

JAYNE DENKER

*Some projects are
meant for two...*

By
Design

A KISS BY DESIGN

Graham caught Emmie by the elbows and steadied her. She looked up once again at that warm smile and in one step closed the short distance between them. She shocked even herself, leaning into him—and was mortified for a moment, as Graham, startled, drew his head back a fraction of an inch. Then relief and warmth flooded through her as she felt his arms close around her, his broad hands spread across her back. She slid her arms around his neck, felt her heart hammering in her chest. She dropped her gaze and noticed a pulse throbbing at the open collar of his striped Oxford.

Their foreheads touched, their noses nuzzled, and then Emmie's mouth sought Graham's. Or his sought hers. She wasn't sure anymore, and it didn't matter. Emmie gloried in the sensation of the length of his body fused to hers. They fit. They fit! She always knew they would ... but she had no idea just how perfectly. The tip of her tongue grazed his bottom lip. He pulled her tighter and his tongue found hers—just a little, just enough to draw a little gasp from deep in her throat ...

By Design

JAYNE DENKER



eKENSINGTON

Kensington Publishing Corp.

<http://www.kensingtonbooks.com>



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

Table of Contents

[A KISS BY DESIGN](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

For Brigid, who claimed me

A million thanks to the following angels:

Agent extraordinaire Jordy Albert, who may actually be a Time Lord, because she messed with time in order to make it look like she sold my book in less than three weeks. Or she actually did sell it in less than three weeks. If the latter indeed occurred, it is all the more impressive, as it is more astounding of the two options.

My editor, John Sconamiglio, for his mellow attitude and constant encouragement, and the entire righteous staff at Kensington Publishing.

My ever-patient family, especially my son Owen, who selflessly agreed to play video games (oh the sacrifice) when mama needed to work.

Neighbors Ken and Norma Embling, for letting me use their falling-plaster story, which I related without embellishment. It happened exactly that way.

Carla O'Hornett, for answering my countless questions about the interior design industry.

Andrew Woloson, for getting insurance details through my thick skull. I hope they got through properly. If not, it's all my fault.

Wendy Blake, for inviting high school alums to her annual holiday cookie party. However, let it be known that any similarity to Juliet starts and ends right there.

Elizabeth Torgerson-Lamark, for her fabulous photography skills that made me look less like a gargoyle.

My former bosses Bill and Scott. If it hadn't been for their encouragement, I never would have had the courage to leave that full-time job and write a novel.

And finally, the two psycho kitties (*q'uest que c'est*), who always keep me humble. I am their servant first and foremost, at all times.

Chapter 1

A hand snaked toward her from her left. Emmie Brewster's eyes never strayed from the television, but her peripheral vision caught the movement. "You jonesing to make a stub the newest fashion accessory?"

"I was just wondering about that last Tootsie Roll you got there ..."

Emmie sighed and glanced over at her best friend, Trish, who batted her eyelashes coquettishly. Emmie heaved herself forward toward the coffee table, seized the candy, unwrapped it, and bit it in half. "Here," she said, handing the bitten piece to her friend.

"*Danke.*" Her jaw working diligently, Trish said around the lump of candy, "Ee sool wowt, oo no?"

Emmie sighed. "Yeah, we should go out. Beautiful day, blah, blah. But I'm, you know, *busy.*"

Trish swallowed and said more clearly, "Watching design shows? Seriously?"

"It's educational."

"Oh, please! You do this for a living! What in the world could you possibly learn from them?" she muttered, disappearing behind the Sunday comics.

"Not to use pea green spray paint to renovate an old lamp, for one thing. Ew!" Emmie tucked her right toe into the cuff of her left sock and scratched her itchy ankle.

Trish said from behind the paper, "Those socks again? Will you throw them the heck out, please?"

"No! They ..." Emmie searched for a reason not to. "They have kitties on them."

"I'll *draw* kitties on your feet for you. Just get rid of the damned socks!"

"No!"

Trish tossed the paper aside and pounced on the socks, yanking them off Emmie's feet before she could react. "They're going out!"

"NO!"

Trish disappeared into the kitchen. Emmie raced after her, but she was too late. She swung around the doorjamb just in time to hear the hum and growl of the trash compactor as it mashed her socks into last night's potato peelings.

"You suck."

"Emmie, my darling," Trish said, leaning her long and narrow frame along the counter, "there's something you've never understood about life. If you don't like something, don't put up with it—*throw it out!*"

Emmie had a funny feeling they weren't talking about her socks anymore.

Sure enough, Trish asked, "Did you hear from him this weekend?" She had one eyebrow cocked suspiciously; she already knew the answer.

Emmie looked down at her bare feet on the yellow and blue linoleum. "No."

"Even though he knows about today?"

Reluctantly, she murmured, "Yeah."

"So ..." Trish prompted.

"What?"

"*Throw it out.*"

And Trish reached over to the refrigerator, plucked a photo of Emmie and her erstwhile boyfriend, Kyle, out from under a ladybug magnet, and shoved it down the sink drain. She flipped on the water and flicked the switch for the disposal.

"Are you trying to destroy all my kitchen appliances one by one, or was that just easier than finding a pair of scissors?" Emmie shouted over the din.

“It’s more dramatic. Never underestimate the value of good drama,” Trish shouted back. She turned off the disposal and studied her friend. “You know what your trouble is?” Emmie winced. Nothing good ever came after “you know what your trouble is.” “You’re too safe. Too quiet. You’ve got your comfy little job—”

“Which keeps me in kibble.”

“And your comfy little house—”

“You like my comfy little house.”

“And your comfy little life. And nothing much moves.”

“I thought that was a *good* thing.”

“Yeah—when you’re eighty.”

“You calling me an old lady?” Emmie demanded. Trish smirked. “Hey, at least I don’t have cats.”

“First kitty socks, then real kitties. It just follows. I’d be worried if I were you.”

“Yeah, well, looks like someone else has ‘adventuring’ covered.” Emmie fished out a colorful postcard from her pile of mail and catalogs on the counter and handed it to her friend.

Trish turned it over and winced. According to the postcard, Emmie’s father was in the middle of a “fantastic” vacation in Saint Lucia. “Hm. I was going to ask how he’s holding up.”

“Oh, just fine, apparently. My dad used to be the kind of guy who thought that Saint Lucia was in Italy. *Now* look at him.” She gestured at the postcard with disgust.

“People grieve in different ways, sweetie.”

“I don’t think he grieved at all.”

“Oh, come on, that’s not fair. He was *so* broken up when your mom died. I remember.”

“Yeah,” Emmie said grudgingly. He had been in shock for quite a while; when you’d been married for thirty-five years, she reasoned, it must be tough to suddenly be without that person who’d been by your side for so long.

Especially because her parents' marriage was about as ideal as you could get. Oh, not because they'd never had their differences—of course they had. But they'd always seemed to be in sync with one another, always engaged in a balanced, give-and-take dance. When one pushed forward, the other gave way to make room, and vice versa. Granted, her father was usually the one pushing and her mother the one yielding. Bob Brewster was unapologetically the more forceful of the pair, and while that bothered Emmie at times, Jennifer Brewster always saw through his bluster. She never saw her husband's behavior in a negative light; instead, to her he was simply confidently decisive in all things. Even when he was wrong, he somehow came out sounding like he was right. Emmie never could figure out why her mother let him get away with that, but she'd just take Emmie aside and explain that "that's just the way your father is."

What amazed her more, however, was how her mother managed to take his nonsense in stride. Bob would barrel through situations like a bull in a china shop, and Jennifer would sigh, shake her head, and clean up the mess in his wake. If Bob made unwise investments, she adjusted the budget to cover the loss, and eventually their finances would recover. When Bob adopted a Great Dane on a whim, she came up with the idea to walk him like a pony—driving the family car at a crawl on a country lane, hanging on to Bruce's leash out the driver's side window, so he didn't take anyone in the family for a drag. If Bob suddenly decided it was time for a family camping trip to the Adirondacks in May—blackfly season—she was the one who brought the bug spray ... and reserved a hotel room in Old Forge in advance, so after several miserable hours, they could leave the wilderness to the bloodsucking beasts.

Yes, his wife often kept him in check, kept him on the straight and narrow. To his credit, Emmie's father often was brought up short by his wife's skeptical look; that often got him to think twice about his decisions, and on occasion he even backed down and did things her way. But for the most part, he had the freedom to do what he wanted, safe in the knowledge that someone would pick up after him.

Emmie usually didn't think that was fair, but then Jennifer would catch her daughter's eye, wink, and smile, and Emmie knew she had her own measure of control in the partnership. It was like a daily master class in how to maintain a successful relationship.

But now there was no wife to shake her head at Bob and keep him from going off the rails, so off the rails he went. Not right away, however. Trish was right; for the first few months, Bob Brewster didn't know what to do with himself. Emmie came by to see him almost every day, and sometimes, although he was up and dressed, she wasn't sure he'd moved from his recliner in the living room for hours at a time, and she was pretty sure he wasn't eating, except for maybe a sandwich—and she could only tell because there were crumbs in the sink, where he'd stood to eat it.

He'd definitely been lost without his wife, and at the time, his daughter worried that he'd never recover. But then, almost out of the blue ... he did. With a vengeance. It was as though he woke up one morning, shook off his mood the way he'd done so often before with more minor issues in his life, and charged ahead, that familiar white-haired bull in a china shop again. Before Emmie knew it, he was off on one vacation after another. Maybe he decided if he stopped moving, he'd die, like a shark, Emmie thought.

So from that point on, he simply never stopped moving.

“But it was like he ... recovered too quickly or something.”

“There's no set time for grieving.”

“I know. I don't want him to be moping around a whole year later or anything, but he could at least ... acknowledge the date.”

“Like your official wallow?”

“Precisely.”

Today, September 8, was the first anniversary of Emmie's mother's death, and she had decided to face the day by *not* facing the day. Her plan was to hunker down in her house and, yes, “wallow.” And Trish was going to help her through it.

Trish Campo, her best friend since elementary school, always seemed to float confidently on the surface of life instead of succumbing to all the nasty bugaboos that threatened to drag other women under. That was precisely why Emmie still clung to Trish, even now, in their “old age,” which was mumble-mumble-mutter-something past thirty. Trish was her lifeline, her floaties, and she’d keep Emmie from sinking under the weight of her residual sorrow today.

Emmie headed back toward the living room, beating her friend to the remote by inches. “My house, my remote,” she declared. “My wallow,” she added for good measure.

As the shadows lengthened in the living room, Emmie and Trish sank lower and lower into the sofa, and Emmie’s spirits dipped accordingly.

“I dunno,” she mumbled, her wineglass tipping sideways in her hand at a precarious angle. Trish wordlessly righted it. It promptly tipped again, but less so. Trish let it be. “I don’t get it. I feel like I’m missing something.”

“You want your mommy.”

“You know what, though?” Emmie turned her semi-focused chestnut eyes up to her friend. “I don’t. I mean, I miss her, but she raised me right—to be self-shuff ... shelf-shuff ... independent.”

“She did do that.”

“When I thought I wanted to join Pee Wee football, she didn’t talk me out of it.”

“Yeah, a few drills at practice did that.”

“She convinced me to take AP Calculus. Don’t know how she pulled that off.”

Trish snickered. “Thought you were gonna jump right out the classroom window at least once a week. Sometimes twice.”

“She told me I wasn’t a freak if I didn’t have a date to the prom.”

Now Trish laughed outright. “Rick *loved* having the both of us as his dates. His friends thought he was going to get a threesome at the end of the night, and he *let* ’em think it.”

“She was *so* happy when I got into Westfall College. She got choked up whenever she talked about it. For, like, an entire year.”

Trish nodded fondly.

“Oh—remember when she kept hammering at me about Billy Joosten, in college? Told me a thousand times not to go out with him. She was convinced he was a psychopath.”

“She was pretty much right.”

“Hey, he was never formally charged with anything.”

“They’ll find the bodies one of these days. You mark my words.”

“She ... she gave me the down payment for this house.”

Emmie and Trish sighed, cherishing their own favorite memories of Jennifer Brewster.

“She was a great mom,” Trish said after a moment.

“She was. And I feel like I’m letting her down.”

“Oh, you are not.”

“Yuh-huh. She always wanted ...” At this Emmie felt her throat constrict; she couldn’t get any more words out.

“More,” Trish finished for her. “She wanted more for you.”

“And I don’t have even half of what she had.”

“Don’t tell me you want marriage and kids and all that crap.”

“Not just for the sake of having them, no.”

“Because I did that for the both of us.”

“And you did it well.” Emmie toasted her. Trish and Rick had dated all through high school and college. Their boys, Justin, eleven, and Logan, six, were mostly polite and well behaved and only slightly insane—just the usual boy-type

madness, which included shouting at the tops of their lungs from morning till night and leaving lots of LEGOs around. “But ... remember when we were younger, like twelve?”

“Ayup. You had bad hair. I had too many freckles. I still have too many freckles,” Trish murmured, suddenly engrossed in her forearm.

“Remember the feeling we had, that the world was wide open, that anything could happen at any minute? That we were in on a big adventure?”

“Yeah ...”

“What happened to that? Because now it feels like ... things are closing in ... and ... and ...” She drifted off, not sure what she was trying to say.

“Are you going to throw up?”

“No.” Emmie slapped her friend’s wrist, not noticing the wine finally sloshing out of her glass. “But I feel like there’s something I should have done. Or should be doing. I just don’t know what it is ... Hey!” she burst out, making Trish jump. “Do you remember Juliet Winslow?”

“Oh my Goodddd!” Trish drawled, laughing.

“No, no, seriously!” Emmie insisted, refilling Trish’s glass, and her own, all the way to the rim. “Remember her? She had everything. She was ...”

“Perfect,” Trish finished for her.

“Like Venus on the half shell,” Emmie agreed wistfully. “Barbie doll—blond hair, blue eyes, skinny. Smart, talented, sporty. Not one flaw. Plus she was nice, remember?” Trish nodded. “Damn, you couldn’t even hate her, she was so nice.”

“What happened to her, anyway?” Trish mused.

“God, I don’t know. That’s what happens when we blow off reunions, huh?”

“Guess so.”

“I wanna know,” Emmie said abruptly.

“What’re you hoping for—that she stayed perfect, or that she peaked in high school and then crashed and burned?”

Emmie thought for a drunken moment. “I’m not sure.” Both friends fell silent, comparing their high school selves with their current selves, and reflecting on Juliet, the high priestess of high school. Then Emmie broke the reverie by lurching to her feet. “Wait, wait,” she said, even though nothing had to be stopped. “Wait.” And she tottered down the hall.

“Are you going to throw up now?” Trish called after her.

But Emmie returned after only a moment, loosely cradling her laptop in one arm. Trish squinted fearfully, expecting her to drop it on the hardwood floor, but Emmie made it back to her seat with the laptop—and her wineglass—intact. She put the glass on the floor and opened the computer.

“Are you googling Juliet?”

“Circle-O.”

“Circle what?”

“O. As in ‘circle o’ friends.’ It’s new. There’s a group for our high school. I joined it but never check it much.”

And after much impaired typing and backspacing and retyping, Emmie managed to correctly spell Juliet’s name in the search box on the social media site. Both women peered at the screen with bated breath, as if waiting for the revelation of the ages.

“There! There!” Emmie pointed. “That’s her!”

“Click!”

Emmie clicked, but no information was visible. “I’d have to ‘wave’ at her and then she’d have to ‘wave’ back, and then I can find out about her.”

“What a stupid site,” Trish declared, but paused for only a moment. “Well? Do it!”

“I don’t know. This is Juliet freakin’ Winslow ...”

“Oh for God’s sake.” And Trish reached over and clicked on the “wave” button for her.

“Dammit, Trish!”

“She’s just a person, Emmie! And we’re nosy. Nosy wimmins must be satisfied.”

Emmie and Trish stared at the screen.

“Now what?” Trish whispered, as if afraid to disturb the computer.

“Now ...” Emmie whispered back, still staring at the screen, “we order a pizza.”

“Hey, baby.”

Emmie skidded to a halt on her front walk and raised her eyes to the early-morning overcast sky in a silent why-me plea to the heavens. Her head still throbbing and her stomach gurgling from the overindulgence portion of her wallow the previous day, the last thing she needed to face was The Return of Kyle. But there he was, her on-again, off-again boyfriend, who, judging by his carefully posed “casual” slouch against her tan Honda Civic, was expecting to be “on” again. As usual.

She took a fortifying breath, marched over, and elbowed him sharply in his side. “Get your butt off my car, Yates.”

“Ow! Sheesh, Emmaline!”

“Don’t call me that. You know I hate that.”

Undaunted, he slid over to the back driver’s side door and grinned. “Miss me?”

The nerve.

Emmie shot back without hesitation, “Nope, can’t say that I have.”

And she meant it. Emmie had fallen for his sly grin and his wolfish good looks almost a year ago, and he had a certain charm that got her to overlook his irritating fake-cowboy persona and tendency to flirt with everything in a skirt that crossed his path. But when he was out her life for a bit, she found that she was able to function perfectly well without him.

In her more honest moments, she even was able to admit that sometimes the past ten months had felt like nothing more than one long booty call.

“Ouch. Harsh,” he muttered, tugging at the denim shirt he had slung over his faded T-shirt and tucking his fingertips into the front pockets of his jeans; his pants were so tight that was all that would fit. “Why’re you being like that?”

“Oh, gee, I dunno. Let me think,” Emmie drawled, putting a finger to her lips as she pretended to consider the question. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with, oh, somebody named Caitlynn, would it?”

“Aw, *c’mon!*” Kyle laughed, but it was a weak one. “You were giving me such a hard time, I figured we were broken up.”

“Oh, no—don’t you put this on me. We have one argument, and you turn right around and find some cheesy little ex-cheerleader at the bar? Tacky, Kyle.” She hesitated. “*Not* like I care, mind you.”

“Yeah, you care.”

Kyle turned on his megawatt you-want-me smile, and although Emmie only glared back, she felt her resolution crumbling. Dammit, she hated herself when she fell for that grin of his. She hated to admit it, but it was actually kind of sexy. Her expression must have showed the change in her, because Kyle suddenly grew more confident—if that was at all possible.

“Come on, let’s go inside. We can have lunch. Or, you know, not.” He leered at her suggestively.

“I have to go to work, like most people. Unlike you, apparently.”

“I’m not on the schedule today.”

Kyle’s brother owned a small used-car lot, and he paid Kyle mainly to keep him company while they waited for customers to wander in. Most of the time they sat around with their feet up on the desk, talking about what kind of changes they would make if they ran the country.

He sighed. “All right. Your loss. Catch you later?” he asked, tapping the end of her upturned nose. Emmie was never sure if she liked or hated his little endearing gesture.

“Maybe. Call first!” she shouted after him. He waved over his shoulder as he sauntered to his truck; Emmie checked her watch, gasped at the time, and jumped into her car.

Chapter 2

“Is he there?” Trish whispered, even though she was safe at home.

“In the back,” Emmie murmured into her phone. “Don’t worry about it. He’s counting his color wheels. But talk fast—I think he’s going to drag me to a consultation soon.”

“Oh, goody—Wilma’s leash remains strong, then.”

“I beg your pardon. I’ll have you know he let me visit the Nottings about their living room upholstery just yesterday.”

Trish gasped. “Wilma allowed you to meet with some clients *all by yourself?*”

“I know!” Emmie enthused sarcastically. “It’s only been four years!”

Emmie’s boss’s real name was John Wilman, but Emmie and Trish had nicknamed him Wilma at the first sight of his ginger-colored, flip-front, really, *really* bad toupee. To refer to him by Fred Flintstone’s wife’s name was childish, perhaps, but John Wilman was an insufferably vain stuffed shirt—and a holy terror of a boss. A little sniggering behind his back helped Emmie get through the day.

“And were you able to handle the Nothings?” Trish asked.

“Nottings, darling. Nottings.”

“These are the people who only want beige walls, beige carpets, and beige furniture, right? I stand by the name.”

“I think that’s why Wilma let me off my leash. They were going to choose beige or beige or beige from all the beige fabric swatches I presented to them. What could possibly go wrong?”

“What’d they pick?”

“Beige.”

“Good work. Hey, did you get a reply from the Great and Glorious Juliet?”

“Oh my God!” Emmie gasped. “I’d forgotten about that!”

Trish laughed. “No more wine for you.”

Emmie glanced over her shoulder. No sign of Wilma. She furtively loaded Circle-O and signed in. “Oh, no!” She half laughed as she winced. “Juliet waved back.”

“I told you she wouldn’t refuse, ya dummy.”

“I feel like a stalker.”

“That’s only if you start sending her a thousand messages. So you’re linked up on Circle Jerk or whatever. Big deal. You don’t actually have to have direct contact.”

“Right. I just want to read her profile ... like a silent stalker.”

“So what did you get up to last night?”

Emmie flinched. “Oh, you know ... nothing much.”

“Nothing much named Kyle?”

“Yeahhh.”

“So he’s back?”

“Yeahhh.”

“Is he a new man? Kind and courteous, with eyes for no one but you?”

“That ... remains to be seen. He’s still on probation, I can guarantee that.”

“So what’d you do? Leave out the icky bits, please,” Trish hurriedly added.

“Like I said, nothing much. Kyle brought over some ribs and we barbecued them, that’s all.”

“Is he still getting his meat from that discount butcher?”

“Let’s just say I ate a lot of salad.”

“And when you say ‘we barbecued them’ ...”

“Okay, *I* barbecued them.”

“Who made the rest of the dinner?”

“Me,” Emmie muttered.

“Set the table?”

“Me, all right?”

“And Kyle?”

“Drank beer and threw acorns at the neighbor’s yappy dog. There. Happy?”

“Not really,” Trish said, her voice suddenly subdued. “Will you please get yourself a better boyfriend?”

“Oh, Kyle’s all right, really.”

Uncomfortable, Emmie fussed with her hair; it was in that in-between stage as she grew it out. She had liked her sassy short ’do—she thought it helped break her out of her “average” rut (average brown hair and brown eyes, average height, average everything, so much so that she easily vanished in a crowd)—but decided to let it grow when Kyle had said he liked her with long hair. Actually, he had said he liked his “women” with long hair. She had forgotten that until this very moment. And then Rick had seen him getting cozy with that Caitlynn chick at the bar—Caitlynn, with her Texas-beauty-queen blowout. Emmie started to wonder just whose hair, exactly, Kyle had been talking about.

“But you know,” Emmie ventured, “sometimes a little sophistication *would* be—”

“Emmaline. Is that a personal call?”

She jumped and turned to her boss. “Good morning, John.”

Wilma sneered, his narrow frame frozen in its usual pinched, tight, ramrod-straight posture, his lips tightening over his protruding teeth. “Say good-bye to your friend, Emmaline,” he said coldly. “We have an appointment at the Hudsons’ in fifteen minutes.”

Emmie never felt comfortable at initial consultations. Wilma usually met with the clients alone first, implying that Emmie’s presence would cramp his style or ruin his reputation—in what way, Emmie had no idea. He feared she’d drool on the floor, perhaps? But on occasion, Wilma dragged her along,

usually to measure rooms and perform other tasks that were beneath him.

Now she perched carefully on the edge of an overstuffed sofa (the first thing to go, she was certain, knowing Wilma), working hard not to elicit farting noises from the leather. So far, so good. She looked up at the vaulted ceiling of the potential clients' new, unadorned McMansion and waited for Wilma to start his usual introductory spiel. He always started with a soft-spoken, gently worded bit about his many years in business (twenty-three), his many clients (too many to count), and which houses in the neighborhood he'd worked on. At that point he threw in a bit of gossip to foster a little false intimacy. Dropping his voice to a stage whisper, he'd say something like, "The venerable old Mrs. Studdard, in the mock Tudor on the corner? She fought me tooth and nail about getting rid of the rose-colored fixtures in the master bath. But now that her house has been brought into the twenty-first century, she's in love with the place. And now she acts like the bidet was all *her* idea!"

Laughs all around, then down to brass tacks, as Wilma did with the poor deer-in-the-headlights couple, the Hudsons, in front of them now. The youngish pair were seated attentively in anomalous Edwardian-style tub chairs on the other side of a low coffee table. Chairs would stay but be reupholstered in damask, Emmie guessed. Coffee table would be flung to the curb with the unacceptable sofa.

Phase II of the introductory spiel began: Wilma assured them that he was there to help, to discover their inner style and put it on display for all the world to see. This, Emmie knew, eventually translated into "I'll *tell* you what you want." And the funny thing was, the customers always went along with his ideas, even when the clients were obviously all about pizza and beer and football, yet Wilma decided what they needed was more custom-made shot-silk draperies in their lives.

Still, this might not go according to plan; Emmie noticed the husband and wife exchange glances when Wilma broke eye contact to make a few notes. They seemed to be hesitant about the designer's enthusiastic brainstorming already.

“Er ...” the husband began, his small eyes blinking uncertainly in his large face.

Emmie knew if he protested, this wouldn't end well. On the few very rare occasions when a client had resisted his plans, Wilma had raised one eyebrow and calmly explained that if they were going to quibble about every nut and bolt and color choice, they would ruin the vision, and he might as well just stop working on the design right then and there. More than once, much to Emmie's horrified fascination, Wilma had actually told off some particularly stubborn clients and stormed out. But the clients always came crawling back, because everyone knew that Wilma was *the* interior designer to hire in Jemison, Emmie's small but rapidly growing hometown in western New York. Lose Wilma, and you might as well start buying your throw pillows at Walmart.

Emmie stole a glance at her boss. One eyebrow was already creeping toward the dead squirrel perched on his head.

“Uh ...” the husband began again, but stopped, mesmerized by the ascending eyebrow.

“Yes?” Wilma prompted.

“Well, I was just wondering ...”

“Are we concerned about a favorite recliner, or the location of a plasma television, perhaps?”

The young man tried to chuckle, but it came out as an unidentifiable strangled noise. “S-sort of. I mean, I just want to make sure the TV—”

“The television will have its place,” Wilma said with a stiff smile.

Yeah, probably the garage, Emmie said to herself. She watched Plasma TV Guy collapse in on himself a bit, and she knew the resistance was over. Or was it? Now the wife spoke up.

“You know,” she said in a high-pitched, cheerful voice, “we were also thinking of making sure we had a lot of storage space. I have a lot of—”

“Collections?” Wilma finished for her. “Or you do scrapbooking?”

Her eyes crinkled behind her pink-framed glasses. She looked relieved that Wilma seemed to “get” her. *Big mistake*, thought Emmie. “Both, actually, and we’re hoping—”

“To have children, so you want to accommodate all their baby items and, later, playthings?”

The wife started nodding vigorously. *Doomed*, thought Emmie. *Dead client walkin’*. “Yes! That’s exactly what—”

“We’ll work on it,” Wilma cut her off, and Emmie knew that he had no intention of creating either craft corners or cabinets for squeezey toys. As he so often pointed out, Wilma considered his designs to be works of art. And an artist of his caliber did not make concessions for bourgeois hobbies like scrapbooking or having babies.

Scrapbooking Wife’s smile flipped to a frown as she picked up on the notion that they were being steamrolled.

And suddenly Emmie found her lips parting. She didn’t know what came over her; she knew she wasn’t allowed to speak at all, unless it was to compliment a client on the “wonderful space” that Wilma was about to obliterate. And yet, as if from very far away, she heard herself clearing her throat.

“Well, you know,” she said, and her voice shook a little as she realized she was suddenly in the spotlight, “you could fit a built-in worktable for crafts in that sort of lost space between the kitchen and the sitting room, there. And storage cabinets can be unobtrusive if done the right way.”

She blinked and smiled weakly at the couple, trying desperately to ignore the laser beams shooting out of her employer’s eyeballs to her left. She could feel her antiperspirant failing. *Oh, no*—the couple seemed interested.

“That sounds perfect,” Scrapbooking Wife said, firing a “so there” look at Wilma.

Too petrified to even turn her head a millimeter to look at Wilma, Emmie curled her toes up in her shoes, waiting for a

lava-spewing eruption from Mount Designer.

But instead, Wilma said, and almost cheerfully, “I’ll make a note of that.” And he scribbled dutifully on his sketch pad.

Emmie felt too light-headed to dare to participate again, so she returned to her observer status for the rest of the meeting. As everything else went according to plan, she gradually calmed down ... until after the consultation, when she climbed back into Wilma’s Lincoln Navigator and realized with a lurch of panic that he could now unleash his full fury in private.

Wilma settled in behind the wheel. The driver’s side door closed with an expensive-sounding *clump*, and Emmie braced herself as she put on her seat belt. But Wilma said nothing as he started up the SUV and pulled out of the driveway. He said nothing as they drove back into town. He said nothing as he unlocked the door to the office. Emmie wasn’t sure what was worse—a tantrum or this silent treatment.

Her boss removed his jacket, and Emmie scooted to her desk to take the phones off forwarding and turn her computer back on. She put her purse on the floor—and when she stood up again, Wilma was mere inches from her, doing his best impression of the grinning skeletal monster in *Aliens*. She froze and closed her eyes.

“Never ... again,” he hissed in her ear, and she had no idea what he meant. That she’d never be allowed to speak again? What was he going to do, cut out her tongue? “Do *not* undermine my authority. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she squeaked, disgusted with herself for sounding so frightened.

“You. Have. No. Opinion. *My* business, *my* ideas, *my* opinions,” he continued to hiss. “Do you understand?”

She cleared her throat and tried to sound stronger. “Fine,” she rasped. She clamped her lips shut till he was gone, back to his lair—er, off ice—and Emmie collapsed into her desk chair, hating her life.

Trish tipped her head sideways, trying to get a better view of Emmie from a different angle.

“Sweetie?” she ventured. “Emmie, honey? This isn’t a good look for you.”

Emmie’s “look” was quite ostrich-like. After her terrible, awful, no good, very bad day at work, she had retreated to her beloved little bungalow, crawled into her flannel lounge pants and hoodie (barefoot, as Trish had so cruelly sacrificed her kitty socks to the trash compactor and she didn’t have any other clean ones at the moment), and was now face down in the needlework cushions of her Mission-style sofa, her flannel-clad behind up in the air.

“I don’t care,” she wailed.

“Would you care if I said it made your butt look big?”

“No.”

“Wow. You really did have a bad day.”

“I told you.”

Trish plopped onto the sofa. “It’ll be okay,” she said, just like she would comfort one of her boys. “Really. It’s just Wilma. You know how he is.”

“I know,” came the muffled response. “He sucks.”

“Yes, he does.” She licked her lips, then said tentatively, “Maybe you should think about finding another job?”

Emmie raised her head, horrified. “Are you kidding me?”

Trish tried not to laugh. “Um, you have ...”

“What?”

“Your ... um ...” And she pointed at Emmie’s face.

“What?” Emmie demanded, gingerly touching her forehead. She felt indentations from the embroidered couch cushions. “Oh great. See what a train wreck I am?”

“You’re not,” Trish said emphatically. “And it is possible to get another job, you know.”

Emmie tipped herself right side up and rubbed her eyes. “Oh, God, Patricia, where in the world would I get another job in Jemison? Or even all of Iroquois County, for that matter? It’s not like the interior designer industry is just chugging along in our burg.”

“There’s always room for one more,” Trish said with a wicked smile.

Emmie didn’t get it. “What?”

“I mean,” she said, draping her arm over the back of the couch, “maybe you should, you know, go out on your own.”

Emmie gaped. “I can’t do *that*.”

“Oh my God, Emmie, it’s not like I’m suggesting you murder the man, bury the body in your garden, and take over Wilman Designs while you tell everyone he’s ‘out of town visiting friends.’”

“That’d be easier. And safer.”

“People start their own businesses all the time.”

“People go *out* of business all the time, too.”

“Or not.”

Emmie sighed. “Businesses cost money, and you know I don’t have anything saved. Wilma owns me.”

“Business loan?”

“They’d laugh me out of the bank.”

“But—”

“Trish, I *can’t*,” Emmie cut her off with a finality that made it clear it wasn’t really about the money. And she buried her face in the cushion again.

Trish started to argue, but she was cut off by a cry of “Wassup, wassup?” as Kyle entered, his sudden presence sucking all the air out of the room. Kyle acknowledged Trish with a curt nod. “Patty-cake.”

“Urinal cake,” Trish muttered under her breath as she rooted around in her purse for her car keys. “Hi, Kyle,” she said,

louder, tossing a chilly smile in his direction.

It was no secret that Trish and Kyle weren't fond of each other, mainly because Trish didn't approve of the way he treated Emmie, so he didn't like her in turn, and around and around it went.

"Hey, baby," he said to the back of Emmie's head. "What's for dinner?"

Emmie's shoulders tensed. Trish went to bat for her. "Emmie's had a rough day," she told Kyle in her tough-mommy voice. "Be nice to her."

"I'm nice!"

"That means don't expect her to cook for you tonight. She's upset."

"But it's dinner time."

"Then go make dinner!"

Kyle laughed as though Trish had just cracked the funniest joke he'd ever heard, but he stopped short when she pinned him with her fierce mommy-glare. Kyle's mouth flapped a couple of times, fish-like. "I can't *cook*."

"Nobody's asking you for coq au vin, Kyle. Scramble some eggs. You can do that, can't you?" As Kyle wandered off toward Emmie's kitchen, trying to wrap his head around this foreign concept of "cooking dinner," Trish leaned closer to her burrowing friend. "Breakfast for dinner," she cooed. "That should make you feel better."

Emmie raised her head and gave her a hopeful, weak smile. "Pancakes?"

"Aw, hell, I can't make *pancakes*!" Kyle exclaimed from the kitchen.

Trish rolled her eyes and patted Emmie on the shoulder. "Maybe eggs. Depends on what the Redneck Chef can whip up without blowing up the kitchen." She hoisted her purse onto her shoulder. "I've gotta go." She kissed Emmie on her dented red forehead and whispered, "Make *him* take care of *you* for a change. Don't help him in there. Got it?"

“But—”

“Do *not!*” Trish raised an admonishing finger. “And think about what I said before, about your job.”

When Trish left, Emmie snuck a peek over the back of the sofa to see what Kyle was up to. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, looking lost, with a carton of eggs in one hand and a frying pan in the other. At least he found the frying pan, she thought. And the eggs. That was impressive, for him.

When Kyle felt Emmie’s eyes on him, he turned hopefully toward her, likely expecting her to take over. But Emmie decided to see what kind of humor the sitcom *In the Kitchen with Kyle* could provide. She ducked back down and busied herself with the newspaper even though she’d already read it that morning.

Late that night, Emmie found herself wide awake, staring at the darkened ceiling of her bedroom, wondering if Kyle’s snoring was going to suck sections of paint off it. Kyle rolled onto his side, which lessened his snoring, but he flung his arm across her neck, throttling her. She flipped his arm onto the pillow above her head and shifted toward the edge of the bed, where she teetered precariously.

Emmie clamped her eyes shut and tried to sleep, but Trish’s voice was echoing in her head. “Throw it out,” her friend had said about her lackluster relationship, and now about her job as well. It was sort of obvious that Trish didn’t approve of the way she lived her life. Emmie admired Trish’s super-confident decisiveness, but sometimes she resented it. Trish had made all the right choices in *her* life and was always in control, while Emmie often felt as though her own existence were a crazy gallumphing Labrador retriever out for a run, and she was merely hanging on to the other end of the leash, shouting, “Heel!” and trying to avoid doing a face-plant onto the sidewalk.

Emmie turned onto her side and stared at the wall for a while. Kyle found her again, draped an arm across her once more, and grasped her left boob through her nightshirt. Even

in a deep post-sex sleep, his inner homing beacon never failed to locate her breasts. It was uncanny. Suddenly irritated, she unsuctioned his palm from her boob and slid out of bed.

She made her way into the living room, sat at her desk, and turned on the lamp—a vintage brass number she had dug up at a garage sale and rewired. She flipped open her laptop and went to Circle-O. She hadn't been there since her drunken stalking of Juliet Winslow and had never spent much time reading up on her former classmates' lives. Now, however, she was curious about what those other people were up to. Well, she had to admit that, in her present state of mind, she was probably drawn to compare her life to theirs and see if she was better—or worse—off than she thought.

She clicked on her class year, 1995, and studied the list of names. Her graduating class wasn't that big—about three hundred students—and about half of them were listed on the Circle-O site. She recognized very few of the names. She and Trish had stuck together all through high school, and she had never had much need to become close to other classmates because of it. Boys were few and far between; Trish had only ever dated Rick, and Emmie never had a boyfriend, just a few flirtations that never really went anywhere.

Emmie perused the list of people who had allegedly been her classmates. She had halfheartedly “waved” at or “waved” back at a number of them over the past few months, even if she wasn't quite sure who they were, but had never checked their profiles. Now she clicked on one name or another to see what they were up to. Eventually she made it down the list to Juliet's name. She clicked on the link to her profile.

“Damn,” Emmie whispered.

For a second or two, she thought that Juliet had posted her yearbook photo. She seemed not to have changed one iota. Slim and trim—even her arms, noted Emmie, as Juliet was confident enough to be photographed in a tank top—without a wrinkle on her face or a hint of a sag in her jawline. Unbelievable.

Then Emmie clicked on the profiles of the classmates they had in common on Circle-O, which led Emmie down the dark, perilous path of the Popular Girls. She cringed. These women apparently had been trapped in amber shortly after graduation. Emmie shrank in her chair as if they could see her sitting there, all frumpy in her flannels.

And the profiles! Successful businesses—consulting firms, boutiques, graphic design studios, art galleries—or high-ranking titles at major corporations, plus some PhDs. Apparently the Popular Girls remained at the top of the heap forever.

She went back to Juliet's profile. She was married, with two children, a boy and a girl ("Of course," muttered Emmie), with a florist shop "Coming soon!" Plus she had a laundry list of charities she donated her time to, including her church and an animal shelter. Emmie looked at Juliet's photo again, checking for the halo she must have missed the first time.

At this point, she was more than ready to bail out of Circle-O entirely, but Juliet's last update, dated July 30, caught her eye: "Taking the plunge. The fam is moving back to the old hometown at the end of August. Can't wait! Nothing like new beginnings in old, familiar places! Looove Jemison! Looking forward to getting together with everyone! Maybe we can tailgate at some games. Go Panthers!"

Emmie shut her laptop down. Juliet hadn't lived here for years, but she was here now. Maybe her husband had taken a position with one of the new data-management companies sprouting up like mushrooms in what had been the rural area ringing the town. After decades of decline, the town had redefined itself, hosting new tech businesses that gave the area a healthy dose of cash and brought in lots of employees who enjoyed the finer things in life. Upscale businesses were thriving, noses were tipping a little higher, and developers were tossing up McMansions by the hundreds. That was good news for Wilma—the new folks moved right into those unadorned boxes and needed someone to fill those blank canvases with color, and they gave him free rein ... for better or worse.

Emmie had never been a fan of newly built houses; she preferred her little bungalow, even if it was in a sort of dicey part of town that was rapidly becoming more commercial than residential. Sure, new houses had the benefit of being a clean slate. Walls and floors were straight and true, and there were no remnants of previous owners—no forgotten boxes of junk in a corner of an attic or dried goo in the back of a cabinet. But she had a thing for the funky character of old houses. When she had seen her tiny Craftsman house for the first time, she fell in love with the beamed ceiling, the built-in cabinets with leaded glass, the hardwood floors.

She had poured a lot of love into the place—not to mention all that bottled-up creativity that Wilma wouldn't let her express at work. She had installed the brightly painted Mexican tiles around the fireplace. She had stripped layers of old paint off the oak trim, groove by groove, and refinished it. She had chosen her furniture carefully, one piece at a time, from antique stores and secondhand outlets.

Her tastes differed from Wilma's, that was for sure, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Wilma was all about ostentation, displays of opulence, formal grandeur—the finest fabrics, the most expensive furniture, the most dramatic artwork and accessories by only the most noteworthy craftspeople. The kind of elements that should have the price tags left on in order to fully appreciate why they were there in the first place. But Emmie preferred comfort and homeyness—furniture you could relax into, rugs that could incorporate a little cat or dog hair, well-loved wooden tables with dings, accessories with chipped enamel and faded paint from having been used instead of just put on display to collect dust. Was there a market for her kind of interior design? Did she even *have* a style, or was she kidding herself?

She turned back to her desk. That blank canvas of a house from earlier today ... she had her own ideas about what to do with it, and there was no law against playing around to see what she could come up with. Even if Wilma wasn't interested in her ideas, she could please herself. She pulled out a piece of paper and started to sketch.

* * *

Emmie sat back, stretched, and massaged her fingers. The only sounds in the house were Kyle's snoring and the *thunk* of the wall clock in the kitchen. That was one of her favorite finds: She had dug that treasure right out of a Dumpster, when her old school was being remodeled and expanded to make room for all those new kids in the new housing tracts.

Emmie looked over her sketches. She liked what she had just created. A lot. So much so that her warm fuzzies extended to encompass everything else in her world. She forgave Wilma, she loved Trish's strong opinions, she didn't mind her neighbor's yappy little dog. She even was grateful for Kyle. She tucked her drawings into her notebook and dropped it into her workbag. Then she headed back to bed, intending to crawl into Kyle's arms and appreciate her blessings.

Kyle, however, had taken over the whole bed, splayed out like a starfish and snoring loudly. She pushed, she shoved. Kyle was so far gone, he was immovable. With a sigh, she yanked her pillow out from under his head and returned to the living room. She also loved and appreciated her sofa. And a good thing, too.

Chapter 3

Emmie slouched across her desk at work, the heel of her hand mashed into her cheek to keep her head propped up. Her night on the sofa hadn't been very restful. At all. Of course, she could have reclaimed her bed. She could have moved Kyle if she'd tried hard enough. She could have made *him* sleep on the couch. She even could have woken him up and sent him home, no matter what the time of night. But she hadn't. Sometimes she wondered if she even knew *how* to make demands on other people. Maybe she could ask Trish to give her a few lessons in assertiveness.

Right now, however, her only goal was to stay awake without the assistance of caffeine. Wilma never let her make a pot of coffee unless there were clients in the office, and though he was out at the moment, she didn't even think of disobeying. The most daring thing she could do was to allow herself to slouch like this—Wilma would have murdered her on the spot if he saw her looking so unprofessional. He was worse than a headmistress at a finishing school. Sit up straight, don't chew your nails, smooth your hair out, be more polite, speak proper English, act like an adult ...

Emmie's eyelids drooped. She rolled her shoulders and tipped her head to the left, then to the right to keep herself awake. She wished Wilma didn't insist on having classical music playing in the office—it wasn't helping. She had to do something, get herself moving. Was there any pressing work to be done? Nothing that couldn't wait, said her drowsy brain. Maybe if she just shut her eyes for a moment ... just one teeny-tiny moment ...

The clanging noise reverberated in Emmie's head like a fire alarm. She lurched up and glanced around wildly. Had she actually let her head rest on the desktop, even for a split second? Then she realized the fire alarm hadn't gone off—it was just the antique brass bell over the door of the shop, and it was far quieter than it had seemed through the haze of her impromptu nap. When Emmie first brought Wilma the bell, which she had found at a flea market one weekend, he had

dismissed it as tacky, but she had convinced her boss that customers would like being greeted by its quaint, friendly jingle instead of an electronic sensor's beep. Now, however, she hated the thing; she never thought it could scare her half to death like that.

She tried to calm her thumping heart as she rubbed her blurry eyes. Yes, someone had come in and was standing by the door. But there was no screaming. That meant it wasn't Wilma. A man, but taller than Wilma. And definitely quieter, she noted.

"Can—can I help you?" she stammered.

"Er, I hope so, yes," the man said, in a melodious baritone that woke Emmie up completely. She'd never had her nerve endings put on high alert by a mere voice before (unless she counted the negative physical reaction she had whenever Wilma spoke), but she felt a distinct tingling now. "I'm looking for ... John, is it?"

The man came closer to her desk; Emmie did her best to smile. She suddenly realized the side of her face was wet, near the corner of her mouth. What ... ? *Drool? Dear God.* She'd have preferred it if someone had shot her and the dampness was blood instead. Blood was dramatic; drool was just pathetic. Emmie tried to subtly wipe it away, and she heard a faint *tick* as something landed on the desk. Her earring? She looked down. A paper clip. A paper clip had been *stuck to her face. Good grief!*

The man was now standing directly opposite her, his hands in the pockets of his relaxed, low-slung jeans, his pose bunching up the bottom of the tweed blazer he wore over an open-necked white cotton shirt. Emmie let her gaze travel upward. She had a bad feeling this person before her was going to be extremely good-looking. She felt her face get a head start on the inevitable blush.

Oh, just great, she thought as she tried to unobtrusively rub the spot on her cheek where there might have been a paper clip imprint. He was definitely hot. But not unrealistic, male-model-type hot. No, this guy's look was even better. He was

... realistically hot. Nice build—solid, she noted, but not massive—nice shoulders, friendly face. Black hair, a tad longish, gracefully going to gray at the temples and brow ... and then her gaze locked onto the man's blue eyes, and she found herself unable to look away. She had never seen such blue eyes in her life. Not the shocking iciness of light blue eyes—no, his were a deep, rich shade with a depth she could easily fall into. He smiled politely, and the blue eyes were suddenly caressed by the most charming crow's-feet Emmie had ever seen.

Silence. Emmie stared, and the man's smile became a bit strained as he tried to sustain it for too long. More silence. Now it was getting stupid, Emmie realized. She fought to find her voice, but failed. Finally the man spoke again.

“John ... Wilman?” he prompted gently. “This is his place of business?”

“John ...” Emmie finally snapped out of it at the sound of her boss's name. “Yes! John! Wilman! Yes! Of course! You're in the right place!”

She wished with all her heart she could stop bellowing enthusiastically like a game show host. Trying to show a little more class, she stood up and smoothed out her skirt. “Welcome to Wilman Designs. How can I help you?”

Realistic Hottie's polite smile faded and he gazed at her blankly. “I'm looking for John Wilman,” he reminded her.

“Right! You said. John. That's my boss!” she said in a singsong voice that horrified her. *Where did that come from?* She had lost control of herself completely. “Uh ...” Emmie rifled through the papers on her desk as if she could find Wilma there, then leaned toward her computer, frantically jiggling the mouse to make the screen saver disappear. Staring at the computer gave her the opportunity to get her head straight. She tucked her hair behind one ear and brought up Wilma's calendar. “He's, uh, out right now ... obviously. He should be back in ... about an hour.”

“I see.”

More silence. Emmie froze, staring at the calendar, even though it wasn't going to change and wasn't going to summon Wilma through the door to end this excruciating awkwardness. The density of the silence pressed on her. She forced herself to look at the man again. To her surprise, he was smiling again, but differently this time. He was looking downright amused, in fact, his blue eyes twinkling and a grin playing around the corners of his perfect lips. It was such an intimate look that she felt a blush rising in her cheeks again. What was he grinning at? Did she have more office supplies attached to her face? She imagined herself bristling with thumbtacks and plastic Post-it arrows that read "Sign Here," and she resisted the urge to run her hands over her face, hair, and neck to brush them off.

She needed to get a grip. "Would you care to wait?" Emmie gestured toward the ornate furniture by the door—a bit spokesmodel-y, but refined, she hoped. "I can get you some coffee or tea or whatever." Okay, now a random teenager had taken control of her speech. One step forward, two steps back, apparently.

"No, thank you," he demurred, and Emmie felt her stomach drop with a ridiculously overblown feeling of disappointment. "I'll stop by another time."

Was it her imagination, or did Realistic Hottie give her the once-over before his polite, neutral smile took over and he started to walk toward the door?

Emmie found herself desperately trying to regroup to keep him there. "Uh ... did you want to make an appointment?" He opened the door. "Leave a message, a business card ... ?" He shut the door behind him. "Marry me?"

And he was gone.

"So Cinderella didn't even leave a glass slipper behind?" Trish asked as she dashed around her kitchen, preparing dinner. Emmie dodged out of her way, protecting the glass of merlot Trish had graced her with as soon as she had stepped through her door.

“Not a thing. Just a whiff of manly perfection in his wake.”

“New brand of cologne?”

“Ha. Funny, you are.”

“Talking like Yoda, you are. This guy must have done a number on you.”

Emmie’s eyes glazed over. “He was so hot ...”

“Clooney hot?”

She made a face. “Pfft. Clooney’s overrated.”

“Shut your mouth.”

“Well, this guy was hotter.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Oh, it is—believe me.” She sighed. “I’m being ridiculous.”

“Well, I think it’s great,” Trish countered, stirring a big pot of something on the stove with a long-handled wooden spoon.

Emmie snorted into her wine. “Oh, yeah, I know how your mind’s working, missy. In your head, you’ve already got me broken up with Kyle and married to Mr. Manly Perfection.”

“Mm, just engaged. So we can have plenty of time to plan the wedding.”

“Oh, stop.” Emmie laughed.

“Ooh.” Trish made a face, turning to her mid-stir. “Was he married?”

Emmie thought about it. “You know, I don’t know. He had his hands in his pockets—”

“Pervert? Or chronic ‘adjuster’?”

“Ew! Neither! It was just a casual pose. Looked really good on him,” she murmured, losing focus once more as she pictured Realistic Hottie standing before her again.

Trish looked amused through the steam rising up from the various pots and pans on her stove top. “Sounds like luuuuuvvvv to me.”

“Please.” Emmie dismissed her friend as she absently swirled the little bit of wine left in her glass. “But ... I’ve gotta admit, I sure hope he does stop back in like he said he would.”

“And then you’ll jump on him?”

“Yes *indeed*.”

Chapter 4

“Can I check my e-mail on your computer?” Emmie asked, finishing a piece of candy Trish had produced from her secret stash at the back of the cupboard over the refrigerator. “Looking at that tiny screen on my phone gives me a headache.”

“I thought your dad gave you the headache.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot I already had one.”

If Emmie stopped and thought about it, she would have found it very telling that when something stressful happened in her life, she always sought the company of her best friend instead of her boyfriend. But Emmie didn't want to stop and think about it, so she just took comfort in the chaos that permeated Trish's house. She sat back and let the constant noise wash over her—the TV blaring, Trish yelling at her younger son, Logan, to stop narrating the war he was putting on with his action figures at absolute top volume, the steady *thump, thump, thump* of the clothes dryer in the laundry room—and her mind was finally in neutral.

Until she thought about her dad. After two weeks in the tropics and then a bit longer to regroup at home, Pa Brewster had finally surfaced and called his little girl that morning, all kinds of cheerful, as though he hadn't betrayed her mother's memory by gallivanting on the beaches of Saint Lucia with dark-skinned native girls younger than his daughter, downing tropical drinks with umbrellas in them, and turning beet red with an equatorial sunburn. Emmie's imagination had been running wild ever since he sent the postcard, so even if he had gone to a sedate resort and spent the entire time dressed in seersucker shorts, black socks, and padded sandals, playing euchre with old men named Salvatore and Myron, she'd never believe it till he produced photos as evidence.

So, working on a low boil in advance, Emmie had agreed to meet her father for lunch. He had been late (surprise, surprise), and she had been ready to blow when he finally marched into the diner, exclaimed, “How's my girl?” and awkwardly bent his six-foot frame to peck her on the cheek.

But she just plastered on a weak smile and said, “Hi, Dad. How was your trip?”

“Wonderful!” he exulted, sliding into the booth and immediately starting to fiddle with the silverware and paper napkin. His white hair was set off by his new, deep tan (no sunburn for him, Emmie noted). “Beautiful place. You should go there sometime. The food is unbelievable. And did you know—”

Emmie cut off the impending travelogue with an exasperated, “Dad!”

“What?” Bob’s bushy white eyebrows crept up toward his thick thatch of hair. “What’s the matter?”

Emmie sighed. “Nothing. Never mind.” She picked up her phone and ran through her bookmarked sites to distract herself until her irritation abated.

“Don’t take that tone with me, missy,” he admonished, making Emmie feel like a teenager. “Whatever you’re upset about, you might as well spit it out. And put that toy down and look at your father when you speak to him.”

She sighed again. Yep, the regression was complete. Hello again, fifteen. “It’s just ... why didn’t you tell me you were going, instead of disappearing and then sending a postcard?”

Her father’s eyebrows traveled higher up his forehead. “I didn’t think you’d mind, Emmaline.”

“Well, I did,” she snapped, and immediately regretted it.

It was times like these that she missed her mother the most. Because she would have handled her father much better. Jennifer wouldn’t have bitten his head off like Emmie just did; she would have patted his forearm with a calm but cautioning “Now, Bob ...” and the man would have immediately rethought his position.

Then again, if her mother were here, she and her dad wouldn’t be having this conversation.

A waitress appeared beside their booth, and her father asked for a cup of coffee. Emmie told her father she didn’t have

much time left for lunch and ordered a salad. As her father read the menu quickly and chose an omelet, Emmie hid behind her phone again.

Circle-O loaded, and she thought about all her old classmates with their perfect lives on display. She'd bet anything their parents didn't ignore the anniversary of a loved one's death. Heck, she'd bet that nobody in their families had even died yet. They probably all still had both their parents and all their grandparents, artfully arranged around an elaborately laden dining room table like a Norman Rockwell painting.

Bob Brewster sat back and studied his daughter. "I didn't forget the date, you know. That was why I went."

Now she did put the phone down. "What!"

"I can't sit around at home, staring at the walls. You think I don't do that enough as it is?"

"So you ran away."

"No!" he protested. "Emmaline, I loved your mother—you know I did. But she's gone, and I'm still here." Her father sighed, looked away. "When your mother died, I was ready to curl up and die, too. And there were times I wished I had. But after a while, when I got up each morning and realized I wasn't going anywhere, I started to see things differently. Do you understand that?" She sat still, her insides in a muddle, surprised that he was able to say this much. "It's just ... I don't *feel* old. Okay, maybe first thing in the morning, when it takes me a few minutes to get out of bed." He chuckled ruefully. "But up here"—he tapped his temple—"twenty-two, maybe. I want to see what else this life has to offer while I'm still 'with it'."

Please don't talk about senior-citizen sex, please don't talk about senior-citizen sex, Emmie prayed silently.

"And," he continued pointedly, "I want to be around to see my little girl get married and give me grandchildren!"

Emmie rolled her eyes. Why was it that, when children grew up, parents only measured their worth in terms of the

number of grandchildren produced?

The waitress set their food in front of them, and Emmie stared down at her salad. Sliced hardboiled eggs stared back up at her. She sighed and picked up her fork. She wanted to be angry at her father. She really did. But—and she hated to admit this—what he said made a certain amount of sense. If this was what it took to make him feel better about still being here when his wife wasn't, who was she to begrudge him that? Didn't mean she had to like it, though.

“How's that man Kyle of yours?”

Oh, that was inevitable. Emmie started poking at her salad. “Same,” was all she'd offer. “Good,” she lied, then dodged with, “Tell me about Saint Lucia.”

That session with her father was enough to drive her to the sanctuary of Trish's house after work to let her best friend talk her down. Because Trish was so darned good at it.

Trish leaned her dining room chair on the two back legs to see into the living room. “Justin!” she barked. “You on the computer?”

“Yeah.”

“Doing homework?”

Pause. “Yes?”

“Liar. Let Aunt Emmie use it.” She plonked the front legs of her chair back onto the carpet. Emmie started to protest, but Trish whispered, “I think he's got a girlfriend. Lots of instant messaging lately. Let him get off the computer for five minutes—” She interrupted herself with a bellow, “Get *off*, Justin!” then continued calmly, “So he can do something healthy, like play violent video games.”

Once Justin had moved on to blowing up aliens on the Nintendo, Emmie checked her work e-mail through her Web access. She didn't really care if Wilma had left her any after-hours messages, nor whether a vendor or client urgently needed anything, but lately she'd been wondering if Realistic

Hottie might contact Wilma by e-mail. A long shot, sure, but she was desperate, as there had been no sign of him since that first time he'd stopped in.

Out of a burning desire to find out *something* about Realistic Hottie, Emmie had decided to see if Wilma knew him. She made what she'd hoped sounded like an offhand comment to her boss while she and Wilma had been inspecting some custom-made wallpaper for blemishes.

"Somebody stopped in looking for you the other day while you were out," Emmie had ventured in her best casual voice as she scanned the wallpaper. She felt braver when she didn't have to meet Wilma's eyes.

"Really?" Wilma murmured, running his finger down a line of scrollwork. "Who was it?"

"That's the thing—he didn't say." She felt Wilma eyeing her suspiciously.

"And you didn't *ask*?"

Heading off yet another lecture about office etiquette, Emmie said quickly, "I asked him if he wanted to leave a message or if he had a business card, but he just ... left." Wilma said nothing. "Tall guy? Dark hair with a little gray?" Hot as all get-out, she didn't add. She braced herself for a snide comment about how she'd noticed his looks but had forgotten to get his name, but it didn't come. Wilma rolled up the wallpaper with quick flicks of his wrists.

"No idea," he said. "But if we lost a new client thanks to your—"

"He said he'd stop in again."

"Oh, they always say that," he growled with a curl of his lip.

Emmie sighed and let the subject drop. If he wasn't an acquaintance of Wilma's, he probably had been a potential customer looking for a design consultation, and it really was Emmie's fault that they'd lost a client because she was too busy drooling, both literally and figuratively, to get his name and contact information.

Now a quick look at her work e-mail, with only three new messages, all from current clients, only left her disappointed. Shocked at how down in the dumps she suddenly felt without a message from a man she didn't even know, she stared at the computer for a few more minutes, just so she could compose herself before Trish could catch a glimpse of her unhappy face.

She switched to her home e-mail account. She found the usual batch of spam, a shipping confirmation for some clothes she'd ordered ... and a notification from Circle-O. It said she had a message from a friend waiting for her on the site. She clicked on the link and, sure enough, there was a little glowing envelope. *Odd*, she thought. Trish still refused to join Circle-O, especially after Emmie regaled her with stories of their much more fortunate fellow alums (although Trish swore most of them were lying—or at least exaggerating), so who could be contacting her?

Emmie clicked on the envelope, which unfolded with an animated flourish. “Ho-ly ...” she muttered.

Trish came up behind her, and Emmie could feel the heat of Trish's coffee mug close to her shoulder as her friend leaned in to look at the screen. “What is that?”

“I,” Emmie announced dramatically, “have been invited. To a holiday cookie party. At ... Juliet Winslow's.”

“OoooOOOOoo,” Trish cooed appreciatively. “Aren't we special!”

Emmie read the details quickly. “Actually, no, I'm not. Looks like it went out to every single alum from our graduating year who's on Circle-O. Or ... wait. It went to all the *females*. Gee, that's not sexist at all.”

“You've *got* to go.”

“You've *got* to come with me.”

“Ohhh, no!” Trish protested, then added demurely, “I wasn't invited!”

“Nice try, Emily Post. It’s only because you won’t join Circle-O. If you had, you’d be the lucky recipient of this choice invite, too.”

“Oh well. You’ll just have to go without me and tell me all about it afterward.” Before Emmie could insist, Trish held up a hand and exclaimed, “No, no, no! Don’t try to convince me! I wouldn’t *dream* of crashing such an exclusive event.”

“You totally suck.”

“I know.” But she didn’t look the least bit remorseful.

“Come *on*,” Emmie wheedled. “Don’t make me go into the lion’s den alone.”

“What lion’s den? If Juliet was the nicest person on the planet back in high school, she’s probably even more saintly now. I don’t think you have any reason to be worried about her.”

“Yeah, but ... but ... what about the Popular Girls?”

“They’re *adults* now—professionals, wives, mothers, blah, blah, blah. Not snooty high school bitches.”

“When snooty high school bitches grow up, their meanness is distilled into its purest, most lethal form,” Emmie whispered fearfully. “Don’t you watch *Real Housewives*?”

“Oh, nobody’s going to be mean to you,” Trish scoffed. “Come on, you’re nice, cute, successful ...”

Emmie raised a skeptical eyebrow. “I’m a slave to a temperamental queen of an interior designer who wears a dead squirrel on his head. How in the *world* does that translate into a success story?”

“You’re a survivor, for one thing—how many of those other women would be able to last one day, let alone four years, working for Wilma?”

“This isn’t making me feel better.”

“All right.” Trish tried another tack. “Then lie. Or, rather, shade the truth. You *know* all those folks did.” Trish waved her hand at the Circle-O site. “So ... you’re a fabulous up-and-

coming interior designer, and you're just about to start your own business. And you're in a long-term relationship. Never mind that the guy's a doof—they don't need to know that part. See how it works?"

"You still think Kyle's a doof?"

"Don't you? And don't change the subject."

Emmie slouched, rested her chin on the back of the desk chair, and turned doe eyes up to her friend. "Scared."

"Don't be. Think of this as an opportunity to strut your stuff. And to bake ten dozen cookies."

"What!"

Trish laughed. "Missed that part, did you? What do you think a cookie party is, anyway?"

"You go to somebody's house and sit around eating cookies?"

"Obviously you're not a housewife and a member of a neighborhood committee, like *moi*. You bake ten dozen holiday-type cookies and everyone takes a few of each kind home. Oh—and you have to print a bunch of copies of the recipe, too, to share with everyone."

"You are so wise, O Mistress of Hearth and Home."

"Nice flattery, but I will not help you bake ten dozen cookies."

Emmie smiled. "Yeah, you will."

Trish grimaced. "Probably. God knows you can't be trusted alone with an electric mixer."

Emmie snaked her Honda through one of the mazelike housing tracts on the edge of town; she snuck a glance at her map from time to time, trying to decipher Rabbit Run from Rabbit Way from Bunny Bounce or whatever other repetitive street names peppered this particular development. The road was deserted; only a few pellets of snow drifted down from the

overcast sky this gloomy Saturday. The snow swirled in her car's wake, dancing over the gray pavement without sticking.

"Two seventeen ... two seventeen ..." she muttered, slowing to a crawl and peering at the numbers on the mailboxes by the road. "Hah," she breathed, finally spotting Juliet's house. She pulled into the driveway, where a Subaru and a Land Rover were parked. Only two cars? She must be early, she thought, and wondered if she should drive around for a while, until other people arrived. But she was here now. Might as well get it over with.

When she climbed out of the car, she shivered as the cold air hit the bare part of her legs between the tops of her high-heeled boots and the bottom of her dress. She wondered if she was overdoing it, wearing a cable-knit sweater dress and stylish boots instead of more casual clothes. Was she overcompensating? Maybe she should go home and change? But she forced herself to stay.

She reached into the backseat and hauled out two giant rectangular Tupperware containers that Trish had lent her. They barely held all the cookies that were the price of admission for this shindig. She tottered up the concrete step to the front door with her elbows askew, trying to keep the plastic containers stable and her purse on her shoulder. Juliet's place was standard-issue modern tract home, with a bright red door flanked by prism sidelights, the shingles a carefully weathered gray. But it definitely wasn't the McMansion she expected. A giant light fixture hung over her head like a glass bell. She got the feeling that if she stood there too long, it would come rushing down and trap her like an entomological specimen. She inched to one side.

Emmie shifted the balance of the tubs to her right arm and, wobbling in her high-heeled boots, snaked her left hand out to give the doorbell a jab. As she stood there, listening to the doorbell echo in what she was sure was a tile-floored foyer with a double-height ceiling, Emmie went over her routine for the party. *Up-and-coming partner at the premiere interior design firm in town ... in a long-term relationship with an entrepreneur in the automotive industry ...* She figured she

could get away with the first bit, as it was mostly true—at least the “premiere interior design firm” part—but she didn’t think she was going to be able to get out that fiction about Kyle with a straight face. For a second, she considered making Realistic Hottie her boyfriend; she could make up plenty of stories to share about how they’d met and how fabulously they got along.

Nobody was coming to the door. Emmie was attempting to poke the doorbell again when the red lacquered door swung inward, and there, in all her blond-haired, blue-eyed glory, was the legend that was Juliet Winslow. Emmie immediately realized that Juliet hadn’t cheated on Circle-O by using an old photo for her profile picture; she looked exactly like the picture on the site—her hair was still long and curly, her blue eyes as round and astonished-looking as a doll’s, her figure still trim. (Even after more than fifteen years and two children? Emmie was really, *really* ready to hate her.) Emmie knew it wouldn’t be long before she’d be exclaiming, “You haven’t changed a bit!”—and completely sincerely. She doubted that Juliet would be able to say the same of her.

She put on as bright a smile as she could manage as Juliet opened the glass storm door a crack and said politely, “Yes?”

“Hi!” she squeaked, immediately hating the sound of her voice. “Emmie Brewster, from high school?” She desperately wished her inner teenager would stop turning? Everything she said? Into a question? As Juliet frowned delicately, Emmie added, “I’m here for the cookie party?”

Juliet’s delicate features cleared, and her wide blue eyes got wider. “Oh! I’m so sorry! The cookie party got rescheduled for Thursday night! Didn’t you get the update on Circle-O?”

Emmie felt her stomach plummet into her stylish boots. “Oh —”

And then, both embarrassed, they started yammering over one another, each desperate to be more obsequious than the other.

Emmie exclaimed, “Oh—no—I’m sorry! I didn’t get the—”

And Juliet cried, “It’s my fault—I sent it too late—”

Emmie lied, “No, I never check my e-mail often enough—”

Juliet: “And you came all this way?”

Emmie: “Oh, it’s really not—”

And finally Juliet won the protesting game by pushing the storm door wide and saying, “Oh, and here I am leaving you out in the cold with all those cookies! Please come in!”

As Emmie hesitantly stepped into the foyer, she said, “I don’t want to bother you—I really should—”

Juliet shut the door, struck an open pose, and cut her off with, “Emmie Brewster! It’s been such a long time!”

And then both of them said, at the same time, “You haven’t changed a bit!”

The petite woman looked her up and down. “Gosh, I remember you so well!”

“Really!” Emmie said, surprised.

Juliet hesitated for a moment. “Actually, no, not really.” She winced. “I’m sorry—I’m afraid I don’t remember you at all.” And Emmie’s newly formed happy bubble popped. “But,” Juliet rushed to add, “that means we can start fresh. Let me take those—”

As Juliet reached for the plastic containers, Emmie saw a movement out of the corner of her eye, down the hall that she assumed led to the kitchen. Someone passed the doorway, stopped, did a double take, then emerged from the shadows. And she nearly dropped her load right onto the tile floor.

There he was—the man she had been looking for, waiting for, for weeks. Looking even better than she remembered.

With a quizzical half smile, he said, “I know you.”

Emmie couldn’t speak. Not when her gaze was captured by a pair of too-familiar blue eyes. She heard someone speaking, but because of the roaring in her ears, she only heard a noise like the teacher in the Charlie Brown specials. *Wah wah wah* ... Emmie shook her head and focused. Juliet was saying, in a

rapid, high-pitched, almost nervous tone, "... Emmie Brewster, an old friend from high school. She—she didn't get the notice that the cookie party was rescheduled. I feel so bad about that! Emmie, er, this is, um, Graham—"

Oh, now he has a name, Emmie thought—an actual name instead of the variety of manly yet romantic names she had given him in her wayward fantasies. And "Graham" fit him better than anything she'd come up with.

"Oh, we've met," he said to Juliet, in an amused, warm tone, and Emmie blushed to the roots of her hair. He remembered who she was (good); he remembered her because she had acted like a moron and had had a paper clip stuck to the side of her face (bad).

Emmie dropped her gaze to the floor. She noticed his feet: socks, no shoes. Someone sure felt at home ... *Oh my God*. Home. Her mind ricocheted from thought to thought in an instant. Realistic Hottie ... in Juliet's house ... *Oh my God*. His home? She looked up again, from him to Juliet, looking for a connection but dreading finding it.

"Oh?" Juliet prompted with a wavering smile.

"Yes," he said, and Emmie found herself reveling in the sound of his rich baritone, even as she realized he was snuffing out the candles she had lit for him with every word, every breath, every comfortable, intimate look at Juliet. "At that interior design place in town. I was trying to find the owner. But—Emmie, is it?" She nodded once. "Emmie greeted me instead."

"Really?" Juliet prompted again. She stepped forward and took the plastic containers. "Emmie, come into the kitchen—"

Emmie had the distinct feeling that the last thing Juliet wanted was to catch up on the last fifteen years over a cup of coffee ... and now neither did she. So she pushed up the sleeve of her coat and looked at her wrist—no watch, but oh well—she was beyond any further embarrassment at this point. "Actually, I can't. I—I have to go. I just realized I have to be—to go ..." She had nowhere to be, but it didn't matter. "I've gotta go. Excuse me," she said breathlessly, and pulled open

the front door. “Please, keep the cookies for Thursday. I’m ... sorry.” She didn’t know what she was saying she was sorry for, and she didn’t stay to figure it out. “It was nice seeing you again,” she said to Juliet. “Nice to meet you.” She nodded at Graham.

Then she was out the door, down the walk, in her car, and, after fumbling with her keys for a moment, tearing down the driveway and out into the street.

And that was the end of that. No more limitless potential with Realistic Hottie. She mentally gathered up all the little fantasies she’d so lovingly sculpted with her fertile imagination and dumped them into a trash bin. No, she corrected her mental image—a toilet, so she could send them down the tubes with a decisive, depressing flush.

Chapter 5

“Stupid! Stupid! *Stupid!*”

Emmie banged her head on the steering wheel with each utterance. She hadn't gotten far from Juliet's house before she had to pull over and wail for a few minutes. Even though Juliet had no idea why Emmie felt so humiliated, it didn't lessen her embarrassment. The way Realistic Hottie—no, *Graham*—looked at her, it was like he already knew she'd been lusting after him for weeks. And now that she'd found out he was—what? Juliet's boyfriend? Juliet's *husband*?—it was so inappropriate.

She couldn't go through this alone. She just couldn't. She fumbled in her purse for her phone. When Trish answered, Emmie blurted out the briefest of communications.

“Busy?”

“Not really.”

“Carl's. Now. Meet me?”

“Aren't you supposed to be at a cookie party?”

“Alcohol first, explanations after.”

“You bailed in the first ten minutes?”

“You in or not?”

A heavy sigh crackled in her ear. “If you get me drunk on a Saturday afternoon ...”

“No, *I'm* going to get drunk; *you're* going to mop me up and drive me home. Savvy?”

“You sweet-talker, you. How can I refuse?” A pause. “How bad was it? Should I make sure the menfolk have pizza money for dinner?”

“Mario's has a two-for-one deal if you order before six o'clock.”

“Done and done. See you in a few.”

* * *

Emmie hardly ever made a habit of frequenting Carl's—or any bar—on a Saturday afternoon. In fact, she didn't usually go to Carl's at all without Kyle—it was more his place than hers—but if she was going to relive this experience by relating it to Trish, she was going to need a good stiff drink (no, definitely more than one), and it was the first place that came to mind.

She pulled into the gravel parking lot five minutes later and instantly regretted her choice. Carl's was pretty run down, with a bad shingle job, a hand-lettered sign, a speakeasy-type metal door with a small, scratched Plexiglas window, and a permanent smell of beer that seemed to seep out of the very membrane of the place and hover, mistlike, over the parking lot. All that was easy to ignore when she was going out with friends at night, but in broad daylight, and alone, it was just ... depressing. But it matched her mood, so she decided to stay and wait for Trish to arrive.

She craned her neck to look at the smattering of cars around her in the parking lot. She didn't see the Mom-Mobile, Trish's minivan, anywhere—just pickup trucks and other manly modes of transportation. It looked like the bar was going to be sparsely populated with dedicated drinkers. *What great company to keep. Go me*, she thought, whapping her head on the steering wheel once more for good measure.

This was the way Trish found her; Emmie heard the *bip* of a truncated honk and looked up to see her friend peering at her from the Mom-Mobile. Trish mouthed, “What the hell?” Emmie stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout, pointed toward the bar's entrance, and tipped up an invisible glass. She was pretty sure she was miming a shot, and she didn't really care that it wasn't even two thirty in the afternoon.

Three shots and several beers later, Emmie rested her cheek on her hand, her elbow on the bar beside the glasses and bottles. Trish was more composed; she was still nursing her first and evidently what was going to be her only bottle of beer as she sat primly on her stool and studied her friend with concern.

“She’s got my life,” Emmie muttered, not for the first time since she’d started bending her elbow.

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because she does,” Emmie answered matter-of-factly, as if that explained everything. Trish just looked at her, so she was forced to elucidate. “She’s got this ... whole life ... and it should be mine. It should!”

“Inside voice, Emmaline,” Trish reminded her, also leaning her arm on the bar.

Emmie continued, more quietly, “She’s got ... everything.”

“Nothing you want.”

“Yuh-huh! She’s got this perfect life. Big house, her own business ‘Coming soon!’ ... kids ... and she’s got my man,” she pouted. “*Mine*. My perfect, gorgeous, nice, hot, perfect ...” she trailed off.

“You said perfect twice.”

“Because he’s extra perfect.”

“You don’t even *know* this guy.”

“Don’t you get all logical with me, Patricia Ann Campo. I’ll have none of that today.” And she waved Carl over for another drink.

Trish sighed. “I’m *going* to get all logical with you, Emmaline Helen Brewster, because that’s my job as your best friend.”

“Foo.”

“Let’s review, shall we? We’ll skip the guy thing for now ___”

“Thank you.”

“But we *are* going to come back to it.”

Emmie gave her a loud raspberry and flipped up a rude finger.

“You certainly lose some of your charm when you drink too much,” Trish said, grinning.

“But you still love me sooooo.”

“Yes, and you’re lucky I do. Now, according to you, Juliet Winslow—”

“Princess Perfect.”

“—has a perfect life.”

“Right.”

“And that consists of a house—”

“Perfect house.”

“—that you wouldn’t live in in a million years.”

“It’s a fancy-schmancy house.”

“And when you’re sober, you’ll admit you don’t really like it.”

Another raspberry.

“Next, her own business. ‘Coming soon!’” Trish added, knowing Emmie would tack that on every time it was uttered, and she did. “I told you that *you* could have your own business, but you never listen to me.”

Emmie flopped her hand around in a dismissive gesture.

“Next, kids. Since when do you want kids?”

“I never said I didn’t,” she said defensively. “I want kids. Why wouldn’t I want kids?”

“I constantly offer to give you mine, but you won’t take them. And finally, this perfect man.”

Emmie sighed and drew a circle by dragging her finger through a droplet of water on the bar. “He’s so perfect.”

“You don’t know anything *about* him.”

“I know he’s perfect,” Emmie offered, as if it made all the sense in the world.

Trish studied her in silence for a moment. “You’re really smitten with this guy, aren’t you?”

“Smitten as a mitten.”

“What does *that* mean?”

Emmie started to laugh. “I have no idea.” Trish snickered into her beer, and Emmie stood up, a bit unsteadily. “Must powder my nose. No, no”—she waved off Trish as her friend moved to help—“I can do it.” She stood there for a moment. Trish turned her in the right direction. “I knew that,” Emmie muttered, and crossed the room, stepping carefully, as though the floor were littered with land mines. Of course, in her state, even the chipped corner of a square of linoleum could very well have tripped her up. But she managed to remain upright, if listing a little to one side, all the way across the room.

Emmie lurched into the ladies’ room and, after a quick stop in the stall, checked her reflection in the speckled mirror over the sink. Above the stickers for motorcycle brands and tattoo parlors, and to the right of several lipstick kisses left over from the night before (Emmie wondered how many different diseases that girl contracted from her brief love affair with the bathroom mirror), she found a clear spot to get a look at herself.

“Oh, God,” she muttered. Her mascara and eyeliner were smeared, she was pale from the great deal of alcohol she had imbibed in a short period of time, and her hair was a marvelous tangle, likely from her vigorous headbanging on the steering wheel. Emmie ran her thumb under her eyes and got rid of most of the smeared makeup, dragged her fingers through her hair, rummaged around in her bag looking for her lipstick, failed, and gave up. She was doing some serious drinking, and for that, she didn’t need to look good; she just needed her lifting arm to work.

She pulled the door open and walked out of the bathroom, coming up behind a couple who had just entered the bar. The man had his hand on the small of the woman’s back to steer her in. Emmie made a face; she always hated it when Kyle did that to her—as if she was so stupid that she’d wander off in a random direction unless he guided her. As they moved farther inside, the man flung his arm around the girl’s neck.

Emmie’s alcohol-influenced synapses were firing slowly, so it took her several seconds of following the couple, and an

exchange of glances with an astonished-looking Trish, who had a better view from her barstool across the room, before the penny dropped.

“*KYLE!*”

The man ahead of her spun around, startled. Kyle acted like nothing was out of the ordinary—he could have been holding a motorcycle helmet under his arm for all the guilt he displayed. He smoothly took his arm from around the woman (that poofy-haired tart, Caitlynn, *again*) and eased her away from him with practiced skill as he put on a welcoming smile. “Hey, baby! What are you doing here? I thought you were at that housewife party.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Emmie saw Caitlynn snicker as she retreated to the bar. Ever loyal, Trish gave the girl her best vicious mommy-glare, and Emmie felt bolstered by the support. She wasn’t sure what to say to Kyle. He was caught red-handed, but acted like nothing at all was wrong. He didn’t even look nervous. And that was the worst part.

Finally Emmie spat out, “You bastard.”

“What?”

Ah. That goofy look on his face meant Kyle *was* nervous. That habit of his was infuriating. Whenever Emmie wanted to argue, but Kyle treated it like a joke (even though he almost didn’t realize he was laughing), it only made her want to throw things.

Then, without another thought, that was exactly what she was doing.

She reached out to her right and made contact with a pyramid of shot glasses stacked up on the bar—one of Carl’s misguided attempts at classing up the joint—and suddenly the air was full of a hailstorm of flying glass. Emmie, who might or might not have been shouting epithets at her boyfriend—or, rather, *ex-BF* as of about twenty seconds ago—as the missiles started flying, didn’t really know exactly what she was doing. But whatever it was, it sure felt good, especially when Kyle put his arms over his face and, survival instinct kicking in,

turned sideways to let his thick tan Carhartt jacket absorb the worst of the impact.

“Geez, Emmaline!” Kyle shrieked several times, but Emmie didn’t stop. She couldn’t stop.

One shot glass for all the times he’d used her as a booty call. One shot glass for how he repeatedly belched in the middle of a meal and thought it was funny. One for all the times he steered her through doors with a hand to the small of her back. One for all the times he had throttled her with a possessive arm around her neck. One for his damned fake-cowboy persona. One for all his beer. One for the bleached-blond ho at the bar. One—no, two—for all the lousy sex. One for each month of her life she’d wasted with him. Those ten took a while to fling at him, one by precious one.

The observer part of Emmie’s brain wondered why she wasn’t stopping, or why nobody was stopping her. After a few moments enjoying the entertainment, however, Carl and Trish saw fit to show Kyle some mercy. Or Carl finally calculated the cost of replacing the shot glasses, most of which lay shattered on the floor, although a few rolled in lazy arcs, safe and whole, at Kyle’s feet. Whichever, Carl rounded the bar at a trot, preceded by his large belly, elbows akimbo, and Trish launched herself off her barstool to stop the barrage.

“All right, Emmie, take it easy,” Carl commanded, holding out a beefy hand in front of her, but staying out of the way of her pitching arm. He might have had a faint smile on his face, but he was all business.

Trish was less cautious. She stepped in front of Emmie, grasped her by the shoulders, and said, “Emmie, honey—*stop.*”

Emmie stopped. As she stared at Trish and sniffled, stunned, Kyle straightened up, brushed himself off, and glared at her. “What the *hell*, Emmaline!”

“I *said* don’t call me that!” Emmie lunged for the last of the shot glasses, but Trish held her back.

Over her shoulder, Trish snapped, “Shut it, Kyle, or I’ll let her loose so she can go apeshit on you again.”

Carl also spoke up. “Kyle, move it, you hear me? Go over there”—he indicated the bar—“and I’ll get you a beer.” To Emmie, he said, “Honey, you got every right to be upset. But you can’t trash my bar. And you can’t beat up my customers—at least not in here, okay?” he murmured with a wink. “I think it’s about time Trish took you home.”

The commanding presence of the mountain-sized man before her got through to Emmie, and she visibly wilted. Trish put a comforting arm around her. Carl fetched their coats and handed them to Trish, who draped them over her free arm and guided Emmie toward the exit.

Trish almost got Emmie out the door without further incident, but at the last moment, Emmie glanced over her shoulder at Kyle. The idiot had the audacity—and the stupidity—to raise his beer in a toast to her.

With a last burst of energy, Emmie spun away from Trish, swept up the plastic bin of lime wedges, and flung it at him, a hailstorm of green and seeds and bitter juice. Only then did she walk out sedately, as dignified as she could wobble, and she allowed the tears to well up only when she was safely belted into the passenger seat of Trish’s minivan.

Once they were on the road, Trish said simply, “It’ll be better tomorrow. I promise.”

Emmie nodded and snurfled a little.

“You okay?”

Emmie whispered something toward the window.

“What was that, sweetie?”

“He had it coming.”

“Trish, dammit! Where the *hell* are you?” Emmie hissed into her cell phone.

Emmie had summoned up enough courage to get herself back to Juliet's for the rescheduled cookie party. She had to, after Juliet sent her a Circle-O message late Saturday, expressing concern about Emmie's wackadoodle performance at her house that afternoon. Of course, Juliet had put it in much nicer terms. She asked if "everything was okay" and said she was "kind of surprised" when Emmie "left so suddenly." She even added a thoughtful PS: "I put your cookies in the freezer to keep them fresh and will defrost them in time for the party. Hope to see you there!"

So Emmie had girded herself and entered the Hallowed Halls of Winslow a second time. Juliet, gracious as always, had acted delighted, not put out, when Emmie told her that she had asked Trish to come along. Then she had confiscated Emmie's jacket and purse and hidden them somewhere upstairs, making her a party prisoner for the rest of the evening.

Emmie glanced around furtively for the first few minutes, on the lookout for Graham, but she didn't see him. Maybe he had made himself scarce, and who could blame him, with a house full of women talking baked goods? Emmie was relieved that he wasn't there, but a little disappointed as well. She tried desperately to ignore that last feeling. Inappropriate, she reminded herself.

She waded into a crowd of vaguely familiar-looking women who were squealing whenever they recognized one another. All she had to do was socialize with people she hadn't seen—and hadn't missed—in years. Luckily, she'd have Trish alongside her. Right?

But when Trish didn't show right away, Emmie retreated to the powder room to rail at her missing friend with some degree of privacy. She got voice mail, but that wasn't going to stop her from freaking out if she wanted to freak out.

"The place is filled with weird, *old* doppelgängers of people we used to know in high school, and I'm outnumbered! It's like being in a zombie movie!"

Emmie took a deep breath and clicked off. Trish had to be almost there. Maybe she didn't answer because she was getting out of her car and walking to the front door at that very minute, and she didn't want to waste time digging her phone out of her purse. That was probably it.

Emmie looked around for a box of tissues, didn't find one, and blew her nose on some toilet paper. It looked like Juliet had just moved in—the powder room was as stark as the rest of the house; the entire place echoed emptily with only the barest amount of furniture and absolutely no creature comforts. She expected Juliet to have decorated every inch of the place by now, but there was not one stylish accessory in the place yet. Maybe Juliet was a good candidate for Wilman Designs, she thought.

Emmie was passing through the kitchen with the drinks table as her target—she had lost her first thimble-sized plastic “wineglass” somewhere along the way, and she desperately needed a replacement—when her phone rang in her pocket. She scrambled to answer it.

“Hey, honey,” came a distant voice.

Emmie frantically turned up the volume on her phone. “Trish! Where are you? Tell me you're on your way.”

“Uh, no, sweetie, I'm afraid not.”

“*Why* not?”

Emmie was ready to rend her friend six ways from Sunday, but she stopped short when Trish said in a tight voice, “We're at the hospital.”

“Oh my God. What happened?”

“Nothing major,” she rushed to reassure her friend. “It's Logan; he just *had* to try out Justin's skateboard even though we've told him a *thousand* times he's not allowed, and he fell. He might have a broken arm.”

“How awful for the poor little punkin. I'll be right there.” And Emmie started to look around for Juliet to find out how to get her personal effects released.

Trish actually laughed. “You’re not getting out of the party that easily.”

“Oh, screw the party. I’m worried about Logan. And you,” she added.

“Logan’s arm is iced and he hasn’t even had X-rays yet. He’s watching television, and I’m going to get him some dinner. Do you know they have McDonald’s *in* the hospital? Isn’t that kind of a conflict of interest?”

“Good for repeat business, at the very least.”

“Anyway, we know the drill, after Justin’s concussion *and* both of his sprains from soccer. Stupid sport,” she muttered. “I feel like we should have a Campo Memorial Cubicle here or something. I’ve got a nice one picked out; I’m going to ask the charge nurse if we can have a plaque and a little ceremony—you know, maybe some canapés and champagne for the local dignitaries, nothing big.” Emmie started to insist again that she was going to show up at the hospital, but Trish interrupted her. “Honestly, Emmie, we’re fine. I mean it. Okay?”

“I don’t like it,” Emmie grumbled.

“Well, suck it up. Now get in there and mingle with those zombie alums!”

After eliciting a promise from Trish that she would phone when she had an update on Logan’s status, Emmie ended the call and looked around, a little desperate. She was on her own. She’d rather be at the hospital with Trish and Logan. She’d rather be at home. She’d rather be in a foxhole under heavy mortar fire.

Suddenly Juliet was at her elbow. “Emmie, is everything okay?”

There it was again—*everything okay?* Emmie didn’t even want to speculate on what Juliet thought of her—most likely that she was the biggest drama magnet on the planet. Funny how it wasn’t so long ago that Trish accused her of having a boring life. *Proved her wrong*, Emmie thought smugly. As for Juliet, well, Emmie was going to show her just how downright normal she was.

She put on a smile and dragged her best vocabulary out of mothballs. “Yes, everything’s fine. But I’m afraid I imposed on you to add an extra guest a little prematurely. That was Trish. She can’t make it.”

Juliet put on a concerned frown. “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope nothing’s wrong.”

Emmie told her about Logan, and Juliet expressed just the right amount of dismay at the news. She commiserated by talking about the health crises of her own children, which another guest overheard. That woman added her accident-prone-kid anecdotes, and they were off and running in the small-talk department.

Pretty soon Emmie realized that she was actually having a good time. The other partygoers were not, in fact, vicious animals sizing her up as their next meal; instead, they were friendly and welcoming. Sure, the Popular Girls were out in full force, and still glamorous, but the high school celebrity contingent was balanced, possibly even outnumbered, by the frumpy, the overweight, the shy—the resoundingly average. Emmie fell somewhere in the middle of the scale, which made her feel ... normal.

She was honestly enjoying her conversation with a few of the dowdy and a few of the still gorgeous—their own little alumnae UN—enough that, when they asked her about her life, she felt comfortable telling the truth—that she was with Wilman Designs right now, but really wanted to start her own company.

“Oh, Emmie, you should,” enthused one of the Popular Girls, who owned her own yoga studio. “It’s *so* rewarding. Hard work, but worth it.”

“I’m seriously looking into it,” Emmie replied, punctuating her words with a wave of her hand, then exclaimed, “Damn!” as a dollop of cream cheese flew off her appetizer and landed on the front of her fawn-colored sweater.

Instead of raising their eyebrows at this faux pas, the women in the group cooed their concern. “And as you can see from my demonstration,” she commented as she started wiping

at the cream cheese with her cocktail napkin, “tan-colored walls can be nicely augmented by an off-white or ivory faux-finish that we can achieve by applying the lighter color and then ragging most of it off.”

Amid appreciative laughter at her self-deprecation, Emmie kept wiping but realized she was going to need some soap and water to really clean it up properly. Then she felt the lightest of touches on her shoulder.

It was Juliet, breaking into their small circle to announce, “Sorry to interrupt, girls, but it’s time to divvy up the cookies. Emmie, yours are on the kitchen counter.”

“I’ll grab them.”

Still swiping at her cream cheese smear, she headed for the kitchen as a door slammed at the back of the house. In an instant she was nearly run over by a boy about thirteen and a girl a few years younger as they thundered down the hall, into the foyer, and up the stairs, shedding coats and shoes and backpacks along the way. She recovered in time to hear Juliet shout, “Zoë! Brian! Pick up your things! No TV up there; I want you to get your homework done—”

Emmie was sort of pleased that Juliet had to yell at her kids like any other mother. It brought her back down to earth somewhat. She crossed to the sink, put her empty plastic wineglass and crumpled napkin on the counter, flipped on the water, and tore off a paper towel from the roll, all before she noticed the other person in the room.

“Hello there.” A shortish man with a pleasant, freckled face and thinning, sandy hair was taking off a baseball jacket and hanging it on the back of one of the tall chairs at the breakfast bar. “How’s the party?”

“Great; we’re so rowdy we’re flinging food. Okay, I actually flung it at myself, but still.” Emmie smiled, blotting at the stain on her sweater.

“Sounds like a good time.” He smiled back.

She finished cleaning up and tossed the paper towel and napkin in a nearby garbage can but held on to her wineglass

for a refill. No worries about not being fit to drive; the amount of wine these glasses held wouldn't fill the gap left by her pulled wisdom tooth—and she was too embarrassed to get any more than this next refill so she didn't look like a lush.

The man held out a thick, calloused hand. “I don't think we've met. I'm Kevin Underwood. Juliet's husband.”

The plastic glass slipped from Emmie's grasp and bounced on the tile floor with a clatter. She realized her mouth was open, so she tried making some words come out of it. Unfortunately the first ones that did were, “Oh! I—I didn't know you were Mormon!”

As the man looked at her, bemused, she hid her burning face by crouching down to pick up the glass. *That's one man, many wives, Einstein*, she berated herself. She stood up and tried again. “Er, it's nice to meet you,” she said simply.

And then Juliet was there. She crossed to her husband—Emmie could *not* wrap her mind around this one—and they gave each other a peck on the cheek. They were the same compact height, but Kevin was twice as broad as his wife. “How were the kids?” she asked him, and he replied, “Just fine.”

“I see you've met Kevin,” Juliet said cheerfully. Emmie must have looked puzzled, because Juliet went on, “I know it's confusing ...” Emmie let out a breath. *No kidding*. She listened eagerly for the explanation. “... I just always felt really strongly about keeping my own last name when we got married. Luckily Kevin didn't mind.” She turned her smile on him. “This is Emmie Brewster, Class of '95.” As Kevin nodded at Emmie, Juliet said, “Emmie, your cookies are right over there. Why don't I take one container and you take the other—”

“No, it's okay,” Emmie said hastily, eager to have something to do, even more eager to leave the kitchen. “I can get them.” She picked up the tubs, balancing her empty glass on top—she had the feeling she was going to need that thimbleful of wine even more than she'd planned—and escaped to the living room.

* * *

The next morning at work, Emmie was surprised to hear the bell over the door jangle. She put down the supplies she was unpacking and hurried out of the back room. No meetings were scheduled, Trish was home with a recuperating Logan, and she'd gotten past the phase where she thought every person who walked into the office was her dream man. So who else could it—

“Juliet?” Emmie stopped short at the sight of the petite woman standing just inside the doorway, clutching the strap of a large designer purse on her shoulder. Emmie scrambled to put on her professional demeanor. “Please, come in. What can I do for you?” She gestured toward the guest chair next to her desk, but Juliet remained standing.

She smiled nervously at Emmie and clutched her bag tighter. Her expensive cropped leather blazer creaked. “So this is Wilman Designs,” she said, taking it in with her wide blue eyes.

“Yep, this is it.”

“It’s nice.”

“Yes,” Emmie lied.

“I can’t wait to open my doors—I signed the papers on the space last week. I should be working on finalizing the details right now, but ...”

“You need design advice?”

Juliet looked confused for a moment, then shook her head. “Oh. Not just yet, no.”

Emmie couldn’t for the life of her figure out why Juliet was standing in front of her, fidgeting. Had Emmie left something behind at the party, and Juliet was stopping by to give it back? Did she do something offensive—even though she thought she had been on her best behavior—and Juliet was going to call her out about it? Did—*oh, God in heaven, no*—did Graham tell her that she went all googly-eyed at him the first time they met, and now Juliet was going to warn Emmie to keep her mitts off her man?

Finally Juliet fought out, “I was wondering if you were free for lunch.”

Well, that was entirely unexpected, Emmie thought. “Uh ...” Instead of saying yes or no, she heard herself blurt out rudely, “It’s eleven o’clock.”

“Is that a problem?”

Emmie took another look at Juliet. She wasn’t the confident, gracious socialite she had been last night. In fact, she looked a little green. Emmie wondered what was bothering this lost-looking wisp of a woman.

“No, it’s not a problem,” she said. “Let me get my coat.”

They chose a little café that was within walking distance of the office. Emmie ordered an iced tea, but Juliet ordered a gin and tonic. Emmie stared at it longingly. She raised her eyebrows at how efficiently Juliet sucked it down and asked for another before their flatbread pizzas were even close to arriving.

Wilma was out searching for just the right dining room set for a client, so Emmie knew she had some time—and a good thing, too, as it didn’t look like Juliet was going to be ponying up the reason for asking her to lunch anytime soon. Juliet had been a master of small talk at her party the previous night, but her skill was failing her now—or she was too fixated on getting the last drops out of the bottom of the glass. As she poked at the lime wedge with her thin straw, Emmie debated whether it was better to fill the void with frivolous conversation or get right to the heart of the matter and ask her what she wanted—well, in a more polite way, of course.

After spending a few moments watching Juliet rattle the ice around in her glass, Emmie took a breath. “Juliet—” she began, just as the woman across the table looked up and finally spoke.

“Did you have a good time at the party?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was nice—”

“Look, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“I could kind of tell.”

Juliet tried to smile. “Not a lot of people know this, but ... I guess you should.”

“Okay ...” Emmie prompted.

“I can trust you, I think—you seem like a really nice person.”

“Thanks ... ?”

And suddenly Juliet got the rest out in a rush. “I need to explain about Graham and—and Kevin.”

Juliet was flushed—whether it was because of the alcohol or nerves, Emmie wasn’t sure. But judging by how skittish Juliet was, Emmie could pretty much guess what she was going to say. And she *really* didn’t want to hear the gory details.

“Juliet, you know, you don’t have to—it doesn’t matter—”

“No, I need to explain. I mean ... it’s complicated.”

“Seems that way.”

“Kevin doesn’t know ... Nobody else knows. And I want to keep it that way. I wouldn’t bring it up at all,” Juliet went on, frowning at the tabletop, “but then Graham ... he ...”

Emmie sat up a little straighter at Juliet’s suddenly annoyed tone. *Graham what?*

“He just *had* to come into the foyer to meet you on Saturday, so now ... now I need to ask you ... Emmie, what I need to know is, can I count on you for this?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Emmie saw the server slide their pizzas onto the table. He asked if they needed anything else, and Juliet reminded him that she was still waiting for her second drink. Once he was gone, Juliet prompted, “Emmie?”

She jumped a little. “Right.”

“Can I count on you for this?” she said again.

“Uh,” she rasped, “sure. Yeah.”

Juliet visibly relaxed. “Thank you,” she said. “I can’t tell you what this means to me. But you should know it’s not as

bad as—”

“Uh, you know ...” Emmie blurted out, cutting her off. “I can’t ... I ...” The server returned with Juliet’s second gin and tonic, and Emmie looked up at him. “Can I get a box, please?” To Juliet, she said, “I have to go.”

Juliet frowned prettily. “Again? Is it me, or—”

Yes. It damn sure is you this time, Emmie thought, but she only said, “I’m so sorry. I hate to keep doing this to you, but I really do have to get back ...”

“Emmie, is it because of what I just—”

“No! No, of course not. You can do whatever—I mean, it’s fine. I just have to go. Really.” She made an effort to smile at Juliet, who was looking a whole lot different in her eyes all of a sudden. She wrestled her arms into her coat, nearly knocking over her iced tea, and fumbled for her purse.

“Emmie,” Juliet ventured, “are we still friends?”

“Of—of course,” Emmie heard herself saying, even as she wondered when they had ever actually *been* friends. “Sure.”

“I’m so glad,” Juliet breathed. “And I’m going to tell everyone I know to go to you if they need work done in their houses.”

Emmie stopped dead. Was that a *bribe*? She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Juliet was looking so earnest, so worried. What did she think Emmie was going to do, lie in wait on their street and jump out at Kevin when he came home from work, just so she could spill the beans about Juliet’s little secret?

Emmie took a deep breath and, before she could say anything she’d regret, only muttered, “Thanks. I really have to go now.”

“Let’s have coffee sometime!” Juliet called after her, but Emmie was stumbling out of the café on wobbly legs, so hurriedly she even left her box on the table—and usually Emmie was more loyal than the Marines. She *never* left a pizza behind.

The cold air actually felt good on her flushed cheeks as she thought about Juliet and Graham. How in the world did something like this happen? Well, that wasn't such a mystery. A couple of happenstance meetings, a bit of unhappiness and loneliness on one or both their parts, some flirtatious exchanges, a private moment or two, and they were off to the races. Happened every day, all over the world, right?

This was Juliet's life, Juliet's duplicity, Juliet's problem. She didn't care. But she sure didn't like the notion that Juliet had the perfect life, with a perfectly nice husband and family, and she was playing footsie with yet another perfect man. Why wasn't she happy with the nice man she had? Was she making a collection or something? And why, she wondered, should some women have too many men, when other women, who were just as worthy of happiness—if not *more* so, she couldn't help throwing in—end up with losers like Kyle, and then not even manage to keep the likes of him interested?

Emmie wondered what Graham's story was. Did he have a wife and kids, too? Did they have to hide from just Juliet's family, or from his as well? She thought of how quiet the house had been that Saturday. Did Juliet cancel the cookie party in order to steal an afternoon with Graham instead? *Why did she care?* Why? Because if Graham was going to have an affair, why hadn't Emmie gotten to him first, that's why!

Emmie stopped short on the sidewalk so abruptly a few people nearly ran into her. Did she actually just think that? She was in worse shape than she thought. But she knew better; she'd never get herself into a situation like that, not even with a man as hot as Graham.

Would she?

The ethical dilemma kept her busy all the way back to the office. She peeked in the window; Wilma was back in the office already, talking with a client, who was seated in her guest chair at the front of the room. Suddenly she was glad she had bailed on lunch with Juliet. The last thing she needed right now was an earful from her boss about having the office locked up for too long in the middle of the day. She pushed open the door.

“Oh. There you are.”

“Here I am, John!” she agreed with forced brightness.

As she busied herself with hanging up her coat, Wilma said to the client, “This is my assistant, Emmaline.” Never “associate,” Emmie noted. And never, *ever* “partner.” God forbid. Then again, she thought, she should be grateful that he didn’t call her his secretary. The client twisted around in the chair, stood up to greet her—and she felt her second punch in the gut within an hour.

“We meet again,” Graham murmured, smiling.

Chapter 6

It was too much. Being ambushed by Juliet was bad enough, but now she had to smile and make small talk with the one person—besides Juliet—she just couldn't bear to see. She wanted to make some excuse and run away, just as she had done with Juliet—twice—but she couldn't. This was her job. And that grump over there, that was her dour employer glowering at her, wondering why she was hesitating. She was stuck.

“Emmaline?”

“Yes!” she said briskly.

“This is Graham Cooper—”

Graham smiled more broadly and said to Wilma, “We've met. Several times, in fact.” He turned back to her. “But it's always nice to see you again, Emmie.” He held out his hand.

“Mr. Cooper is an architect.” Wilma beamed at him as he spoke to Emmie. *Oh, great—the boss man's taken a shine to Graham*, she thought. *Get in line, bub*. “He's looking for a designer to work on his latest project.”

“Oh! Er ... great,” Emmie tried to enthuse as she reluctantly shook Graham's hand. That was all she needed. Funny how she had wished for just this circumstance only a few weeks ago.

Without taking his eyes off his new client, Wilma said, “Make a fresh pot of coffee, if you please, Emmaline, while Mr. Cooper and I get started.”

Emmie barely managed to stifle a heavy sigh and she clomped toward the kitchenette at the back of the office. Make coffee ... he might as *well* have called her his secretary. She robotically pulled the bag of coffee grounds out of the cupboard, then shoved the glass carafe under the bottled water dispenser.

Seething about Juliet and Graham, Wilma's abuse, and her aching back as she bent over and watched the water burble into the pot, Emmie completely missed the tastefully muted

“ahem” that came from behind her. However, she caught the second, slightly louder one. She stood up and whipped around, keenly aware that she had been displaying a broad view of her backside to ... *Ahh, just great.*

“Graham. What can I do for you?”

“I, er, was looking for your restroom.”

“Oh, it’s that door over there.” Emmie moved to point it out, but Graham spoke again.

“Actually, that was a cheap excuse to come back here and talk to you privately,” he murmured. And despite everything she now knew about the man, his warm voice and steady blue-eyed gaze turned her insides to jelly again. He leaned back against the counter, hands in his pockets, looking so casually delectable that Emmie knew if he stood that way thirty more seconds, she’d agree to absolutely anything he asked, and the more torrid the better.

“I heard from my friend Juliet that you’re a remarkable designer.”

Well, didn’t that just dump a bucket of ice water over her agitated hormones. “I see.” And—wait—his “friend”? Ew.

“Yes. She couldn’t say enough good things about you.”

And how in the world was that possible, when Juliet had seen none of her work? “Wow, that was really nice of her. She’s *so* nice, isn’t she?” Emmie tacked on, with a large dollop of sarcasm.

Graham blinked. “Er, yes. So I was thinking—” he began, but he was interrupted by Wilma, who had come to see what was taking Emmie so long. He looked ready to rage at her, but stopped short when he saw his new client in the kitchenette as well.

Instead he said, quite pleasantly, “Emmaline, when the coffee’s ready, please bring it to the conference table. Mr. Cooper, if you’ll come with me—”

With a lingering glance in Emmie’s direction, which she tried to ignore as she focused on watching the coffee drip,

Graham sat down with Wilma at the antique carved pedestal table, and Wilma started his usual introduction about how wonderful and trustworthy he was. Emmie was suddenly grateful that she had the coffee to attend to, if only to avoid having to listen to that drivel for the thousandth time.

When she brought the coffee tray to the meeting area, Wilma was quizzing Graham about the details of his project.

“This must be a significant remodel,” Wilma said admiringly, and Emmie marveled at the black-hole level of vacuum the Suck-up Master was generating. “Or a new build, perhaps?”

Graham glanced up at Emmie and thanked her when she handed him a cup. “No, not a new build. It’s a remodel—an extensive one.”

“Someone not happy with the layout of one of the new places?” Wilma nodded knowingly, ready to dish about difficult clients with someone who knew the trade. Emmie passed him a cup; he stuck his hand out for it without taking his eyes off Graham.

“Actually, it’s one of the older places in town. The Greek Revival just down from the corner of Central and West.”

“Really!” Wilma gushed. “That’s quite a place. Only a few owners in its entire history, am I right?”

“Right. But there’s a lot of work to be done. It’s a bit run down—it’s been empty for a couple of years—and before that there hadn’t been much updating, what with the last owners being pretty up there in years.”

“Of course. The old-timers don’t like change, do they? Nor do they like spending money.” Wilma let out a snort of laughter. Graham smiled politely as he stirred his coffee. “So let’s talk about what you need from me,” Wilma said, getting down to business.

Emmie retrieved a pad of paper from the sideboard against the wall and sat down, poised to take notes as they talked. Usually Wilma took his own notes, but apparently he wanted

to give Graham his full attention—no surprise there—so this time it fell to Emmie.

“Well, first of all,” Graham said, shifting a bit in his chair, “I’d like to start with a specific request.”

“Anything. *You tell me* what you want.”

For now, Emmie thought with a tight grin. She picked up her cup and waited for the battle of the alpha males to commence.

“All right. I want Emmie.”

Emmie choked on her coffee. Oh, sure, she had gone for weeks wanting to hear those very words, but it was disconcerting to hear Graham actually utter them.

“Pardon me?” Wilma responded delicately, utterly confused.

“I want Emmie. To be lead designer.”

Emmie held her breath. Graham was completely serious. She didn’t know what to think of his ludicrous suggestion. First of all, the last thing in the world she wanted or needed at this point was to work closely with her dream man who had just revealed his feet of clay (and his clay shoes that were stored under Juliet’s bed—whenever Kevin wasn’t in it, of course). Second, she wasn’t allowed to be the lead *anything* at Wilman Designs, except for lead gofer and coffee maker, but obviously Graham didn’t know that—he thought Wilma was a normal, rational business owner. Emmie focused on her notepad but glanced furtively at her boss.

Wilma was at a loss for words; what Graham was suggesting was incomprehensible to him. “I’m sorry, you want ... what?”

“I would like Emmie to be point person on this project.”

“Emmaline doesn’t design,” Wilma said with finality.

“But she’s a designer, isn’t she?”

Graham looked over at her, and she nodded. That diploma confirming she had a BFA in interior design was collecting

dust in a closet at home, but it sure didn't have an expiration date.

Not that that mattered to Wilma. "She has no experience."

"She's worked with you, hasn't she?" Graham turned to Emmie again. "I'm so sorry. We're talking about you like you aren't even here. How long have you worked with John?"

"Nearly five years," she said quietly.

"There, you see?" Graham sat back. "In five years, you must have taught her everything you know."

"Hardly," Wilma muttered derisively. "Mr. Cooper, I hope you're not trying to cut corners, either artistically or monetarily, because we at Wilman Designs wouldn't *dream* of burdening you with substandard service. I am the sole designer; Emmaline is an assistant. She can get you more coffee, she will deliver some samples, she might even take an order or two from you. But she does *not* design."

Graham sat forward, resting his arms on the table and interlacing his fingers, and looked Wilma squarely in the eye. He spoke mildly, but Emmie heard steel beneath his melodic tones. "John, these are my terms. Either Emmie is my interior designer, or I take my business elsewhere."

Tiny multicolored butterflies invaded Emmie's belly and fluttered about behind her navel. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. For the moment she ignored the underlying reason he was doing this—because of Juliet—and just enjoyed watching a handsome, charming man championing her. She couldn't have been more pleased if Graham had taken out a baseball bat and brained Wilma with the force of a Looney Tunes character. In fact, his words had pretty much the same effect: Wilma was now completely speechless. Graham waited patiently.

Finally Wilma spluttered, "Well ... well ... of course, if that's what ... We can work something out. Of course."

"Good." Graham smiled, and the storm cloud passed without a lightning bolt striking the table. "Now let's talk

about some concepts. Emmie, let me get your thoughts on this ...”

Their meeting lasted two hours, and by the time it wrapped up, Emmie had forgotten she was supposed to be repulsed by him. Graham was sophisticated, kind, and intelligent, and his treating her like an equal—and dragging Wilma along for the ride—had bolstered Emmie’s confidence. She was able to suggest layouts, paint colors, wallpaper patterns, fabrics, fixtures, all on the fly, without even stopping to refresh her memory of the era. And the more Graham had smiled encouragingly at her, the more she came up with. She spoke to him directly the entire time; it was like Wilma had been the one relegated to the status of a footstool instead of her for once.

When Emmie walked Graham to the door to see him out, Wilma wasn’t far behind. The lack of control over the situation was already driving him crazy. Then Graham turned to Wilma and asked her to retrieve his leather-bound notebook that he had left behind on the conference table, and Emmie couldn’t suppress a smile. She knew he had left it there on purpose. By asking Wilma to fetch it, Graham put her in her place once again.

Emmie nearly didn’t want Graham to leave; she was sure the minute he was gone, Wilma would turn on her. But she could cope with the inevitable payback just knowing she’d be working with Graham, and for a long time, too—it was a whole lot of house, and the crew Graham had employed had just gotten started. He had said large parts of it had to be gutted right down to its 180-year-old studs. This could take an entire year, at least. What could turn out to be a really, really great year ... professionally speaking, of course.

Graham seemed pleased with the arrangement as well, and for a minute Emmie pretended that Juliet hadn’t been behind it all, that Graham just wanted to work with her. She got more material for her fantasy when he smiled and shook her hand, putting his left hand on top as well, as if to emphasize his words: “I really look forward to us working together.”

Graham took his notebook from Wilma, shook his hand more perfunctorily than he had Emmie's, and let himself out. Wilma closed the door behind him, and both he and Emmie watched Graham stride down the street and out of view of the office windows.

"I have *no* idea what that man is thinking," Wilma muttered haughtily, his chin up and his arms crossed, his hands gripping his elbows. He cast a sideways glance at Emmie. "But you will run *all* your ideas by me first—at *all* times. Understand? I will not allow you to ruin the reputation of my company with some horrid, half-baked notions that you call interior design." Emmie nodded silently, trying very hard not to roll her eyes. "And if, at any time, I get even the *slightest* hint that you are not living up to my exacting standards, in *any* way, I am pulling you off this project and taking over, no matter what Mr. Cooper says. Is that clear?"

Emmie nodded again as both their gazes were drawn to Graham driving past the office behind the wheel of his silver Subaru. "Such a remarkable man, Mr. Cooper," Wilma murmured, almost to himself.

And the spark of rebelliousness that Graham had inspired in her gave her the courage to say with a smirk, "Careful, John, or I'll tell Travis on you."

Wilma's head whipped around, and he squinted at her with a threatening glare. Travis was Wilma's companion of more than a dozen years. A towering, warm-hearted, chestnut-skinned teddy bear, Emmie liked him far better than Wilma, yet she never saw much of him. She wished he'd stop by the office more often, as Wilma tended to be much more even-tempered when he was around. Even cheerful, sometimes. Ah, well. Feeling unintimidated by Wilma's death ray of an evil eye for once, Emmie merely smiled serenely and returned to her desk to flesh out some of the ideas that Graham had expressed an interest in.

After her rollercoaster day, Emmie was grateful to immerse herself in the resoundingly normal, if loud, Campo

environment that evening to visit the brave, cast-bound Logan and, Trish phoned to remind her, to stay for dinner. She made it sound like a punishment, but Emmie was looking forward to a home-cooked meal and the company of friends—*real* friends, not ones who promised you things for keeping your mouth shut about their personal lives.

After Emmie spent plenty of time admiring Logan's cast, autographing it with a flourish, hearing the saga of how he ended up with his fracture, and dishing out gifts of toys and comic books, she and the Campo family settled down to lasagna, some blaring toons on the TV to distract the boys, and an analysis of Juliet's love life.

"So let me get this straight," Rick said. "The always-perfect Juliet Winslow is stepping out on her husband and two kids with a 'hunky' architect—you did say 'hunky,' right?"

"Hottie, actually," Emmie corrected.

"Some player," he said with a grunt, digging at his lasagna.

Trish looked at him. "Juliet, or this Graham guy?"

"Well ..." Rick chewed and swallowed as he chose his words carefully. He'd learned long ago that if he tossed off what he thought was a harmless comment without considering it from all angles first, it could very well win him an all-expenses-paid night on the sofa before he even had a chance to figure out what his transgression was. "Dude's single?" he asked Emmie, and she nodded tentatively; she'd had plenty of opportunities to check his left ring finger that afternoon, and there wasn't even a hint of an indentation from a wedding band, or a telltale tan line. "Okay, then, Juliet's more of a player here. I think, anyway. I know it's not *right*, but if he's a single guy, and she was ... you know ..." He shrugged as if to imply that a man couldn't help but give in to any advances a woman like Juliet might have directed his way. Trish gave him a dirty look.

"I don't know," Emmie muttered. "I guess I'm just old-fashioned or something, but it's just ... ick." She wasn't sure she could express how conflicted she was feeling. And her violently fluctuating emotions were exhausting her. One

minute the mere thought of Graham gave her the wibbles, and the next, she was furious with him. And disgusted. “I mean, cheating *and* expecting someone who’s practically a stranger to keep your secret ...”

“Yeah, good job on that one.” Trish winked. “How long did you last—a couple of hours?” She stood up and started to clear the table.

“I’m not done yet!” Rick cried, stuffing his face with the last of his pasta before Trish whisked the plate out from under him.

“*Yeah, y’are.* It’s your turn to do the dishes, dude.”

Rick growled and trudged into the kitchen, licking his fork on the way. “Aw, but the kids are going to need my help putting together the slot car track! Thanks for the extra pieces, Aunt Emmie—now they have enough sections to go all the way under the dining room table.”

“Yeah, thanks a bunch, Aunt Emmie,” Trish said drily. “Nice try, husband o’ mine, but nothing doing. Emmie, can you give Mr. Overgrown Child a hand while I take a look at the schoolwork Logan’s teacher sent home?”

Trish nudged her husband in the ribs as she passed him in the kitchen doorway. Emmie smiled at how cute they were together as she started putting away the leftovers.

As Rick rinsed the dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher, he ventured, “So, I hear you kicked Kyle out on his ass.”

“Yeah, but it’s okay. He landed on Caitlynn’s boobs and they cushioned his fall.”

Rick laughed a little. “You sound like you’re taking it well.”

“Whatever, you know? Kyle was okay, but—”

“But you deserve better.”

“Awww.” Emmie smiled. “Any more at home like you?”

“Not unless you’re a lesbian.” Rick was the youngest of five, and the only boy.

“Andrea’s an attractive woman.”

“I can see if she’s free, maybe hook you up.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

After a moment, Rick said, “Actually, there’s this guy at work ...”

“Oh, no. No, no, no.”

Rick turned around, drying his hands on a towel. “You’d like him.”

“Come *on*, Rick,” Emmie groaned.

“He’s really nice—smart, and an artist. You’d like him.”

“An artist? At the supermarket?”

“Part time. He’s in college.”

“Oh, too young. Even better.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Trish asked with a wicked grin, reentering the kitchen.

“You *knew* about this! Traitor! *That’s* why you guys fed me dinner? So you could soften me up before making the pitch?”

“Just trying to help you get back in the saddle, sweetie.”

“I don’t need any ... saddle-getting-back-in ... help, thank you very much.”

“But apparently you do need some help with your sentence structure. Logan’s doing his reading homework now—want to join him? You might learn something.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“He’s nice,” Rick offered again, a little desperately.

Emmie raised an eyebrow. “That’s an awful lot of nice, buddy.”

“I think you should give him a chance,” Trish said. “I haven’t met him, but—”

“You haven’t *met* him? You’re going on *Rick’s* recommendation? No offense,” she tossed to Rick.

“None taken.”

“Give the guy a chance!” Trish urged. Emmie crossed her arms and frowned at her stubbornly. Trish sighed. “Okay, if you’re going to be like that, it’s time for the secret weapon.”

Trish reached into the fridge but kept her eye on her friend the entire time, as though afraid she’d bolt. She put on her best James Bond evil-genius accent. “I hear you’re open to a leetle ... *persuasion*, Miss Brewstah.”

“What are you talking about, Campo?”

Trish drew out a parfait glass covered in plastic wrap and waggled it at her friend. “Pudding, my friend ... and, to sweeten the deal, I’m going to top it with artificial whipped topping made from soy products and plastics!”

Emmie made a grab for it, but Trish was too quick. Holding it out of her reach, she said in her normal voice, “Promise to go out on *one* date with Avery first.”

Emmie boggled at the name. “Avery? Seriously?”

“He’s nice!” Rick said for the umpteenth time.

“Promise!” Trish ordered her friend, keeping the pudding high out of reach while Emmie continued to jump for it.

Emmie stopped jumping and pouted. It was a dirty trick. She was helpless against the power of the pudding, and Trish knew it. “Promise,” she grumbled.

Chapter 7

You know, Emmie thought, *this is nice*. Sometimes a date with a charming, good-looking guy was just ... nice. It was a nice night—cold, but perfect for the winter festival downtown. The neighborhood looked so cute, with all the little shops open late, their windows glowing, and friends chatting on the street corners. The donuts, cider, and hot chocolate being doled out at the Kiwanis booth were nice, the carolers were nice, every part of the night was perfect for walking around and getting to know this genial Avery person.

Plus, it was a relief to focus on a pleasant event after her semi-awkward Thanksgiving dinner with her aunt's family two days before. She didn't have anything against her Aunt Phyllis, but she would have vastly preferred having her father there as well. But—surprise, surprise—her father had left her a voice mail on Tuesday, announcing he was going on a cruise. A cruise! Over a family holiday! When he had just gotten back from a tropical vacation! She was starting to think her father wasn't only running away from the memory of her mother, but also was running away from spending time with his only child.

That stung, but Emmie had to admit it was a real possibility. She and her father had never had a super-close relationship; her father was always blustery and clumsy with her, and she had never been a daddy's girl by any stretch of the imagination. Oh, she loved him, and he her, but their relationship worked better in a more abstract sense. Emmie was her mother's daughter all the way; she'd looked for her mom whenever she needed help or advice or someone to confide in. Her mom had been her friend; her dad was the somewhat distant guy in the recliner in the living room, watching TV.

On occasion, Emmie recalled, her mother tried to nudge her toward spending more time with her dad, but it always ended up being an excruciatingly awkward episode for the both of them. Bob tended to be clumsy with his affection and his communication even on the best of days, and it seemed that

was even more of a problem when it came to dealing with his daughter.

No, they had been far better off with Jennifer in the middle. So, of course, once she was gone, that was when things got really messy. Emmie couldn't blame her father for keeping his distance now. The parameters of their relationship had been set decades ago. It was just that ... sometimes she thought it would be nice if they could build something new, now that it was just the two of them. Maybe that was too much to ask, after all these years.

But Emmie put all that behind her to enjoy her date with Avery, and so far it was going just fine. They got along well, talking easily about art and design and pop culture. He had bought her a hot chocolate without asking her to fork over some money, like Kyle would have done; he didn't clank when he walked, having squirreled away a six pack of beer in all of his pockets, like Kyle would have done; he made room for her on the sidewalk and held shop doors open for her but didn't do that damned hand-on-her-back-to-steer-her thing, like Kyle would have done. However, he also did something that Kyle *wouldn't* have done—not in a million years.

Nice, Emmie thought, glancing at her date. *Real nice*. Had she really seen what she thought she saw?

Emmie felt completely neutral about Avery, no matter how nice he was. She compared her reaction to him to the capering butterflies Graham inspired—oh, look, there they were now, still in her belly, acting up at just the thought of him—and she knew that Avery didn't measure up in the slightest. So, because she really didn't care whether they had a second date or not, let alone whether they ever forged a real relationship, she decided now was the perfect time to start being more assertive when it came to dragging the truth out of men. Even if it did guarantee she'd end up a perpetually single, old, crazy cat lady someday.

“Avery?”

The young man leaned his blond head closer to hers as they walked; the holiday parade was passing, presently featuring

the middle school band's honking, squeaking rendition of what may or may not have been "Jolly Old St. Nicholas," and it was difficult to hear much of anything else. "Yes?"

Once they were on the next block, she turned to face him squarely. He flicked his long bangs out of his eyes. "Avery ... did you just check out that guy's butt?"

Avery had a beautiful smile, dimples, a chin that came to a dramatic, handsome point and was adorned with a little peach-fuzz stubble. He turned on his glittering smile now. "Er ... " He half laughed. "Well ... "

"You dumbass," she said, but affectionately. "Why didn't you tell Rick, when he said he wanted to introduce us?"

Avery sighed with relief, shrugged, and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. "I don't know ... "

"Don't say it's because he's the store manager and you were fearing for your job or something stupid like that."

"No, Rick's cool. But the other guys at work ... "

"You work at a supermarket, not down on the docks!"

"There's a lot of testosterone in the stockroom! All that swearing and spitting and ... "

Emmie laughed, shook her head, and started walking again. Avery took long strides to keep up with her.

"So you're not mad?"

"No. I think you're being silly, though." Emmie sighed, studying him. "Got a boyfriend?"

"No, not just now."

"So you're not cheating on anybody by being out on a date with me."

"No, I would never do that."

"Well, that's something."

"I really like you, Emmie. Can we be friends and, you know, hang out more?"

He took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. She rested her head on his shoulder. “Sure. After all, what would a sassy single girl be without a cute gay frie—oh, crap.”

She stopped short, and Avery stumbled, taken by surprise. Up ahead, Juliet emerged from a shop and bounced down the single step onto the sidewalk. She was hard to miss, in a puffy white down jacket short enough to show off her pert tush wrapped in expensive, tight jeans, a baby-blue knit hat and matching mittens, and soft, calf-high boots with some sort of fluffy lining.

“Somebody you know?” Avery asked.

“You could say that.”

“She’s hot.”

“Humph. And you said you wanted to be my friend. Whose side are you on, bub?”

“Sorry.”

Emmie fervently wished that Juliet would turn left and walk away from them instead of toward them, but she wasn’t holding out much hope—not the way her luck was going lately. Sure enough, Juliet turned in their direction. And the next person to emerge from the shop...

“I hate my life,” Emmie whispered.

“I smell drama,” Avery murmured.

Emmie began, in an overly sweet tone, “Avery ...”

“You need me to pretend to be straight and madly in love with you right now, don’t you?”

“You’re very perceptive. Yes, please.” And Emmie gripped his arm with her free hand as well, moving closer to him.

“Are we trying to make her envious, or him jealous?”

“Yes, please.”

“I can’t wait to hear the details.”

But Emmie couldn’t give him any just then, because Juliet had spotted her and was waving merrily.

“Emmie!” Juliet cried, as though running into her was the highlight of her evening.

“Hi, Juliet,” she said politely—and far more reservedly.

Juliet gave Avery the once-over, obviously expecting an introduction. “This is my dear friend Avery,” Emmie filled her in, emphasizing the words “dear friend” and letting Juliet draw her own conclusions. “Avery, this is Juliet, an old friend from high school.”

“And a good friend still,” Juliet added with a tinkling laugh. Emmie raised her eyebrows at Graham, who had caught up and was sort of lurking in Juliet’s shadow as he stood looking in the other direction at nothing in particular. Juliet turned around and tugged on Graham’s sleeve. He turned to face Emmie and Avery, nodding politely, his gaze meeting Emmie’s eyes for a long moment. She swatted at the little butterflies that tickled her insides again. God, she was crazy about him ... but here he was, out with Juliet. Which put her right back to being angry. And disgusted. And hurt. She looked away with what she hoped was an icy snub.

“Professor Cooper?”

All eyes turned to Avery. *Oh, for the love of ...* Emmie groaned inwardly. *What fresh hell is this?*

Graham brightened in recognition. “Avery! Good to see you!”

They shook hands, and Avery explained to Emmie and Juliet, “I took a course in historic architecture from Professor Cooper at JCC last year.”

“Small world,” Emmie murmured.

He said to Graham, “That was a great class—I learned a lot.”

“Thank you, Avery. That’s nice of you to say. But I’m not a professor,” he was quick to add for Juliet’s and Emmie’s benefit. “Just an adjunct instructor. One class a semester, when I have time.”

Juliet bubbled, “Graham is a *wonderful* architect. He’s doing some work for me, in fact. I just bought a shop, and it needs a lot of TLC. It’s right over there.” She indicated a dark storefront down the block. “We were just taking a look around the place and thought we’d stop by the festival and warm up a bit. I can’t help it—I have a thing for candied nuts.”

As if to corroborate Juliet’s story, Graham dolefully held up a tiny, white paper bag from the candy shop and shook it a few times so the nuts rattled around inside. He looked for all the world like a melancholy lapdog. *Serves him right*, Emmie thought, although a faint twinge of pity stirred deep down inside her.

“Congratulations on the new business,” Avery said politely. “What kind is it going to be?”

“A florist shop,” Juliet informed him, then exclaimed, “You two should come see it!” And she pulled out the keys from her jacket pocket.

“Oh ...” Emmie started shaking her head a little too vehemently. “Nnooo, I don’t think—that is, we have to—er ...”

“It’ll only take a minute. Emmie, I *really* want to get your thoughts about the space. I’m hoping that once Graham has done his part, you could take care of the design elements—you know, like we discussed?”

Emmie started to protest anew, but Juliet wasn’t going to take no for an answer. She grabbed Emmie’s arm and practically pulled her down the block and across the street.

It seemed colder inside the vacant shop than outside on the street. Emmie could feel the icy chill of the linoleum floor seeping up through the soles of her boots. She looked around at the shadowed space: high ceilings, cupboards, a dilapidated counter. A doorway in the far wall revealed a hall that stretched straight back, dissolving into darkness.

Avery wandered around and gazed appreciatively up at the tin ceiling, just visible in the light from the streetlamps.

Emmie stayed where she was, near the front windows. Juliet took her elbow and pulled her farther in.

“Take a look over here,” she said as she hauled Emmie across the room. “It’s the original counter. Not in the greatest shape, but I thought maybe we could do something to bring it back.”

Emmie tried to focus on the woodwork while wondering if she could get away with bolting from Juliet a third time. She doubted it.

“I just love the dark sage green on the front—was it the original color, do you think?”

Emmie tried to collect her thoughts and respond without sounding like an idiot, even though the last thing in the world she wanted to do was talk turn-of-the-century design elements with Juliet in this cold, dark, echoing space. “Uh ... no, I don’t think so. If this counter was made from high-quality hardwood, it would have been shellacked, not painted. I can’t really tell what kind of wood this might be—I’ll know better when I see it in daylight—”

Emmie gave herself a virtual dope slap. Had she just agreed to be Juliet’s designer? It seemed Juliet assumed as much. She got the feeling the woman did this a lot—acted as though you wanted what she wanted, and voilà—instant compliance from everyone in her orbit. Emmie wondered if that was how she hooked Graham.

And where was Graham, anyway? Avery was across the room, examining some dusty built-in cabinets with leaded glass doors, but Graham had slipped away. *Lucky*, Emmie thought. She wondered if he knew about some secret passage, some hidden exit—or at the very least knew where Juliet kept a space heater. Emmie was *freezing*. She shivered.

“Oh, I am *so* sorry,” Juliet breathed, putting a petite, finely manicured hand to her mouth in an exaggerated gesture of shock. “I’m being terribly rude, keeping you in the dark and cold like this. I can turn up the heat and get the lights on—”

Emmie started to tell her not to bother, that they wouldn't be staying, but Juliet called out for Graham. No answer. She started to call him again, but Emmie cut her off, if only to avoid seeing Graham behave like her footman again. Besides, she hated it when women acted like helpless things, ignorant of big, scary, allegedly masculine stuff like switching on a breaker.

“Don't trouble Graham,” Emmie said. “I can get it. Thermostat, breaker box, they must be in the back room, right?”

“The thermostat's right here,” Juliet said, rounding the corner into the hallway and adjusting it upward, “but the breaker box is back ... there, I think.” She gestured loosely with her other hand, and Emmie thought she saw her look a little uncomfortable. Trust Juliet to be afraid of the dark. That sealed it—Emmie would take care of this herself, if only to do something that Juliet couldn't. Showing off a bit, perhaps, but Emmie was too irritated to care.

She groped her way down the hall and entered the back room. The faint glow of a sodium vapor light in the alley shone through a dirty, six-paned window high up on the back wall. She stood in the middle of the room for a moment while her eyes adjusted to the light; she could make out cabinets, a couple of doors, and an old, stained sink under the window. Then Emmie heard footsteps behind her. She spun around; it was Graham, closer to her than she expected. She stumbled backward a step.

“What do you need?” he asked quietly.

Loaded question. She swallowed. “The—breaker box.”

“I'll get it.”

“Where the hell did you come from?” Emmie found herself whispering, although she had no idea why.

He gestured behind him at a doorway that revealed a set of dusty stairs going up. “I left some plans upstairs earlier.” He patted some papers sticking up out of the pocket of his black peacoat.

“Oh.” Emmie didn’t want to think about what else was on the second floor, nor why Graham, and likely Juliet, were up there earlier tonight. She knew that these kinds of places had apartments above them where the shop owners used to live; had they found a cozy bedroom for a hot little clinch?

Graham groped his way toward a closet on the side wall. As he pulled open the door, its bottom scraping on the floor, he said something to Emmie that she couldn’t make out. She moved closer and saw that Graham had wedged himself in sideways, among a pile of junk, to reach the electrical panel.

She kept her distance and said, “Sorry—what was that?”

He stuck his head out of the closet. “I said, ‘Nice guy, that Avery.’”

“Oh. Yes, he is.”

“Special to you?”

Emmie felt a little thrill at his words. Did Graham care? Wait. Why did she care if Graham cared? Still, she answered a little smugly, “Yes, he is. *Very*. He’s a *great* guy.”

Graham paused. When he spoke again, he sounded highly amused. “Okay.”

Emmie edged a little closer. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. He *is* a great guy.” Graham bent his knees and leaned back against the door frame, looking for all the world as though he were sitting in an easy chair instead of crammed in a dusty closet. “You know what I liked best about him? He never took himself too seriously. Get enough beers down him at the Rathskellar, and he’d start calling himself Bill.” He chuckled as he pried open the metal door of the electrical panel.

“Bill?” Emmie was puzzled. “Why in the world would he call himself Bill if his name is—oh.”

“Yeah.”

“As in ‘three dollar’?”

“The same.”

Emmie could tell by the tone of his voice that he was grinning ear to ear, and she became even more annoyed. “Okay, so I’m not exactly his type. Big deal.”

From behind the metal door of the breaker box, Graham uttered a cartoonish little, “Hee hee.”

“Shut up,” Emmie snapped. “And in case you were wondering, I was not implying he was my boyfriend for your benefit. Or—or Juliet’s,” she added hurriedly.

“Never said you were.” Graham pushed at something with a bit of effort, and a resounding *thunk* echoed in the room. He straightened up, turned around, and leaned in the doorway of the closet, crossing his arms in front of him and studying Emmie in the dim light. Neither of them made an effort to find a light switch. “You seem sort of ... upset with me for some reason.”

She was blindsided by his statement and could only stammer, “What? Whatever gave you—”

“That idea? Oh, I don’t know. You seem a little frosty tonight. But I admit it could be my imagination.” He looked at her steadily, maybe hoping she’d say his fears were unfounded.

Emmie wasn’t about to tell him that she was stupid in love with him and furious that he was with Juliet. She knew now that she couldn’t bear to be friendly with him in any way—it’d hurt too much. So she said, “It’s not your imagination.”

And for the first time since she’d clapped eyes on him when he had first stood before her in Wilman Designs, Graham didn’t seem so confident. “What did I ever do to you?” he asked.

How could she tell him that he had let her down? That she had thought he was the perfect man, and he wasn’t? That he wasn’t available when she had wanted him to be single, unattached—and interested in her? She couldn’t say any of that. So she said nothing.

“I’ve been nice to you, haven’t I? And we seemed to get along all right when we talked about my project. Speaking of which, that job is quite a feather in your cap, you have to admit. I’m giving you an extensive, complicated assignment —”

“Only because Juliet asked you to,” she spat out.

“Is that what you think?”

“Oh, quit it. We both know what this is about, really.”

“We do?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it just so happens that I don’t,” Graham said impatiently. “Please enlighten me. What is this about, *really?*”

“Come on. I’m not stupid. I get it. Juliet already said—I keep your secrets, the two of you give me work. Nice exchange. Thanks a lot.”

He frowned. “What?”

“Please. Don’t act all shocked. Personally I think the whole thing is reprehensible and repulsive, but that’s your own business. Just don’t drag me into it.”

Graham seemed stunned. “What in the world did she tell you?”

“Hey! Do we have light?”

They both jumped at the sound of Juliet’s voice calling from the front room. Graham regrouped quickly and called back, “Yep! Go ahead.”

There was the loud click of an old Bakelite light switch, and Juliet said, “That’s better! Emmie, come see now.”

Graham closed the closet door and turned to go. The back room was still dark, but she got the sense that he was glowering at her. She realized she was shaking a little bit. As he passed her, he paused, his arm brushing her shoulder. She froze, her heart hammering against her ribs.

He said quietly, his mouth close to her ear, “I don’t know why you would think that I would entrust my project to you just to—what was it?—‘keep my secrets’? For what it’s worth”—and here he paused, and his shadowed gaze locked on hers—“I would still choose you.”

Emmie tried to speak, but her mouth was dry. She could only manage to lick her lips nervously before Graham spoke again.

“You’re good,” he said. “I can tell already. So let’s knock that chip off your shoulder and get to work. All right?”

Dumbly, she nodded and, with difficulty, looked away. When she looked back, he was gone.

Chapter 8

Emmie awoke early the next morning with Graham's words still echoing in her head. "I would still choose you." And in such a sexy voice ... She curled up tight under her quilt. *No, no, no!* Professionally—he had been talking *professionally*. Nothing else ... although she couldn't seem to stop those little fluttery feelings that started up inside her whenever she remembered how he had looked at her—so confidently, so steadily. She wanted to euthanize those damned multicolored butterflies. Her feelings for him were useless. There was no room for Emmie in Graham's life—none at all. Juliet had gotten there first.

And she was going to be reminded of that on a regular basis, apparently, because in addition to working on Graham's project, now it seemed that she was drafted into working on Juliet's shop as well. The woman had kept her in the cold storefront for the better part of an hour last night, picking her brain about how she would renovate the place. It didn't take long for Emmie to realize Juliet was an energy vampire, sucking the life out of a person when she wanted something. Emmie scrambled to come up with ideas, all the while feeling not only Graham's, but also Avery's eyes on her as she was put on the spot. Neither one had offered to help—they just looked on, highly amused. But damn, Graham had looked so good when he smiled ...

Disgusted with herself for even entertaining the idea of pining for a man like some pathetic heroine in a Victorian novel (who, invariably, died in the end, destitute, alone, and unloved), Emmie threw back the bedcovers. She had things to do, dammit. She would make a big pot of coffee, maybe start a fire in the fireplace, and get down to business. She would work all day on ideas for Graham's project—brush up on her knowledge of 1820s architecture, look up color schemes, choose some period furniture, find some good vintage wallpaper options.

And then she would work on ideas for Juliet's store, she decided, as she clipped her hair up on top of her head and

brushed her teeth. After all, a job was a job—and she couldn't throw away her first solo assignment. Despite the drama behind it, this was the key to a Wilma-free future—and she *needed* to know there was the possibility of a Wilma-free future, for her own sanity.

Besides, she told herself, as she pulled on her softest fleece pants and a nubby sweater, lots of people had dubious starts to their careers. What about people who took startup money from less-than-reputable sources? Sold their bosses up the river and took their places? Shared information with their company's competition? It happened all the time. So she should just grow up and stop pretending she was pure as the driven snow. If she wanted to get anywhere in life, she'd have to take the leg up that she was offered and stop criticizing the ugly shoe it was sporting.

And, she said to herself as she scuffed into her kitchen, she had to plain old forget about Graham. Not another thought about his beautiful blue eyes, not another sniff of her coat trying to catch his clean scent on the fabric where he had leaned close to her last night. She didn't need Graham. She didn't need any man. She was going to focus on her career from this moment forward. Starting now. Yeah.

She pulled the ceramic container of coffee out of the cupboard and pried off the lid. Two lonely little coffee beans slid around the bottom.

And the very next moment she was in tears.

She watched her ambitious plans skid all over the place like freight cars in a train derailment. *There was no coffee.* If she didn't have coffee, she couldn't function. If she couldn't function, she wouldn't be able to make a fire in the fireplace. If she couldn't have a fire in the fireplace, she wouldn't be able to work on her two new jobs all day. If she couldn't work on her two new jobs all day, she would never escape Wilma and start her own business. And she would never impress Graham with her artistic insight and professional expertise. And he'd never fall in love with her.

Stop, Emmie commanded herself, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. She pushed the empty coffee container aside. Crying because there was no coffee ... in this, the Age of Starbucks? Phooey. She hitched up her pants and squared her shoulders. Change of plans. The new, improved, *in command* Emmie was on the case.

Emmie frowned and tried to focus on her sketch pad. She was at a Starbucks up the street from her house, her butt planted in a nice, work-oriented, straight-backed, hard-bottomed chair—perfect for her newly developed self-discipline. She had her laptop, her sketch pad, her colored pencils, a paint color fan, and a booklet of wallpaper styles and stencil patterns, all carefully arranged on the table beside her nearly empty venti mocha (*yes*, with whipped cream and proudly so) and the remains of her scone—and she was about to lick her finger to mop up the crumbs as well. She had been there an hour and a half, and she had produced one drawing—okay, half finished—of a sitting room that might or might not exist in the house Graham was working on.

She sighed heavily, her eyes glazing over. She thought about calling Trish just for a diversion, but she didn't really feel like it—not even to laugh about the unfortunate outcome of the date with Avery. She would tell Trish the story soon, but right now she just wanted to be alone with her inadequacies. Maybe she had no self-discipline, she thought. *Maybe*, the wicked little self-confidence-destroying gnome who lived deep inside her suggested, she had no talent. Maybe, no matter what her problem, it was all going to come down to the same thing: She would be doomed to be Wilma's slave forever.

She sighed again. This wasn't working. She decided to give up, maybe go grocery shopping—woo, what an exciting way to spend a Sunday afternoon—and try again another day.

As she packed up her things, a pair of women thumped down in the leather chairs behind her.

“Okay, I'm totally out of my league,” one of the women grunted as she got settled. “I'm not afraid of much—except

this kind of thing.”

“We’ll figure it out,” said the second woman.

“I don’t even know where to start.”

Emmie closed her paint color fan, flipped the cover of her sketch pad, and shut down her laptop, then leaned down and started dropping items into her bag one by one.

“That’s why we’re sitting here instead.”

Laughter. “Well, what in the world do you start with?”

“A cranberry orange muffin, in my opinion.”

“With the *room*, nitwit. Honestly. Why did I drag you along today, again?”

“Because I paid for the coffee and muffins?”

Emmie stood and put on her coat. The first woman said with heavy sigh, “Okay, we can at least decide where we’re going next—the paint store, the antique store, or the furniture store.”

“The paint store. No, the furniture—oh, hell, Walmart has all that stuff. And I need some laundry detergent and a bag of cat litter. Let’s just go there.”

“I told you, a place like that isn’t going to have what I’m looking for. I want something different, a little old fashioned ... sort of ... oh, I don’t know ... maybe plaid ... like that woman’s coat over there. Excuse me!”

It took Emmie several seconds before she realized that the woman was calling to her. She turned around before she gave the impression that she was rude or stupid. “Yes?”

“Sorry to bother you,” the woman said, “but—Emmie?” Emmie blinked. How did this woman know her? Then she realized, just as the woman pointed to herself and said, “Annette Polschuk! Class of ’95! Go Panthers!”

Emmie smiled and echoed, a little more sedately, “Go Panthers. Weren’t you at—”

“Juliet Winslow’s cookie party! That’s right. I *cannot* tell you how happy I am to see you, darlin’.” Annette turned to her

companion. “This is Emmie Brewster—we went to high school together. And she’s exactly who I needed to run into right now. She’s a fantastic interior designer!”

“Oh, I don’t know about that ...” Emmie demurred.

But Annette plowed on. “If you have a minute, I want to pick your brain. You mind?”

“N-No, I don’t mind.”

“Well, then, pull up a chair, darlin’—and let’s see your coat.”

“Why—”

“I was admiring the plaid. Wait—let me start from the beginning. I’m redoing my son’s bedroom. I don’t want anything babyish, but I don’t want anything too popular, you know?”

“Yes, sure. How old is he?”

“He’s eleven. If I redo his room with, oh, I don’t know, some superhero character, then—bang—couple more years, he’s outgrown it. Plus we have an older home, and I was thinking something to fit the age of the house. Maybe something like the pattern of your coat for wallpaper.”

Emmie looked down at her navy wool car coat. It was nice, lightweight but warm, with wide lapels and a sash that cinched her waist. She loved it dearly, but she highly doubted the dark plaid would look good on an eleven-year-old’s bedroom walls.

“Well,” she started slowly, “sure. You could do that. But is the room small?”

“It’s a little small, yeah.”

“Okay. A dark pattern would make it seem more confined. It’s still a possibility, maybe just not floor to ceiling on all the walls. And, you know, you can still incorporate something that he does like—it doesn’t have to be a superhero character ...”

“He likes airplanes,” the other woman offered. “Old ones. Warplanes, you know? From World War II and stuff. Oh—I’m Martie, his aunt, this one’s sister-in-law.” She jerked her

thumb at Annette. Emmie was a little surprised; they looked more like sisters. They were heavysset, both wearing holiday-themed sweatshirts—Annette’s was bright red, with little ornaments dangling off a Christmas tree appliqué in the middle of her chest, and Martie’s was white, with a reindeer appliqué, red bulbs dangling from its antlers. Both women looked profoundly middle-aged, even though Annette, at least, was the same age as Emmie. But then, if she remembered correctly, Annette had looked middle-aged even as a teenager.

“That’s a great suggestion. And it probably could fit in with your decor. What kind of house is it?”

“What *kind* ... ?” Annette looked puzzled.

“Yes. You said it was older—do you know the style?”

“Oh, hell no.”

Emmie smiled patiently. “When was it built?”

“Um, twenties? Thirties? Forties?”

“Never mind. What if you do a retro theme of old airplanes? I know a company that specializes in reproducing old wallpaper, and I’m almost positive they have an airplane pattern.”

Annette brightened. “Oh, I want to see that! Where is it? The paint store?”

“N-No, I’m afraid it’s mail-order only.” Then Emmie had an idea. “Annette, what are you doing tomorrow morning?”

Emmie had never gotten up so early for a day at her job in all her years with Wilma. She was ready and waiting for Annette and Martie in the office, coffee and a basket of warm pastries on the table, precisely at eight A.M.

When the women arrived, Emmie was friendly but all business and was able to present a few ideas she thought Annette might like. They lit up when she suggested a color scheme of blues and grays with bright green for an accent color, loved the idea of incorporating a dark blue plaid like Emmie’s coat as a duvet cover, and cackled delightedly when

she suggested hanging model airplanes from the ceiling with plastic fishing line. The minute they saw the wallpaper Emmie had talked about yesterday, they happily agreed to the whole concept on the spot.

By the time Wilma entered the office an hour later, the women had drifted off the topic of remodeling and were chatting, Annette and Martie laughing loudly. When Emmie saw him frozen in the doorway, she stood up, drunk with success, and beckoned him over. “John! Good morning! Come meet some new clients.” Wilma edged over to the conference table, looking suspicious. Emmie said breezily, “This is Annette Polschuk and her sister-in-law, Martie. Annette wants to remodel her son’s room. I told her we’d be happy to help her out ... What?”

Wilma was giving her the stink-eye, and for the life of her, Emmie couldn’t figure out why. She had gotten him a client without his having to lift a finger. What more could the man want? Wilma jerked his head toward the kitchenette and said, “Emmaline, may I have a word, please? Excuse us, ladies.” He smiled politely at the two women, who waved and helped themselves to more pastries.

Emmie followed a stiff-backed Wilma into the small room, her heart sinking. What the hell was his problem now?

“Emmaline,” he whispered, his lips tight, “what are you doing?”

“Getting you some new business,” she whispered back, annoyed.

“Did you say that ... woman ... wants to redo her son’s bedroom?”

“So?”

“That is *hardly* the type of project Wilman Designs is known for!”

“We’ve done kids’ bedrooms before ...”

Wilma sniffed disdainfully and looked past Emmie at the two women in the outer office. “I suppose she wants *Star Wars* bedsheets and the *Enterprise* painted on his wall.”

“That’s *Star Trek*, John.”

“What?”

“*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*—two different things. The *Enterprise* isn’t *Star Wars*, it’s *Star Trek*—”

“That is not the point!” he snapped impatiently. “Just ... tell them we can’t do the job.”

“*What?*” she spluttered.

“Get rid of them. Now.” He looked past her again, and Emmie followed his gaze.

And then she realized. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“You would throw these women out just because they’re wearing sweatpants? Because you can’t pick up the scent of money oozing out of their pores? Because you think they’re not *good enough* for you? Is *that* what this is all about?”

“Emmaline,” Wilma said slowly, as if speaking to a child, “Wilman Designs has a *reputation* to uphold.”

Emmie licked her lips and thought for a moment, staring hard at Wilma. Then she spun on her heel and motioned sharply for Wilma to follow her. When she got back to the table, she put her hands on the back of a chair and leaned toward her new friends. “Annette, John says he’d be thrilled to have you as our client, and we can get started as soon as we take a look at your son’s room, get some measurements. Can you give me your address again?”

“Oh, sure, honey. It’s 3719 Overlook. You know—in the Lamplight District?”

“Yes, of course.” Emmie knew perfectly well what Annette’s address was; she just wanted Wilma to hear it for himself. She looked over at him. “John? You know the old *Lamplight District*, don’t you?” He had blanched, and his sneer was nowhere to be found. Of course he knew the community of the most venerable—and expensive—houses in town. True mansions, they put the tract homes he often worked on to shame. “Annette’s husband is CFO of Tech/Tonic,” she

added for good measure, dropping the name of one of the new IT firms in the area, “and Annette runs a very successful wholesale import business. I’m surprised you haven’t run into them at one of the networking events in town.”

“P-Perhaps I have,” Wilma stuttered, trying to regain his footing. “You do look familiar, Mrs... . Polschuk, you say?”

As Annette eyed Wilma somewhat suspiciously, the bell over the front door jangled. Emmie looked up and started. “Graham!” she exclaimed, and she automatically moved toward him a few steps. She excused herself from the conference table almost as an afterthought and glimpsed mischievous grins on Annette’s and Martie’s faces. Yeah, the way she’d said his name sounded a little overeager to her, too. More formally, she asked him, “What can I do for you?”

“I’m going over to the house in a few minutes. I was wondering if you’d want to take a look at the place. If you aren’t too busy. We’re still deep in the demo phase, but I wanted you to see it for yourself as soon as you could.”

He had said on Saturday night that he wanted to get to work, and now here he was, first thing on Monday morning, ready to go. And she wasn’t going to refuse—for a lot of reasons.

“That’s a good idea.”

“Great. When can you get away?”

“Fifteen, twenty minutes?”

“Fine. I’ll see you then.” To the others, he called, “Sorry to interrupt.”

Annette shouted, “Oh, that’s all right! If I were Emmie, I’d let you interrupt anytime you wanted!” And she and her sister-in-law whooped with delight. Annette pointed from her to Graham and back again. “Are you two ... uh ... ?”

Emmie felt a blush burn her cheeks, but Graham merely chuckled and replied, “Well, ladies, to tell you the truth, I keep getting the distinct feeling she won’t have me.”

“Well, then, she’s out of her mind!” Martie exclaimed. “But don’t worry—we’ll talk some sense into her and send her back

to you with her head screwed on straight.”

“Much obliged, ladies.”

“Let me walk you out,” Emmie hissed, taking him by the elbow. She opened the door for him and whispered through a fake smile, “Look. I will work for you, but I will not be your beard.”

“Beards are for gay men,” he replied quietly, with a smile that was far more genuine than hers. “I thought you, of all people, would know that.”

“You leave Avery out of this. I will not be your hetero-beard. Or whatever it’s called.” Gritted-teeth smile.

“You’re not making sense, Emmie.” Amused smile.

“Get out. I’ll be over to the house later.” No smile of any sort.

Graham was enjoying himself way too much. “I’m counting the minutes already.”

He sauntered out, still grinning, and Emmie firmly shut the door behind him. She shook herself. *What the hell was that?* When she returned to the conference table, she found that Wilma had pulled up a chair and sat down, saying, “—so *very* sorry I was late, ladies. Emmaline didn’t update my calendar with your early appointment. Now, Emmaline, why don’t you show me where you’ve left off with Mrs. Pol—er, *Annette*.” And he reached for the paperwork Emmie had started.

It figured. Of course he would take over, the minute someone pointed out the vein of gold in the mine. Annette and Martie, however, looked puzzled. They glanced from Wilma to Emmie, apparently taken aback at the change in command.

“Wait a minute,” Annette started to say, “I thought—”

“Emmaline, why don’t you make a fresh pot of coffee before you run along and help Mr. Cooper. I’ll finish up here.”

Emmie produced a tight smile that made her face hurt. “Of course. Annette, Martie, good to see you.”

She grabbed the coffeepot and stalked away, leaving a smug Wilma and two stunned clients at the table. She refilled the coffeemaker as quickly as she could, ignoring Wilma's smarmy tones coming from behind her. Then she crossed to the front of the office, yanked her coat off the coatrack, grabbed her bag, and headed out to her car before she could allow herself to get too angry. After all, she knew this was the inevitable outcome of working for Wilma. She could never please him, and she could never convince him that she was worthy of even decorating an eleven-year-old's bedroom. She might as well stop trying.

Chapter 9

The buzz of a table saw and crash of sledgehammers reverberated in the icy air. Emmie stood on the front walk of the house on West Street and gazed up at the once white, now gray and peeling, structure. The large home sat well back from the street, up a slight hillside, under oaks and elms that would create a deep green canopy in the summer. Now, however, a thick layer of brown leaves, sodden from the recent snow that had fallen, then melted, covered the lawn beneath the bare trees. Emmie knew this place well. It had been a stately home years ago, and she couldn't wait to start on the restoration. Someday, she thought, she wanted to walk down this street and look up at this house, brightly painted and sparkling clean, its lawn lush and its gardens blooming, and take pride in the fact that she had helped rescue it.

Right now, however, it was anything but lovely. Notched two-by-fours, pitched at a steep angle and wedged into the lawn, propped up the sagging porch roof. Four banks of windows, two on each floor in the matching two-story wings on either side of the porch, stared blankly at the bare yard above overgrown, scraggly juniper bushes. Blistered and peeling paint revealed weathered clapboards, and the lower half of one of the corner boards was missing.

As Emmie climbed the porch steps, the rotted wooden treads gave a little under her weight. The steel front door—number one on the mental list she'd started of things that needed to be replaced—was open despite the cold, and orange extension cords snaked from the house to the work vans in the pitted driveway.

She stepped over them into a foyer as wide as the front porch. The hardwood floor had been worn down to a dull gray. The wall plaster was dinged, the paint smudged and stained. Sheets of plywood and more two-by-fours leaned against the wall, nearly blocking the hallway that went straight to the back of the house, likely to the kitchen. The foyer was empty.

When the noise of a power saw ceased momentarily, she tentatively called, "Hello?" No answer. She tried again.

“Hello!”

“Yeah!” came a familiar voice. “Emmie?”

“Yes!”

“Up here. Watch your step.”

She grasped the ornate banister, which wobbled precariously, and took the stairs cautiously. On the upstairs landing, which seemed large enough to be a room all on its own, several workmen in steel-toed boots, sawdust-covered jeans, T-shirts, and tool belts were merrily destroying their surroundings. Emmie always wondered if some construction workers got into the business because they enjoyed making really big messes.

“Graham?”

“Over here!” His voice came from one of the bedrooms at a distance; she excused herself and made her way past the men, who had to stop what they were doing so she didn’t get walloped by a flying sledgehammer.

Emmie stuck her head into the doorway and was startled to see Graham, among more workers, a reciprocating saw in hand.

“Hi,” he said over his shoulder as he knelt in front of a wall that was little more than bare studs with a few scraps of lath clinging to them. “Be with you in just a second.” And he neatly sliced through a few beams in less than a minute. Emmie’s eyebrows crept toward her hairline—not because of the handsome forearms in view, as Graham had rolled up the sleeves of his chocolate-brown fine-wale corduroy shirt for the task, but because she didn’t expect to find him immersed in the actual carpentry end of things. She expected him to be the idea-guy type of architect, visiting sites under construction but not staying very long and, if he did set up camp, hunkered down behind his laptop in a quiet corner.

Graham handed the power tool to a nearby worker and brushed off his clothes as he approached Emmie. “Making this room a bit bigger,” he explained. And the workers continued to slice through the timbers, making two small bedrooms into

one. “We modern home dwellers do like a lot of space, don’t we?”

Suddenly Emmie found herself a little shy around him. “I guess so,” she said hoarsely. She cleared her throat.

“Let me show you around.” He led the way back through the construction zone and down the stairs. “Let’s start at the beginning.”

Graham eagerly led her through the first floor. The two front rooms, one on either side of the foyer, were large and airy, despite the fact that they were both painted dark green. Both had fireplaces; one appeared to have been used as a parlor, the other a library, as it was lined with bookcases. A dining room lay beyond the parlor, between it and the kitchen, but behind the library were two unusual, smaller rooms side by side, off a perpendicular hallway, that Graham called “mystery rooms.”

Graham explained, “Honestly, I don’t know what these back rooms were—maybe a ladies’ parlor? An office? No idea. This house isn’t very ... traditional. It might have started off as Greek Revival, but after a century of alterations ...” Emmie nodded. “And I like it for that very reason.”

As he quickly led Emmie back into the central hallway, she smiled to herself—he was like a little kid showing off his toys, so excited. Well, she could see what he loved about it. “Good bones” was the standard real estate catchphrase. No matter how ugly or run down a house was, if it had “good bones”—large rooms that “flowed” well, a solid foundation—you could make something of it. And she already wanted to make something of this place, too.

And then he pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen. Emmie winced as she stepped over the threshold and straight into the 1970s. Dark brown fake-walnut pressboard cabinets surrounded her, making the space feel smaller than it really was. The appliances were all that special shade of avocado specific to the era. The single-sheet linoleum flooring was curling under itself where it met the chipboard baseboards, also fake walnut. The wallpaper was late twentieth-century ick

—giant yellow daisies over avocado and orange stripes. “Er
...”

“I know.”

Emmie nodded appreciatively. “Orange countertops. I hear they’re coming back in style. Really.”

“Yeah, I read that in last month’s *Architectural Digest*.” He grinned at her, and her stomach did a backflip.

She followed him through the Kitchen of Horrors to view the butler’s pantry (blessedly untouched by “modern improvements”), back porch (more beat up than the front porch), and, unfortunately, a powder room located way too close to the cooking area. Graham informed her that the powder room was going to be relocated. She firmly approved.

Back upstairs, she and Graham poked their heads into the various bedrooms, most of them small, except for the one that had just been expanded, and the bathroom with fifty-year-old fixtures—a shallow ceramic bathtub in a strange shade of turquoise, and a freestanding sink, precariously supported by corroded metal legs, with a bowl that was supposed to be the same color as the tub but didn’t quite match. The bathroom still reeked of a strong soap, even though the house hadn’t been lived in for years.

Graham said, “We’re pretty sure there’s a bar of Irish Spring behind the wall. First contractor to find it and relocate it to the next state wins a prize.”

They ducked out of the bathroom as quickly as possible, and Graham led her to the last bedroom. The door, opposite the top of the stairs, was shut. He put his hand on the ornate, tarnished brass knob and said, “Get a load of this.”

He pushed open the door and ushered her inside. Emmie, braced for an unpleasant shock along the lines of the kitchen and the bathrooms, gasped. Spread across almost the entire back expanse of the house, the massive bedroom was stunning, even in its present dilapidated state. The first thing that caught her eye was a fireplace, the bricks over the opening blackened, the mantel worn, but ... *a fireplace. In the bedroom.* Emmie

was ready to move in right then and there. Two walls were made up entirely of windows. The only place available for a bed was to the right of the door, opposite the south-facing windows, so the spot was graced with year-round sunlight. Built-in cupboards wrapped all the way around the spot for the bed, from the closet door on the far side to the bedroom door and all the way to the ceiling. They were worn and in need of refinishing, but their effect, of real wood paneling, was rich and dramatic.

Emmie took a few steps farther into the room and turned her face up to the thin winter sun, imagining how warm and bright it would be only a few months from now, with the strengthening sunlight making it feel like spring in the room, even as winter hung on for dear life outside.

“You like it?” Graham asked.

Emmie closed her eyes and nodded, smiling blissfully, thinking about what it would be like to wake up to the view of the backyard every morning, the sun shining down on the fruit trees that peppered the gentle swell of the acre behind the house ... being served breakfast in bed by a lady’s maid ... the master of the house (just for the sake of argument, that role could be played by Graham) beside her ...

Emmie let herself get lost in her daydream for so long that, when she noticed the silence in the room, she jumped. She shook herself, opened her eyes, and looked over at Graham. He was staring at her. She blushed furiously. No wonder Wilma hardly ever let her out by herself. Graham must think she was a complete loony.

But he just smiled. “The room suits you.”

And then came a little ... hitch. He was silent, Emmie was silent. His mouth clamped shut in a straight line as he looked at her, then glanced away uncomfortably. Emmie had no idea how it had happened, but something ... extra ... was there in the room with them. And it wasn’t the ghost of a lady’s maid.

“So—”

“Right.”

“—that’s pretty much it, unless you want to see the attic,” he said, swinging his arms a bit too jauntily, startling Emmie. Graham was usually so serenely contained that his sudden random, jerky movements were jarring.

“I can skip the attic for now,” she said. The house was completely quiet. Apparently the workers were taking a break. She wondered how long it had been since their sawing and sledgehammering had fallen silent—had they just stopped, or had she been so caught up in spending time with Graham that she hadn’t noticed the house had gone quiet ages ago?

As they descended to the first floor again, Graham said from behind her, “So ... what’s the Emmie story?”

“The what?”

“The Emmie story. You know—”

At the bottom of the stairs, she turned to him and made a face. “You mean my Very Special Relationship with John?”

Graham laughed, which made her toes tingle. She loved his open, genuine smile. “Not necessarily. But I do wonder how you got there, sure.”

“Uh”—she breathed uneasily—“well, er, I was born here, grew up here.” She skipped over high school so she didn’t have to mention Juliet, and went on, “I got my degree at Westfall College, just up the road—”

“Oh, yeah,” Graham cut in, “I know the place. I’m from Ostey, originally. That’s near there.”

“Right! We used to do some serious drinking in—” Emmie winced. “I probably shouldn’t have told you that.”

He shrugged. “We’ve all got our vices.” *Ain’t that the truth*, Emmie thought. As he directed her back into the library, he asked, “What about family? Brothers? Sisters?”

“Nope, I’m an only,” she replied. “My dad lives here in town. My mom ... passed last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“That’s about it. Pretty average, really.”

“Oh, I think that’s the last word I’d use to describe—” Then something started pinging across the room. Graham said, “Excuse me a second,” and crossed to the window seat to pick up his phone.

Hey now. What was that? As he read his text message, Emmie, thoroughly discombobulated by his last comment, retreated to the opposite end of the room, pretending to study the cobwebbed crown molding and the empty, dusty shelves. She leaned on the wall; after that kind of comment, she needed some support to remain standing. A bulge of dried-out plaster gave under her weight.

“Sorry,” Graham said, putting his phone in his pocket and joining her on the other side of the room. “So. What do you think of the place?”

Hang on—care to finish that last thought? she wondered. But he’d apparently moved on, so she just said, “I think it’s great.”

“Now, Emmie Brewster, interior designer, there’s one thing I want to make clear,” he said, crossing his arms in front of him and rocking on his heels. “This is a very important project.”

“Of course,” Emmie said in her best career-mode voice, feeling a little defensive at his lecturing tone.

“What I mean is, it’s very important to *me*.”

“Okay ...” *So he wants to impress the new owners. Who doesn’t?* “Er, who are the clients, by the way?”

He cocked an eyebrow and replied with the ghost of a smile, “Me.”

“What?”

“This is my house. I bought it.”

“Wow.” After a pause, she added, “Good thing I didn’t make any rude comments about the crazy guy who bought this tumble-down rattrap.”

“Good thing. And you know what this means, don’t you? Now you have to be nice to me.”

She smirked at him, realizing that they were both recalling Saturday night's conversation in the shadowed back room of Juliet's new shop. Then, in all seriousness, she said, "It's a great place, Graham. Really."

"It is, isn't it? And ... I want it to be done right. I want it to be perfect. Not that you won't do your best—I know you will. But I just want to make sure you understand that I'm doing this for someone who's very important to me."

Emmie stiffened. She could fill in the blanks there. Juliet? When the house was ready, was she going to leave her husband and move in here with Graham? That would explain why her McMansion didn't look lived in, wasn't decorated: She wasn't planning on staying all that long. So this was going to be Juliet's perfect house, with Juliet's breathtaking sunny bedroom, and even a lady's maid if Juliet wished it.

But it didn't matter. This was Emmie's job. She would just have to forget that she was doing it for Juliet's benefit. So she took a breath and looked at the handsome man before her—the man she had never had a chance with, because when they met he had already been dreaming of feathering this majestic nest for another woman. "Absolutely," she said. "You can count on me. I will make this place ... beautiful. Perfect." For emphasis, she slapped her hand on the wall next to her.

And suddenly, with a muted *whoosh*, the entire expanse of plaster detached itself from the lath, and the room was filled with a cloud of blinding, choking plaster dust.

Chapter 10

Emmie screwed her eyes shut, coughing, and stretched her hands out to feel her way to the doorway. She connected with Graham's arm and he rasped out, "This way," grasped her shoulders, and directed her out of the room.

In the hallway, Graham bent over, his hands on his knees; Emmie leaned back against the wall. When their coughing subsided, Graham squinted up at her and broke out in a grin.

"What in the world could possibly be amusing at this moment?" Emmie asked, her words punctuated by more coughing.

"Come with me and I'll show you."

He held out a hand and instinctively Emmie took it, realizing a split second later it was probably a bad idea. But she couldn't pull away now, so she let him lead her down the hall and into the kitchen. A yellow and red water jug stood on the orange counter. Graham pulled two plastic cups out of a package next to the cooler, filled one, and handed it to Emmie, who drank gratefully, then filled the second for himself. After he had taken a couple of sips, he said, "Better?" She nodded, so he gestured toward the powder room. He squeezed in behind her and pulled the string on the light over the sink.

"Oh, no," she whispered as she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. Then she started to laugh. Her head, face, neck, and shoulders were white with dust, except for a Joker-like smile curving up from both sides of her mouth where her skin showed through—the line the plastic cup had made.

"You know," Graham said, "if you wanted to start knocking down the old plaster that badly, all you had to do was say so. I could have gotten you a mask and a sledgehammer."

Emmie could feel the warmth of his chest against her back as he smiled down at her in the mirror's reflection. Suddenly the powder room was *way* too small for her comfort. She escaped to the larger expanse of the kitchen and busied herself

brushing off her shoulders and the front of her coat. She heard Graham turn off the light in the powder room.

Emmie bent at the waist and shook her hair out. “You don’t mind if I get a little of this on the floor, do you?”

Graham ripped a few paper towels off a roll on the counter and dampened them with water from the cooler. “Look up,” he said, and he gently brushed the paper towels over her cheeks, chin, and nose. She sneezed, and Graham started to laugh. He seized her chin and commanded, “Hold still!”

Emmie was extremely aware of the roughness of his fingers gently cradling her face. She tried to look everywhere but at him, but her gaze returned to his, and she forgot to breathe. He was staring at her again.

Finally she said hoarsely, “Is it that bad?”

He let go of her chin, shook out the paper towels, and started wiping his own face more vigorously. “Let’s just say you’re going to be sneezing white for a while.”

“I’ll try to avoid run-ins with the DEA in the meantime.”

She took a few more swipes at her coat front when Graham suddenly burst out, “Emmie ...” in a different voice—rougher—and he seemed suddenly awkward. She looked up into his blue eyes, and those tiny multicolored butterflies behind her navel started doing the Macarena again.

But whatever he was going to say was cut off by the sound of rushing feet in the hallway and a cry of “Daddy! Daddy!”

Graham tore his eyes away from hers. “In the kitchen!” he called, and the swinging door flew open. A little girl in a bright yellow quilted jacket burst into the room. “There’s my girl!” he exclaimed, hugging her and planting a kiss on her cheek.

She looked him up and down and exclaimed, “Daddy! What happened?”

“Do I look funny?”

She started giggling. “Yes! What did you do?”

“Oh, it’s all part of the job.” The girl then noticed Emmie and became shy, wrapping her arms around her father’s thigh. He rested a hand on her head. “This lady’s name is Emmie. And guess what? She’s going to decorate your bedroom.”

“Really?”

“Really. Emmie, this is my daughter, Sophie. Remember when I said I wanted to make this house perfect for somebody very important to me? Well, here she is.”

Emmie looked from the little girl—oh, she had the same vivid blue eyes and dark hair as her father—to Graham and back again. *This* was who he was talking about? “It’s nice to meet you, Sophie,” she managed to say. “You’re going to have a really cool house pretty soon.” She couldn’t help but ask Graham, “All this space for just the two of you?” She had to know.

He fidgeted. “Yes ...” And then he said, stronger, “Yes. It’s complicated—”

The kitchen door opened again, and a short, older woman entered, a little out of breath, carrying Sophie’s backpack. “You forgot this in the car, Sophia,” she said to the little girl.

“Thanks, Annamaria,” Graham said to the woman, who nodded.

She placed the backpack on the counter and stuffed her hands in her camel-hair coat pockets. “I see the place is treating you right already, Graham,” she said, looking him up and down.

He brushed more plaster dust off his shoulders. “It’ll be worth it in the long run.”

Annamaria looked skeptical. “If you say so.”

Graham said to Emmie, “This is Annamaria, Sophie’s babysitter. Annamaria, this is Emmie, my interior designer.” The woman nodded to Emmie, and she returned the greeting as she thrilled at Graham calling her “my” anything. He said, “Annamaria’s a godsend—she really helps out when I’m working weird hours.”

Or playing footsie with Juliet, Emmie added silently, her excitement at being called “his” evaporating in a blink.

The woman waved a dismissive hand at him, embarrassed, and said, “You know, I can take Sophia to the dentist if you’re busy—”

Graham was in the process of politely refusing her offer when Sophie approached Emmie. “Can I have yellow?”

“What’s that, sweetie?”

“Yellow. Can my room be yellow?”

“Sure! We can make it any color you want.”

Sophie smiled; one of her front teeth was missing. “Yay. It’s my favorite color. All the other girls like pink, but I don’t.”

A little rebel, Emmie thought. *I like this kid already.*

Graham interrupted. “All right, you two schemers. We’ll have plenty of time to pick colors later. But right now, missy, *you* have to visit the dentist. I’m going to walk Emmie out to her car, and then you and I are going to hit the road, all right?”

“All right,” she mumbled, pulling a face.

Emmie bent down to whisper to Sophie, “I’ll bet you’re going to see Dr. Turner, aren’t you?” Emmie took a chance that Graham would have made sure Sophie went to the best pediatric dentist in town; some things never changed around here, the best dentists included. Sophie nodded glumly. “I happen to know she gives presents to good patients.” The little girl looked up, intrigued but cautious. “They’ve got a whole drawerful.”

“Candy?” Sophie asked hopefully.

Emmie rolled her eyes. “Now, do you *really* think a dentist would give out candy?”

Sophie giggled. “I guess not.”

“Tell Dr. Turner Emmie Brewster sent you. She’ll hook you up with the good stuff.” Emmie proffered her fist, and Sophie bumped it with her own small one.

Then she looked eagerly at her father. “Daddy? Can we go now?”

He smiled. “In a minute.”

As Graham followed Emmie out the front door and down the rickety porch steps, he murmured, “Thanks for that.”

She shrugged, embarrassed and awkward once again. At her car, he pushed his hands into his jeans pockets as the cold winter wind buffeted him.

“You should get back inside,” Emmie said.

“Yeah. I just ... I wanted to ...” He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “When I said I was fixing up this house for someone special ... it goes beyond just doing this for my kid. She’s ... had a rough time lately. My ... well, my wife died two years ago.” Emmie caught her breath. “Cancer. It was quick. So it was a shock.” Emmie started to express her sympathy, but Graham cut her off. “It’s all right. Really. We’re doing a lot better now. Not to say that it was easy. It was hell for both me and Sophie. But I’m not telling you this to get you to feel sorry for me or for her. I just ... thought you should know,” he finished awkwardly.

Emmie tried to speak around the lump in her throat. She watched the wind ruffle Graham’s hair, sending puffs of plaster dust into the air to mingle with the fine snowflakes that had begun to fall. Finally she managed to say, “I’m glad you told me.”

He nodded, looking at the ground for a moment, then back into her eyes, his own squinted against the cold. “I don’t tell many people. I view it as our private business, you know? Sophie’s gone through so much ... We moved here in August, she’s started a new school, we’re renting this crappy little place and ... I try to make everything good for her, but it’s tough. I think once we settle into a nice home of our own, she’ll be happy.”

“You know what?” Emmie said softly. “Sophie already looks happy to me—and I’ll bet anything it’s because you’re being a great dad.”

“Thanks. But I still want to do this for her.” He looked over at the house. “I wish I had found this place earlier. Looks like we won’t be able to move in till next summer ... at the earliest ...”

“You’ve got a lot of people on the job; maybe we can move things along faster.”

“Yeah, now that you’ve already made some progress on the plaster,” he teased with a sly grin. “I’d better get going, get some of the guys started on cleaning up your handiwork in the library before I leave. I’ll be in touch soon, so we can talk about what we’re going to do to get this place in shape.”

“You bet,” Emmie said.

Graham started to say something else, paused, then said simply, “Take care, Emmie,” before he made his way back up the front walk.

“Okay, let’s talk dentil molding.”

Graham shuffled a few papers on his cluttered work area—a piece of plywood stretched across some spare sawhorses—and pulled out one of Emmie’s sketches for the dining room, shifting it so they could both see it at the right angle. Emmie, chin propped on her hand and her elbow in the way, gazed stupidly at his gorgeous profile and didn’t notice that Graham was waiting for Emmie to budge so he could put the sketch down. Graham was looking at the paper, but when she didn’t move, he glanced up. At the sight of his deep blue eyes twinkling at her, Emmie flushed scarlet to the roots of her hair and tucked herself into as compact a size as possible, her hands in her lap.

Graham smiled. “You all right?”

“Sure!” she squeaked, then cleared her throat. “Fine. I’m fine. You were saying? About the ... the ...”

“Dentil molding.”

“Right!” Emmie nodded. “Good stuff, dentil molding. Er, what about it?”

Graham ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip, the corners of which were still upturned in an amused grin, which nearly sent Emmie into fits. He returned his attention to the sketch, but he glanced up at her every few seconds, almost to make sure she was functioning properly, as he asked her how much of the original molding they could salvage, and how much they'd have to replicate and with what type of materials. Emmie put on a studious frown to appear deep in thought, but whenever Graham's gaze was on the desktop, she went back to mooning at him like a love-struck dope. Which she was. This was their fourth meeting in two weeks, and she hadn't gotten tired of being with him yet. He was so ... so ... yeah. That. Gorgeous, sure. But so smart, too. And gorgeous. Self-assured. Talented. And, you know, gorgeous.

She shook herself. She really should be paying attention to what he was saying instead of staring at his perfect lips and wondering what they tasted like. After all, she wasn't there to drool over him. She had to make with the interior design.

Graham sighed and leaned back in his wooden folding chair. "Okay, I can see that dentil molding isn't lighting your fire today." *Oh, my fire is lit*, Emmie thought. *But definitely not by molding.* "So let's figure something else out."

It dawned on Emmie that she was going to have a second chance to sound brilliant. *Focus.*

"The master bath. Obviously it's too small as it is. But I'd hate to lose a bedroom to expand it."

"Totally understandable. You've only got so many—like, fifty."

Graham smirked. "Forty-eight, and you know it. Seriously, I think that front bedroom is worth keeping, and I don't want to cut into it. What do you suggest?"

And Emmie's second chance to sound brilliant died on the vine. She had no clue. As she scrambled to come up with something, her phone chimed, and she jumped. She glanced at the screen; the reminder for her afternoon meeting with Wilma popped up. *Ugh.* "Sorry," she said to Graham (boy, was she ever), "I've got to get back to the office." Was she

hallucinating, or did Graham look a little disappointed? For the thousandth time since she started spending time with him on this project, her heart started beating triple time. Who needed the gym? Just being around him was giving her enough of a cardio workout. “But, uh, before I go”—she had to salvage this meeting somehow—“I wanted to ask you about the wallpaper in the master bedroom.”

“The answer is no, I don’t want to keep it.”

Emmie grinned. “Yeah, you don’t seem like a forget-me-not kind of guy.”

“Well, under the right circumstances. But surrounded by them every night? Not so much.”

“What I meant was, what do you think of having it recreated, custom, for Sophie’s room? It’d be a nice delicate touch above the chair rail, add some color variety to offset all that yellow.”

“Great idea. She’d like that. Her second-favorite color is purple.”

Ooh, praise from Graham always gave Emmie the wibbles. “I’ll get some for a sample before I go, then.”

She stood, and Graham stood up as well. He wasn’t going anywhere, but instead was doing the old-fashioned stand-when-a-woman-stands thing. More wibbles, which made it difficult for her to cross the room, grab a spare putty knife, and make it upstairs without having to sit on the steps to regroup. She almost—*almost*—considered it a relief to be alone for a few minutes in the master bedroom.

The workers hadn’t gotten to the room yet; it was still a dusty mess. Before Emmie hunted for a loose corner of wallpaper to pull on, she spent a minute gazing down at the lawn, which was now encrusted with a thin layer of snow. She rested her head against one of the window frames, not caring if some of the peeling paint chips lodged in her hair. Damn, she had it bad. She couldn’t even manage to keep some emotional distance by remembering Graham’s questionable morals. Really, none of it added up. He was so gentle and kind, not to

mention funny, polite, and intelligent. She kept trying to find something about him that was objectionable, less than perfect—a telltale sign that his gallant manners were a front for something more sinister, and someday his mask would slip and she'd be able to say, Scooby-like, “Ah-hah!”—that she knew it all along. But so far—nothing.

She tore her gaze away from the window. If she didn't get back soon, Wilma would have her head (again). She looked around the room and spotted a panel of wallpaper that seemed looser than the others, about three feet above the floor, by the door frame. A narrow air bubble ran down the middle—that'd be a good place to work loose a piece big enough for the wallpaper company to use to replicate the pattern.

Emmie sliced through the bubble with the corner of the putty knife, then slipped the tool under the edge and started to wiggle the paper free. It came away fairly easily, old as it was, the glue completely shot. Emmie frowned and looked closer. She nudged more of the paper loose, this time on the other side of the cut she had made. Then she started pulling at it with her fingernails. Stunned, she sat back on her heels. Then she called Graham.

“You're kidding me.” Graham crouched down and peered into the open door Emmie had found behind the wallpaper.

A low, narrow hallway ran parallel with the landing on the other side of the wall and ended in a small area only a little wider than the passage. There was a door on that end that would have opened onto the landing, but at some point the opening must have been plastered or drywalled over, because there was no trace of it now.

He thought a moment, then said, “I know what this is.”

“What, a bedroom for hunchback mice?” Emmie muttered.

“Servant's quarters. The lady's maid slept in a cot there at the far end. If the lady of the house—she in the big bedroom here—needed anything, she would ring a bell, and the maid

would scoot down this tiny passageway and pop out next to the bed.”

Good grief, there really had been a lady’s maid, Emmie said to herself. “That is completely weird.”

“Yeah? How does your lady’s maid attend to you when you summon her in the middle of the night?”

“I take care of my own chamber pot, thank you very much.” Then she couldn’t resist teasing, “And you didn’t know this was here, Mister Big-time Architect? I mean, the bathroom ends there”—she pointed around the corner—“and then you’ve got ten, twelve feet of nothing till you get to the bedroom?”

He stood up and stretched. “Well, I didn’t think to investigate, Miss Smartypants. With all these additions, sometimes they just left empty spaces behind the wall.”

“This could have been where they hid their gold!”

“You think the original owners were leprechauns?”

“That would explain the height of the hideaway.” She peeked out onto the landing again. “Well, that solves your bathroom problem, anyway. Raise the ceiling here, and widen the empty space behind it thataway. Extend the bathroom and put in a proper door, and voilà—an en suite bathroom. They’re all the rage these days, I hear.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Can you raise the ceiling?”

“I dunno. Might have to call an architect. Oh, wait.” Graham winked. Then he made a face and scratched his head. “Yeah, how come I didn’t see this before?”

“Well, you’re looking down at foundations and drainage. But I’m looking up at walls and ceilings.”

“That proves we make a good team, then.”

Emmie’s ever-present butterflies switched from their usual light capering to retro slam dancing in steel-toed Dr. Martens.

He tilted his head and studied her. “You are very good at this,” he said. “And John really has never let you work on other jobs?” She shook her head. “How do you know all this stuff, then? I mean, where do you get your hands-on experience?”

“Oh.” Emmie took a breath. “I have an old Craftsman cottage. I—I did a lot of work on it over the past few years. Refinishing and remodeling and ... stuff.” *Stuff*? she berated herself.

But Graham was saying, “I’d love to see it sometime.”

And Emmie nearly fainted dead away right there.

“One more. Come on, just one more.”

“No!”

“Well, too late, because here it comes—”

With groans and mumbles, everyone leaned forward. Three hands plopped three drinks on the coffee table, and six hands covered six ears.

“Squeeee!”

A pause. Then, “Are you done?”

Emmie took a sip of her wine and thought about it a moment. “Mm, yeah. Okay, I’m done.”

“Thank goodness.”

Six hands came off six ears, and three hands reached for three drinks. Three hands nearly dropped three drinks when another “Squeeee!” rent the air.

“I thought you said you were done!” Trish snarled at Emmie.

Emmie curled up in the corner of Trish’s couch and giggled. “Sorry. That last one just slipped out.”

“And for the record?” Avery added, mopping up the wine that had spilled out of his glass when he was jolted by

Emmie's last squeal. "Nobody actually *says* 'squee'—you just text it or post it."

"Is she always like this?" the third rattled person asked Avery.

This was Adam, he of the cute butt spotted at the town's winter festival. Emmie learned from Avery that after he had taken her home, he had hurried back to the town center to see if he could locate the owner of the cute butt, and he had found him, said cute butt perched on a stool at the wine bar on Main Street. "Like he was just waiting for me!" Avery had exclaimed excitedly to Emmie when he called to tell her the news.

Now the new couple joined her and Trish to help her celebrate that she and Graham had had at least one "moment," possibly two.

"Lookee here, newbie," she said with a goofy grin. "I'll have you know—"

"Yes, she's always like this," Trish interrupted. Emmie made a face, but Trish countered, "Well, you are!"

Emmie contemplated this. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

She didn't mind getting ganged up on. Nothing could puncture her happy bubble—the one that had settled in her torso under her burgeoning heart, the one that was filled with those madly careening multicolored butterflies that were threatening to stage an all-night rave in her belly.

"What about Juliet?"

It was like somebody had put on a Michael Bolton tune in the middle of the dance party. The butterflies froze in horror and confusion, much the same way Avery and Adam did, which pleased Emmie. They might be new to the Emmie Club, but they were catching on quick. She gave Trish the hairy eyeball but said nothing.

"What?" Trish persisted. "Nothing's changed. They're still ___"

"Out."

“What?”

“Out, I say! There will be no sabotaging my good mood today. Not the same day Graham and I had a moment.”

“Maybe two,” Avery reminded her.

“Right. Maybe two. So begone, you who dare to pee in my Cheerios. Out!”

“It’s my house.”

“I don’t care,” Emmie said without missing a beat. “I will hear no mention of Juliet today, of all days.”

“But—”

“Nope!”

“But—”

“Wait,” Avery said. “We’re missing one important factor here.”

Adam nodded. “Yep. A ring.”

“What?”

“At the risk of sounding way too gay for my own good by paraphrasing old club tunes,” Adam said, “if there’s no ring on it ...”

“You’re right,” Emmie said. “Juliet’s married to Kevin. Juliet hasn’t left Kevin for Graham—”

“Yet,” Trish muttered.

“Quit it,” Emmie growled.

“Right,” Avery agreed, refilling Emmie’s glass and gesturing to Trish to hand hers over as well. “All’s fair in the mad scramble for a decent man, and all that.”

Trish shook her head. “I don’t know. Juliet could invoke prior claim.”

“Bah.” Emmie took a healthy swallow of wine. “She has no prior claim when she’s stepping out on her husband.”

“Oh, yeah?” Trish asked, eyeing her best friend shrewdly. “You think you could intentionally break them up so you could

steal him?”

Emmie smirked and let out a tipsy “pssshht” that was meant to be a confident dismissal. “Hell yeah!”

“Really?”

“Yes!” Now Emmie was irked. “I am completely capable of playing hardball. This is Graham we’re talking about here! I just need to get him in some ... social setting. Not work, you know?”

The side door to the garage slammed and Rick entered the kitchen, dropping his car keys onto the counter with a clatter. As he came through the doorway to the living room, Trish said, “You forget the little monsters at the hockey rink?”

“Justin’s learning *responsibility*—he’s putting away his own equipment this time. Logan’s, uh, ‘helping.’”

Sure enough, strident kid voices came from the garage as the boys wrestled with Justin’s hockey gear.

“It’ll be in a pile on the garage steps, blocking their way into the house,” Trish corrected. “That means they’ll have to sleep in the garage tonight. And, you know, I’m okay with that.”

Rick nodded to Avery. “Hey,” he said, enthusiastically friendly. “Good to see you. And you, Emmie,” he added pointedly. Emmie snickered. Neither she nor Trish had told him about Avery. Now was probably a good time, though, as Rick looked curiously at Adam and extended his hand. “Rick Campo.”

Adam rose halfway from the sofa. “Adam Lowery.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook Adam’s hand, then gave Emmie the eye. “So! Picking ’em up two at a time now?”

Emmie snickered again. “Not quite, Rick. But Graham and I had a moment!”

“Maybe two,” Avery added again.

Rick was now completely befuddled. “Er ...”

Trish decided to rescue him. She stood up, grabbed her husband's arm, and steered him toward the kitchen. "Let's open another bottle and get you a glass."

"I'd rather have a beer," Rick said, glancing back at the threesome on the sofa, trying to figure it all out.

"Fine," Trish answered, still propelling him out of the room. "Now, there's just one other thing ..."

Chapter 11

“Kill me.”

“And end up alone with ... *this*? No way. Remember, Emmie darling, this was *your* idea. I’m just the saintly friend helping out. Now get this saint another glass of holy wine.”

Emmie and Trish were leaning in the doorway of Emmie’s kitchen. They, like the people who had arrived before them in the combined living room and dining room, were dressed in their best festive gear, backlit by strings of fairy lights and dozens of candles. What with the decorations, trays of hors d’oeuvres, and a side table groaning under the weight of every kind of alcohol Emmie could fling in her shopping cart à la Nicolas Cage in *Leaving Las Vegas*, her impromptu holiday party should have been a raging success.

As it was, however, the scene was more like a forced march. Emmie had invited every happy couple in her circle of friends, in a grand scheme to get Graham to her house and among stable relationships. Kind of as a hint that he belonged with her, in a normal setting, instead of slinking around dark alleys with Juliet.

It had started off promisingly, with Avery and Adam agreeing to attend as readily as Trish and Rick. In a paroxysm of holiday spirit, Emmie had even invited Wilma and Travis. Wilma had turned her down flat without so much as a moment to reflect, of course, but she had anticipated his Scrooge-like response and had sent an Evite to Travis as well. He had phoned her promptly, rumbling to her in his deep, honeyed voice that he would make sure they were there. And, true to his word, somehow he had managed to drag Wilma to the party.

Of course, that didn’t stop Wilma from sulking the entire night, hunkered down in her chair-and-a-half, arms crossed, muttering heatedly with Travis, who stood close by. They were in the middle of an argument—probably about being at the party, possibly not. Avery and Adam sat side by side on the sofa, casting apprehensive glances at the squabbling couple a few feet away. Rick, still trying to wrap his mind around the

notion that Avery and Adam were a couple and his matchmaking hadn't worked out in the slightest, perched on the ottoman in front of them, awkwardly trying to make small talk.

The other guests, which included Annette and Martie and their husbands, were still to arrive. Emmie had been surprised to find that getting the foursome to her party was more of a challenge than she had expected.

Annette had called and asked abruptly, "Will John be there, honey?"

"Well, yes. Why?"

Annette hesitated—something she didn't normally do, *ever*—then blurted out, "Because I don't like him."

Emmie's first inclination had been to burst out laughing and tell her to join the (large) club, but instead she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Well, he ... he's making a mess of things! I'm sorry, but he is!" Annette had exclaimed in a rush. "I thought *you* were going to be redoing Michael's room, and then he just ... took over ... and he isn't using any of your ideas and I don't like it! I want you to fix it."

"Excuse me?"

"I want you to fix it. He's almost done, so I'll try to keep quiet for now. But after, I want you to come in and do it the way we planned. He never has to know."

"Annette, I can't—"

"I'll pay you under the table. Cash. Now promise me you'll do it."

Emmie thought for a second. "Only if you promise to come to my party."

There had been silence on the other end of the line, then Emmie lost a few decibels of hearing when Annette's peal of laughter pummeled her eardrum. "You drive a hard bargain, lady. All right, all right. We'll come."

But they weren't there yet, and Emmie's group was looking pretty skimpy. Graham hadn't arrived yet, either, and maybe that was a good thing. Maybe she should have canceled the whole thing, as she nearly did when she received the Worst Text Message Ever. Several days after she had sent out her Evites, she'd been thrilled to see a text from Graham. Emmie had toyed with the idea of asking him face-to-face, but instead had decided to play it cool and send him the same Evite as everyone else.

When she saw the text with his name on it, she scrambled to open it up. Her stomach went into freefall when she read, Graham & I wd LOVE to come 2 ur party! C u then!—and then it collided with her coccyx when she saw XOXO, Juliet.

Damn her, Emmie thought, offended for Graham. That woman was snooping on his phone! Of course, as Trish, Ms. Voice of Reason, had pointed out later, Graham might have asked Juliet to reply for him, but Emmie preferred her own version of the story, so she could remain indignant. She had most certainly *not* invited Juliet, but Juliet had managed to worm her way in anyway. And now Emmie was going to be the only single person at her own party. Well, along with her dad (also not there yet), whom she had invited in order to show Graham that she was big on family ... and because she couldn't think of anybody else to invite. But being her dad's "date"? Ugh. That smacked of middle-school father-daughter dances. No doubt about it, this night was a disaster already.

"Where's my wine, woman?" Trish prompted with an elbow to Emmie's ribs, adding with a snicker, "Or are you saving some for Kyle?"

Emmie glared at her. "Just for that, you can get your own." And she shoved herself off the doorjamb and went back into the kitchen.

Yes, what was even worse was that Kyle had called—that very afternoon, in fact, while Emmie was sitting around, unshowered and still in her pajamas well after lunchtime, in a funk because of the text message from Graham/Juliet. She groaned aloud when Kyle's name came up on the screen.

“*What, Kyle?*”

“Kyle! Nice to hear from you! It’s been a long time. How are you? I’ve missed you.”

“What do you want? I’m busy.”

“Heck, I was just calling to see how you were.” Emmie remained silent. Kyle *never* called just to see how she was, not even when they were dating. And soon enough he drawled, “Well ... you know that stuff I left at your house?”

“That crap? I boxed it up and put it in the garage. Except for your beer. I drank it.”

Kyle chuckled. “That’s okay.”

“I wasn’t asking your forgiveness.”

“Anyway, I was thinking I could come by and pick it up.”

“When?”

“I dunno. Now?”

Emmie flopped her head back against the couch cushions. What, he needed his chicken-wing-eating trophy *right then*? “Not today, Kyle. I’m busy.”

“Yeah, you said. C’mon, it’s Saturday! What’re you doing, painting your toenails?”

“As a matter of fact,” Emmie burst out, irritated at his guffaw that implied she had no life without him around, “I’m cleaning and decorating. I’m having a party tonight.” As soon as the words were out, she winced. She knew what was coming next.

“Oh, yeah?” Suddenly Kyle sounded quite intrigued.

“No, Kyle, you are not invited.”

“Aw, c’mon, Emmaline, for old time’s sake?”

“Absolutely not. And you’re not coming over here today to get your stuff, you got that?”

“But—”

“No. I will call you and let you know a day when I’ll be out—I’ll leave the garage unlocked and you can get it then.”

“You hold a mean grudge, girl.”

“Gee, I wonder why.” And she had clicked off, longing for the days when phones had nice, heavy receivers that could be slammed down on cradles, eliciting a satisfying *ding* from deep within the rattled phone base.

But she had to give him credit—the threat of him coming over even when she had told him he couldn’t, likely during the party so he could snag some free food and booze, had gotten her up off the couch and out of her flannels. By the time Trish had come over with extra cookie sheets for heating up the frozen hors d’oeuvres, Emmie had finished decorating and was working on making herself look halfway decent.

She had been tempted to do the bare minimum and just look presentable, but Trish had somehow convinced her that she had the chops to combat Juliet’s Power of the Über-cute if she just made a bit of extra effort. So Emmie had decided to fight Über-cute with Soft and Cuddly. She dug out her black velvet miniskirt (but not too mini—no need to be trashy) and her softest, clingiest cashmere boat-neck sweater in a warm, subdued shade of deep cranberry. A pair of black tights and some suede heels later, Emmie almost—almost!—had herself convinced that she might just have her own particular talents in the attraction department.

And now they were going to be put to the test. The doorbell rang, and Emmie practically knocked over Rick, who was making a move for the door, most likely to escape from the conundrum that was Avery and Adam, to get there herself. This had to be Graham. It *had* to be. She opened the door, a bright smile on her face ... but it was Juliet, bundled up in a pale shearling coat, collar turned up to her rosy cheeks while fine, sparkling grains of snow whirled around her head. Emmie felt her best foot forward take a step back, overwhelmed by All That Was Juliet.

Juliet bustled in, shivering, and Emmie tried hard not to peer past her, looking for Graham. She caught a glimpse of

Juliet's Land Rover parked on the street.

"Graham's coming later," her unwanted guest explained cheerfully, as she took off her coat and fluffed her hair.

"Oh, of course!" Emmie responded, matching her nemesis cheer for cheer. Well, sure—what did she expect? That Graham had driven to Juliet's house and said to her husband, "Hi, I'm here to take Juliet out on a date"?

Emmie directed Juliet to the food and drinks—she noticed Rick was standing by the alcohol, eager to serve, and she wanted to slap that goofy look off his face. Judging by the glare his wife was delivering from across the room, so did Trish.

But instead, Juliet gravitated toward the sofa; she had spotted two young, good-looking men. Emmie fought down a snicker. If Graham hadn't told her about Avery, Juliet could just figure it out for herself.

Trish came up beside Emmie and gave Juliet the once-over. The Über-cute was out in full force. She was playing the petite darling for all she was worth, clad in tight white pants and a clingy cherry-red top, like a life-sized lickable candy cane.

"Where's the guest of honor?" Trish murmured.

"Coming later," Emmie muttered as the doorbell rang again. She trudged back to the foyer, not really caring who was behind it at this point.

Through the triple-paned window across the top of the door she saw a familiar snow-white head—her dad. *Oh well.* At least now she could check out just how tan he'd gotten, as this was the first time she'd actually seen him since he got back from his Thanksgiving cruise. Dad knew how to lie low when he figured he was in hot water with her, she had to admit. Emmie fought the urge to dig out her color fan before opening the door so she could greet him by holding up one of the beige-to-brown cards alongside his face to check his shade. Instead, she just yanked open the door with a smile pasted onto her face ... and then stopped. Yes, there was her father ... and in front of him, shielded from the wind and snow by her

father's tall frame, was a tiny, birdlike woman with a sleek auburn bob and bright, glittering eyes.

"Hello, Emmaline," her father boomed. "You going to let us in? Getting pretty nasty out here."

Emmie jumped a little. "Uh—sure, Dad. Come on in."

Bob Brewster ushered his delicate companion into the foyer and helped her take off her coat while Emmie stared, open-mouthed, at the woman. Her father handed her both their coats, which Emmie accepted automatically. Then she bugged her eyes at him, silently demanding an explanation.

"This is Concetta," he said in a warm voice, his hand on the woman's shoulder.

"... Nice to meet you?" Emmie didn't mean to sound like she wasn't sure, but heck, she *wasn't*. Her father had brought a *date* to her party?

"Hello, dear," this Concetta woman said with a gentle smile, the lines around her mouth deepening. Emmie shook her hand, which was cold despite the fact that she had been wearing gloves and felt so fragile. "It's so nice to finally meet you. Your father has told me so much about you!"

"Has he?" Emmie returned the smile, although hers was forced. She wasn't angry at the tiny woman before her, but she was going to have a few choice words for her father when she could corner him. How long had this been going on? And where—

"Concetta and I met at the senior center," Bob said as if he could read his daughter's mind. "She's a mean euchre player."

"I'll bet," Emmie murmured.

Bob looked around. "Well, Emmaline, this is quite nice."

Still with his hand on Concetta's shoulder, he gently steered her across the room while Emmie hung up their coats. She leaned into the closet and closed her eyes. Where was a doorway to Narnia when you needed one? Her dad. Had brought. A date. To her party. Even her dad had somebody. Somebody he obviously knew well and had been seeing for a

while, by the looks of things. And he hadn't even told her. Not that she expected him to ask permission, but ... maybe she did. But he hadn't. So now it was, "Hello, Emmie—meet your new mommy." She didn't like surprises like that. Not at all.

Of course, she realized, she was behaving exactly how an adult child of a single parent should not, under any circumstances, behave: like a petulant, self-centered brat who expected her parental unit to remain frozen in time, perpetually alone and missing his spouse, just because the child preferred him that way. She knew darn right well that widowed people—yes, even her father—had every right to move on. But so quickly? And so ... abruptly? And in time for her party?

No matter the timing, though—emotionally, she couldn't get past the belief that the only woman who should be by Bob Brewster's side was her mother. If that was because it was what she was used to, so be it. She just always pictured her parents as an indivisible unit, and she was going to have a hard time dealing with a different woman in her mother's place.

Especially tonight, in the middle of her Very Special Party Disaster. Which she was deeply regretting, all over again, at this point.

She took a deep breath, got a noseful of somebody's perfume drifting off a coat, and sneezed. She rubbed her nose on Juliet's shearling. What had she been thinking? A weird selection of friends, family, and hangers-on (Juliet!) did not a party make. All to impress a guy who wasn't even here.

Emmie heaved herself back into the room, toward that nice bottle of pinot grigio she had been planning on rationing. Keeping herself stone sober was now officially off.

Between sips of wine, Emmie busied herself with swapping cookie sheets of finger foods in the oven—to have something to do, to avoid having to make small talk, to dodge her father, to distract herself while waiting for Graham to show up. Every once in a while she took a peek at the action in the living room—not that there was much, mind—and noticed Juliet was glancing at the front door just as often as she was, downing

quite a few gin and tonics, and trying desperately to get Avery and/or Adam to flirt with her.

Emmie caught her breath as Rick sidled up to one of the windows, tugged aside the curtain, and peered outside. Emmie sauntered over to him as unobtrusively as possible. She smiled. Rick smiled back. Emmie positioned herself between him and the others in the room ... and then abruptly slapped his hand holding the curtain, with a small but vicious *whap*.

“Ow!” Rick cradled his red, smarting hand.

“Stop that!” she hissed.

“But it’s starting to snow really hard—”

“Well, don’t *telegraph* it! You’ll start scaring the prisoners—I mean guests. Worse comes to worst, you and Trish get a sleepover here, away from the kids. Win-win. So cut it out, you hear me?” Rick nodded. “Good boy. Step away from the window, real casual like, and there’s an extra mini-quiche in it for you.”

“One of the ones with bacon?”

The doorbell rang again, and Emmie ran for it. Annette and Martie and their husbands stood on her doorstep, coated in a layer of white that had accumulated in their short walk from the car. Emmie was slightly disappointed that it wasn’t Graham, but she was happy that the foursome would at least reenergize the party.

Sure enough, Annette bellowed, “Let us in, darlin’! It’s effing freezing out here!”

Emmie was more than happy to comply and, as she found herself mobbed by three short, wide individuals and one tall, lanky, stooped one, she whispered to Annette, “Where have you been? I’ve *needed* you!”

“Oh, we had to go to the holiday dinner at the Moose lodge first. We go every year. It’s a good time—an all-you-can-eat pasta bar.”

“And they had some fantastic entertainment!” one of the husbands, the short one, whom Emmie assumed belonged to

Annette, added. “Great stuff—I bought their CD!”

Sure enough, Annette said, “Emmie, honey, this is my husband, Artie. Artie, this is Emmie.”

Artie was even shorter and wider than Annette and looked remarkably like his sister, Martie (*Martie and Artie? Seriously?* she marveled), but with a shining dome covered by several hairs arcing overhead. He stuck out a beefy hand. “Emmie! Heard a lot about you! A lot! Annette just loves you!”

“Oh! Well ... thanks!”

“Yep, sure likes you a whole lot better than that jackass of a boss you work for—”

Emmie suddenly developed a very loud, consumptive cough. She caught a glimpse of Wilma glancing over, so she kept coughing until Artie, alarmed, clapped her heartily on the back. Then she found herself coughing for real, her eyes watering.

“You all right?” Artie asked, while Annette, Martie, and Martie’s husband, who was yet to be named, grouped around her, concerned.

She gulped for air and nodded. “Please,” she choked, “go on in and make yourselves comfortable. I think you know lots of people already.”

“Yes, I think I see *your boss*,” Annette commented, elbowing her husband in the side in case he didn’t catch the hint.

Emmie recovered enough to usher everyone into the living room, making the acquaintance of Martie’s husband, Stan, on the way, and suddenly, she realized, her house was full. She retreated to the bathroom, fixed whatever makeup had smeared during her coughing jag, then sat on the edge of the tub for a few minutes, her head in her hands. It was going to be all right, wasn’t it? Sure it would. Of course it would.

She took a deep breath and returned to her party. As soon as she entered the living room, she could sense something was wrong. And then she saw it: Annette was talking with Wilma.

Heatedly. She was fairly quiet—as quiet as Annette was capable of being—but Emmie could pick up the bad vibes from across the room.

Annette was saying sharply, “Really, John? Polka dots? What were you thinking?”

Wilma had plastered a condescending smile on his face, but it wasn’t sticking very well. “Now, look here, Annette—”

“That’s Mrs. Polschuk to you, you con artist—”

Oh crap, Emmie thought, *she’s lost it*. So much for Annette’s promise to be civil. Emmie started heading toward them to defuse the situation before it turned into a rumble, the Polschuks against the Wilmans ... and then she was body slammed from the right. She glanced over and saw an inebriated candy cane sticking to her. *How* many drinks had this ten-pound Christmas elf downed in the brief time she’d been here? Juliet’s empty glass was tipping sideways in her hand, melting ice cubes nearly sliding out onto the floor.

Juliet clutched Emmie’s sleeve and said, “Graham is coming later.” It occurred to Emmie that that was all Blondie had said to her all night. “Graham is coming later.” Okay, that was three times. Emmie nodded and tried to detach herself so she could avert the impending blowup a few steps away.

“I *beg* your pardon—” Wilma huffed.

“You’d better,” Annette countered. “That bedroom’s giving my kid nightmares!”

Emmie looked around for some help, to no avail. Avery and Adam still sat cozily on the couch, gleefully dividing their attention between the Design War on their left and Drunken Juliet on their right, like they were at Wimbledon.

“I don’t know why he isn’t here yet,” Juliet mumbled into her glass, and Emmie was glad she had found something else to say, although she wished she’d get off the Graham subject.

From somewhere beneath the din, a phone rang. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Trish digging in her purse. “Hello ... yes?”

The exchange between Trish and the caller was suddenly drowned out by the most god-awful noise Emmie had ever heard—and it wasn't Annette braining Wilma with an antique glass ashtray, although that seemed imminent. No, this terrible, terrifying sound was like ... the hounds of hell. No, wait—the hounds of hell were ... singing a Christmas carol?

Eemie pinpointed the source soon enough: Artie had turned off her iPod speaker dock that had been churning out tastefully religion-neutral holiday tunes and instead had fired up a CD. No, she hadn't been having an auditory hallucination—there really were dogs howling “O Holy Night,” accompanied by ... was that an accordion/ bagpipes combo? What was worse, Artie had turned it up to eleven.

Eemie stood stock still, at a loss for words, while Artie smiled excitedly and shouted over the music, “This is the band I was telling you about! MacGregor and McGraw! They were at the dinner tonight. I bought their CD! Of course, they didn't bring the dogs—kind of a shame, because that's their hook, you know?” And Artie gleefully shoved two or three cocktail wieners into his grinning maw.

Meanwhile, across the room, Trish was gasping into the phone, “He *what!*” while desperately casting around the room for Rick's attention. “How did he even get that *into* the washing machine? ... Never mind. We'll be home in five minutes.” Trish hung up and, after bellowing, “Rick! Coats!” she spared a second to shoot a regretful look at Emmie. “Sorry, hon,” she said. “We've gotta go.”

Eemie sighed. “Will it involve an emergency call to the plumber?”

“Third time this year. Got him on speed dial.” Trish shrugged on her coat and gave Emmie a quick, tight hug. “I'm so sorry,” she shouted into her ear to be heard over the accordion/bagpipes/canine chorus, which had moved on to “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.” “I'll try to come back, okay?”

Eemie knew she wouldn't, but she appreciated the gesture. “Don't worry about it. I'll call you with the postmortem

tomorrow.” And it would be the mortem-est of postmortems. She just had a feeling.

Emmie followed Trish and Rick to the front door and got a faceful of snow for her trouble. The wind was really whipping now; she held her breath as Rick backed the Mom-Mobile slowly out of the driveway. As the minivan crept down the street, another vehicle came up at a pretty good clip for a zero-visibility winter night. Emmie frowned at how fast the idiot was driving and watched carefully to make sure he didn't hit any of her friends' cars that were parked at the curb. Granted, the street was wide enough for the driver to avoid them, but not if he slid on a patch of black ice or was driving with a little too much holiday cheer under his belt.

But the driver didn't hit any of the cars on the street. He did something worse. He pulled up and parked. It slowly registered in Emmie's addled cranium that she was looking at a white pickup truck. A very familiar white pickup truck.

“Shit.”

She slammed the door and leaned on it, wishing for a nice, thick portcullis to drop down and prevent what was going to happen next. Before her, Juliet was now hanging on Adam, who was leaning away from her desperately (Avery was laughing and not helping his boyfriend in the slightest). Annette was still giving Wilma a piece of her mind, loudly (as if she did it any other way), and Travis wasn't interfering—apparently he was rather enjoying the fact that his significant other was being taken down a peg for once. Artie was now *dancing*, albeit just a sort of in-place bounce, along with the travesty of a CD he had brought along. Her father and his new girlfriend were staying out of the fray, in the dining room area, watching all the activity with alarmed expressions.

Even though she knew it was coming, Emmie jumped a mile when the doorbell rang. This was the last thing she needed. What she *needed* was everyone to get the hell out so she could run a bubble bath and open up a fresh bottle of wine, but she wasn't about to get that anytime soon.

Oh, what the hell, she thought. What's one more crazy person at this point? So she opened the door.

No, not one more crazy person. Two.

“Hiya, Emmaline,” Kyle said with a broad grin. “Wazzup?”

“Kyle, why are you here? With ...”

“You remember Caitlynn, right?” The girl was slumped under his arm, looking a whole lot the worse for wear.

Emmie glared. Of course she remembered Caitlynn. How could she not?

“Gonna let us in? It's a frickin' blizzard out here.”

Emmie was in no rush to give Kyle any sort of relief whatsoever. Instead she watched Caitlynn the way a biologist might study the activity of some critters in a petri dish: detached, calm, and observant. The girl was clearly under the influence. Too much influence. She leaned heavily against Kyle's side, her nose in his armpit—proof right there she was pretty far out of it.

Kyle looked down at the half-conscious girl. “We've been out having a good time tonight, haven't we?” he said, jostling her. She groaned in response, then mumbled something into his jacket. “What's that, sweet pea?” he asked in a sugary tone.

Caitlynn said, louder, “I'm gonna throw up.”

Honey, you just read my mind, Emmie said to herself.

“Aw, of course you aren't.” Kyle chuckled, giving her another little shake.

“Ky-ulllll!” Caitlynn groaned, quite clearly, and it wiped the stupid grin off his face.

“Aw, dammit, Caitlynn. I told you that last Jäegerbomb was a bad idea!” He appealed to Emmie. “Can she boot in your bathroom?”

Emmie looked stricken. What a choice—let Caitlynn in to hurl or watch it all come up on her front porch. Judging by how pale the girl was, there was no time to get her back into Kyle's truck and let him deal with the consequences. She

sighed heavily and opened the door wider. As Kyle ushered Caitlynn into the house, Emmie called after them, “Make sure she hits the target, Kyle, or *you’re* cleaning it up.”

Kyle waved over his shoulder with his free hand to let her know he heard her as they made their way through the gathering. “Hey, everybody!” he found time to exclaim. “Nice party!”

Caitlynn only slammed against the wall in the hallway once before Kyle managed to steer her into the bathroom and shut the door. Now everyone at the party was quiet, peering down the hall. Annette wrested the CD player remote away from her husband and turned off the yowling dogs. In the new silence, everyone could hear Caitlynn whining about something, likely announcing that she was going to vomit, and Kyle’s low-toned, wheedling responses, likely telling her to aim for the toilet bowl instead of the intricate throw rug that would be much harder to clean up. You could hear an appetizer toothpick drop in the living room as the exchange went on—whine, whine, mutter, mutter, whine, whine, mutter, “Ky-ulllll!”—and finally the juicy, choking gag that signaled an end to the discussion.

Everyone in the living room winced. And again, amplified by the concave porcelain: “Blarggghhhh.”

Bob Brewster approached his daughter and murmured, “Emmaline, shouldn’t you go in there and see if she’s all right?”

“Dad,” Emmie replied, “this may be my house, but whatever is going on in there is *not* my responsibility.” And she crossed the room to turn her iPod back on. The more sedate holiday music she had originally chosen as the dignified soundtrack to the nice party she had envisioned didn’t do a whole lot to drown out the sound effects coming from the bathroom—now it appeared Caitlynn was alternately sobbing and whining during a vomit intermission—but it helped.

“Shrimp puffs, anyone?” At her guests’ unanimously stricken looks, she muttered, “Oh. Sorry.”

Emmie retreated to the kitchen to find her mop and bucket, just in case all did not go well in the bathroom. By the time she emerged from the broom closet with the necessary cleanup items, she found herself facing a mass exodus. Nearly everyone had their coats on or were lined up to pull them out of the closet. Her guests froze, guilty, as she stared at them.

“Weather’s getting bad, sweetheart,” Travis rumbled. “It’s gonna be rough going to get home. You understand.”

Emmie could never be mad at Travis, so she willingly fell into his big bear hug when he stretched out his arms, deeply inhaling the scent of his leather coat. “Drive safe,” was all she said. “Wouldn’t want anything to happen to John, would we?”

Travis chuckled. “And deny Mrs. Polschuk a second chance to take him apart? Never.”

Wilma barely nodded to her before he dashed out the door, followed by the rest of her guests, in a veritable stampede. Not that she blamed them. Heck, if it weren’t her party, she’d be beating a hasty retreat as well.

Bob Brewster and Concetta didn’t run out the door, and Emmie appreciated the older generation’s better manners.

As her father helped Concetta with her coat, he said to Emmie, “You’ll be all right here?”

“What, with the barfer? She’s probably limp as a wet noodle by now. I can take her.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, Dad, I know. I’ll be fine.”

“It was lovely meeting you,” Concetta said. “It was a very nice party.”

Emmie winced. “It’s nice of you to say so, Concetta.”

Her father ventured, “Perhaps we can all get together another time, without ...”

“Howling dogs? Vomiting girlfriends of ex-boyfriends? Clients yelling at Wilma?”

“Something like that.”

Emmie closed the door behind them, heaved a sigh, and leaned her forehead against the heavy, solid wood. It was over. So much for her great idea, and Graham never even showed—but that meant he wasn't treated to the travesty she thought she could call a party. All good in the end. She reveled in the calm of her nearly empty house, the shush of the snow on the porch roof—

“Hic.”

Aw, geez.

Well, at least the hiccupping Caitlynn sounded more composed than she had five minutes ago. No whining—that was an improvement. And no projectile-vomiting noises—even better. Emmie decided she would just make sure the bathroom was decent, and if Kyle didn't have any cleanup duties to attend to, she'd usher the two of them out the door and finally have some peace and—

“I should go home ...”

Emmie whirled around. There in the middle of the room stood—or, rather, wobbled—Juliet. An absolutely hammered Juliet. In the partygoers' mad rush for the door, Emmie hadn't even noticed that she wasn't among the escapees. And now the little candy cane looked half melted and, to be honest, pretty sad. Her makeup was a bit smeared, her curls weren't neatly in place, and overall she definitely looked a little rough around the edges.

“Can I have my coat? I think my keys are in the pocket. I didn't bring a purse, did I?” And she started for the closet.

Emmie stepped in front of her. “Uh, Juliet? I don't think you're in any condition to drive.”

Juliet brightened a bit. “I should wait for Graham?”

“Er ...” Emmie hesitated, then admitted, “I don't think he's coming, to be honest with you. Sorry.” What was she apologizing to Juliet for? Graham had stood *her* up, not Juliet. Well, okay, Juliet, too ... but it was *her* party!

Alarm breaking through her drunkenness, Juliet exclaimed, frantic, “I've got to get home!”

“Okay,” Emmie said placatingly, “okay. We’ll get you home. Um, can we call Kevin?”

“No! He’s with the kids. I don’t want him to leave them alone—”

“Or wake them up and put them in the car. I get it. Okay,” she said again. Emmie knew the town’s taxi service was nearly nonexistent, so with a sigh, she said, “I’ll drive you. Give me one second.” Juliet just stood there, swaying slightly. “Juliet?” Emmie prompted. “Did you hear me? Nod or something.” Juliet nodded. “All right, then. Stay right there.”

Emmie knocked on the bathroom door, where Kyle and Caitlynn were still holed up. “Kyle? Everything all right in there?”

Someone turned on the faucet. Kyle said over the sound of running water, “Everything’s cool, Em.”

“Fantastic,” she muttered drily. “Come on out of there. I’ve got to leave.”

Pause. “Uh ... can you give us, like, five, ten more minutes?”

“Are you cleaning up a mess or something?”

Another pause. “Yeah. Cleaning.”

Emmie sighed. “I’d rather not wait, Kyle. Is Caitlynn all right?”

“I’m fine,” came a clearer response than Emmie had expected.

“Hey, Emmaline, why don’t you go on ahead,” Kyle said from behind the still-closed door. “We’ll finish up here and let ourselves out. How’s that sound?”

“No way. I’m not leaving you two alone in my house. Now move it.”

“Can’t you just wait—”

“I said no!”

Juliet tugged on her arm—more like pulling on it heavily—and Emmie wasn't sure if she was trying to get her attention or remain standing.

“I have to get home!” Juliet whined again.

“I heard you the first time,” Emmie hissed at her.

Her bathroom door remained closed. Emmie rattled the handle. Locked. Juliet pulled on her arm again, and Emmie nearly fell into her.

“Oh, for ... Fine,” she snapped. “Fine. But I want you guys gone by the time I get back. I have to drive Juliet home.” *The sooner the better.* “And I sure don't trust you guys to do it,” she muttered. “Caitlynn,” Emmie ordered, “do *not* use my toothbrush, got it?” She grimaced when she thought she heard the girl whisper, “Oops,” and made a mental note to dig a new one out of the bathroom cabinet when she got back. “And don't forget your crap in the garage, Kyle.”

“My what?”

Emmie paused and stared at the door suspiciously. He sounded distracted, and a distracted Kyle was never a good thing.

“The stuff you came here for,” she reminded him.

“Oh—right.”

“And try to leave at least one wall standing.”

Kyle forced a laugh. “You can trust me, Emmaline.”

Emmie rolled her eyes and tried not to think too much about that. “Gone by the time I get back. I mean it!”

No answer. Emmie glanced around her living room, past a confused-looking Juliet—who would be gone soon enough, thank goodness—at the forlorn remnants of her party: half-eaten appetizers, empty glasses, empty house. She sighed. *So much for festive*, she thought as she started blowing out tea light after tea light and unplugging her fairy lights. What a miserable night.

Chapter 12

Emmie inched her Honda down the road, leaning forward, her nose almost touching the windshield, as if that would help her see better. The only thing she saw, however, was snow, snow, and more snow. That was it. The tiny flakes swirling madly in her headlight beams were giving her a headache ... or perhaps it was the culmination of the entire night's adventures. But the snow assault definitely wasn't helping.

She stopped at a red light. The intersection was completely empty. She was the only idiot on the road. As she stared up at the stoplight and listened to the hiss of the frozen pellets as they scuttled across the roof of her car, Emmie started to wonder if she should have insisted on putting Juliet up for the night—a blanket on the couch and a bucket beside her—but it was too late now. They were more than halfway to her house; she might as well keep going, unless someone on cross-country skis or snowshoes lapped her. She'd take that as a cue to turn back.

The light turned green and, after a couple of quick glances to the left and right to make sure nobody was unwillingly sliding through the intersection, Emmie slowly started the car rolling again. She caught a glimpse of Juliet in the passenger seat, completely silent, her head resting against the side window. Her curls were mashed up against the glass, creating swirls in mist that quickly turned to frost. Emmie was a little worried about her—not only because she was completely shitfaced, but also because she seemed so out of sorts. The usually bubbly Juliet had turned into a maudlin drunk, and it knocked Emmie off-kilter. She knew how to deal with a giddy Juliet, even if it was fake cheer, but this sad clown, not so much. Juliet's mood was going to have to wait, though. Right now she needed to focus on not getting them killed.

Her passenger heaved a sigh. "You must hate me."

She sighed back. "No, I don't hate you."

"Graham hates me."

“No.” She sighed again, trying to remain patient. “I’m sure Graham doesn’t hate you, either.”

“Oh, he does. You don’t know.”

Juliet sniffled, and Emmie realized she was crying daintily. Trust Juliet not to be a sloppy crier even when she was drunk. That irritated Emmie even more. Her temples were throbbing, and she caught herself clenching her jaw. She wondered how long she’d been doing that. Judging by the intensity of her headache, quite a while.

Juliet whisked some tears off her cheeks. “He’s going to break up with me, you know. He is.”

“Juliet, you’re just”—*totally plastered*—“out of sorts. Things will look brighter in the morning and all those clichés.”

“No,” she protested again. “He didn’t come tonight because of me. I RSVP’d for both of us because I was afraid he wouldn’t bring me. And then—and then he got mad ...”

“Well, you did read his e-mail.”

“I know.” She groaned. “It was wrong, I admit it. But I just ... just ... I don’t know ...” Juliet started snurling in earnest. “I’m losing him,” she wailed. “And it serves me right.”

Well, that much is true, Emmie thought. But Juliet was such a mess, it brought the untouchable angel down to earth, suddenly, and Emmie didn’t really want to kick her in her bent wings. So instead, she said, “Juliet, if you want to make things right, maybe you should, you know, decide who you want to be with and then ... do it.”

“I have!” she burst out, tears springing up afresh. “But it’s too late. He’s so distracted. Sometimes I think he’s got ... somebody else.”

Emmie got a little thrill from that. What if it was her? And almost immediately she felt bad for being so selfish. It appeared that Juliet did care about Graham, and she really had made a mess of her life, and Emmie sort of felt sorry for her.

Emmie turned onto Juliet’s street and slowed down even more as she navigated the twists and turns of the dark

subdivision lane. “What about Kevin?”

“I don’t have him, either!” Juliet wailed.

Emmie pulled into Juliet’s driveway, parked, and risked a glance at the other woman. Juliet had buried her face in her fuzzy-gloved hands and was sobbing all-out now. Emmie wasn’t sure if she should hug her or at least pat her shoulder or what. Suddenly Juliet whispered in a strangled voice, “I’m sorry. Thank you for the ride home,” and lurched out of the car. She stumbled up her front walk, fumbled with her keys, and finally half fell into her darkened home. The red door shut abruptly, and Emmie was left alone, staring into the swirling snow.

It took Emmie nearly twice as long to get home. The snow was even more blinding, if that was at all possible, and she took most of the drive at a crawl. Her shoulders were tight; her headache had expanded from her temples to behind her eyes and around the back of her head. Juliet’s freak-out in the car had completely flummoxed her. After months of dealing with Perfect Juliet and her Barbie Dream World, it came as quite a shock that maybe not everything was all fluffy and pink in her personal life. As Emmie eased her Honda through the main part of town and closer to her warm bed, she couldn’t resist analyzing everything Juliet had said. She thought she’d lost Graham—to someone else (that was the juicy part)—and she didn’t “have” Kevin, either? What did she mean by that? Kevin seemed like a devoted husband and father, even staying with the kids while Juliet partied. How could she not “have” him when he was firmly ensconced at home?

Emmie sighed. Maybe all of that was just Juliet’s drunken rambling. How could she trust anything the G&T-soaked, stood-up, adoration-denied woman was saying late at night in a half-snowbound car, anyway?

She braked slowly to get to a four-way stop without overshooting the intersection. Almost home. Still nobody else on the road. She thought there might be, what with it being a weekend night so close to the holidays. Seemed like there had

been some event at the high school; the yellowy-orange glow of the field lights lit up the edges of the low-hanging clouds.

When she finally got onto her own street, it took her a few seconds to realize something wasn't quite right. First she noticed even more cars parked along the curb than there had been when she had left. Then she noticed the blue lights blinking on many dashboards. Then she saw the yellow lines of hoses crisscrossing the pavement, drifts of snow collecting in their curves and bends.

Then, suddenly, something—someone—was in her headlights, holding up a massive gloved hand. She slammed on her brakes and slid a little. The figure before her skipped to one side. When her car was still, he put a hand on the edge of the windshield and leaned toward the driver's side window. She eased it down. The volunteer firefighter's clunky yellow helmet filled the space.

“Street's closed for a few blocks. Have to go around.”

“What's going on?”

He looked at her like she was an idiot. “Fire.”

“I mean ... where? Whose house? I live on this street.”

Emmie craned her neck to see which of her neighbors were put out in this kind of weather. She could invite them in and—

“No. Oh, God. *Shit.*”

Before the firefighter could stop her, she lurched out of her car and stumbled down the street, past the vehicles of the volunteer firefighters, over the hoses, and through the drifts of snow. It couldn't be. Of all the houses and buildings, it just couldn't—

“*SHIT!*”

Another firefighter came up to her and put his hands up to stop her getting any closer. “Ma'am, you can't be here—it's dangerous—”

“*That's my house!*”

He made a face. “Ooh, that sucks.”

“You’re damned right it sucks!”

Horrified, she watched as a dozen firefighters doused her house with jets of water that iced up as soon as the water hit anything not on fire. What *was* on fire was the back of her house. She couldn’t see any flames from where she stood, but she could certainly see the glow from them—what she had mistaken as the lights of the high school—and billows and billows of smoke pushed toward her by the strong winds.

“My house!” she wailed, and coughed as ash mingled with snowflakes in the air.

“Doesn’t look like it’ll be a total loss.”

Emmie’s eyes were burning, and tears started coursing down her cheeks. “Are you shitting me!”

“No, seriously. I’ve been fighting fires for years, and I can tell you it isn’t as bad as it looks.”

Somewhere a window shattered, making her jump. Emmie shook her head in disbelief. “What *happened?*” she cried.

“Was your electrical system up to date? We get a lot of fires from frayed wires in these old homes.”

“Yes! I had all the wiring redone six months ago!” She put her fingers to her throbbing temples. Her hair was damp with snow. “My house! I was just having a party and now ...” Her rambling thoughts ended in a groan.

The firefighter took sympathy on her and steered her toward one of the rescue trucks. “Come on over here, ma’am.”

He led her around to the far side of the truck so she wouldn’t have to watch her house being destroyed, shook out a blanket, and draped it over her shoulders. She saw two figures, also under blankets, sitting on the bumper.

Emmie didn’t usually swear all that much, and certainly reserved the F-bomb for only the most dire of circumstances, when no other colorful language would do. This was definitely one of those times. “Fuck. Me.”

“Oh, hey, Em.”

“Fuck. Me.”

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” Kyle tried to joke.

Emmie’s voice was ghostly, surprising even her. There was no fury—not like when she had gone postal on him at Carl’s. This time, she just stared at him and whispered, “You son of a bitch. You burned my house down.”

Kyle clutched his blanket with one hand but held up his other in protest. “Now wait a minute, Emmaline—”

“No, I will not wait a minute. I left you two in my house and was gone for an hour. I come back and ... Kyle. What did you do?” It came out as more of a demand than a question.

But her none-too-bright ex wasn’t about to confess—to whatever it was. His face a mask of incredulity and personal affront, Kyle drew out, “Whaaaat!”

Emmie’s death glare stopped that approach quickly enough, so he switched to deflection. “Oh, sure, don’t even ask if *we’re* all right. Don’t even ask how we got out. *And* we called nine-one-one for you. So you’re welcome.”

Emmie licked her dry lips and repeated even more slowly, “Kyle. What—did—you—do?”

Kyle’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times, and then she heard the unlikeliest of voices. Caitlynn’s. “It was just one candle. One ... or two.”

“*What?*” What in the world was this bubblehead talking about?

“It was—”

“I put out all the candles before I left! I’m not stupid!” She looked from her ex to his ditzy girlfriend and back again. “You ... *lit* ... some candles?”

“Just one. Or two,” Caitlynn repeated, as if that would make it all right.

“I didn’t even *have* any candles anyplace but the living room!” And then the light started to dawn. “You *put* candles in

my bedroom? Why were you ...” And then she froze in horror. “*Oh my God.*”

Kyle grinned sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck—that unconscious habit that always revealed when he was feeling guilty. “C’mon, Emmaline, don’t make a big deal out of this—”

When Emmie spoke again, her voice was deadly calm, and she spoke very carefully. “Don’t talk to me. Ever again. Get out of here.”

The firefighter spoke up. “Uh, dude, you’d better listen to her. I’d be pretty pissed, too, if I were her.” Kyle still didn’t move, so he continued, “There’s nothing you can do here—just go on home, okay?” Kyle started to protest, but the firefighter stopped him. “No, man. Seriously. Go on now.” Then he turned to Emmie. “This usually isn’t part of the service, you understand, but, uh, you want me to ... ?” And he gestured toward Kyle. “I can have a little *talk* with him after we’re done here.”

Emmie studied the fist the firefighter was displaying. It was tempting, she had to admit. But she just shook her head. “No. But thank you. You’re very kind.”

Kyle removed the blanket, pulled the other off Caitlynn’s shoulders (she held on to it for a moment, uncomprehending, but he tugged harder), and put both of them on the hood of the rescue truck. Likely remembering Emmie’s assault with the shot glasses, and realizing that anything she could grab off the fire trucks was much larger and heavier, he crab-walked toward his pickup, never turning his back on her for a moment.

When they were gone, Emmie focused only on the rasping sound of her own breath in the icy air. She barely felt the heavy, gloved hand of her caretaker on her shoulder. As if from far away, she heard him say, “What a shithead.”

“He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“Your ex-boyfriend was ... *you know* ... in your bedroom ... with another girl ... and, what ... ?”

“Knocked over a candle—or two—while they were ... *you know* ... apparently,” she said hollowly.

“Jesus.”

They stood silently, in awe of the magnitude of Kyle’s idiocy, until another firefighter approached with the news, “Fire’s out. Just have to give the debris a good soaking for a bit.”

Debris. A good chunk of her house was now a pile of debris. Emmie stared, transfixed, at the icicles dangling from the man’s mustache as he echoed what the first firefighter had told her.

“It’s not a total loss. Just the back bedroom. Seems like it was caused by—”

“Candles,” Emmie filled in for him, her voice faint. “One or two.” She stared vacantly at her smoldering, ice-laden home. “Unbe-fucking-lievable.”

Chapter 13

Emmie was holed up in her childhood bedroom at her father's house, clad in musty-smelling clothes she had dug out of the bottom drawer of her old dresser—too-small sweatpants and a voluminous “Go Panthers” sweatshirt. She hadn't left the room all day, not even when her father tried to talk to her through the closed door. She knew she was being terribly rude. After all, he had picked her up late at night outside the near-ruin of her house and tucked her into her old twin bed, murmuring to her that she'd “get through this.”

But she couldn't help it. She was just ... numb. Her beloved house was a wreck. Despite repeated assurances from the firefighters and her father that the damage would be covered by insurance, she couldn't help but wonder what would happen if it wasn't. (Was the torching of one's house through an ex-boyfriend's stupidity covered by her homeowner's policy or not?)

She burrowed under her pink-and-orange-striped bedspread and matching sheets, also rather stale smelling, and stared in the general direction of her small white TV/VCR combo as the final moments of *It's a Wonderful Life* aired. Now, if she were in Bedford Falls, all her friends would come to her aid and rebuild her home in a weekend while joyfully singing Christmas carols. But her friends were more broke than she was, plus most of them couldn't tell the business end of a hammer from their Wii controller.

Nope, she was on her own. Except for Trish, of course. Her friend had been appropriately aghast to hear about the events of the evening that far outdistanced her kids' adventure with toy submarines diving in full washing machines. When Emmie called to give her the news, Trish begged her to stay with them, which Emmie politely and repeatedly declined, more for Trish's sake than her own. So she promised to bring Emmie some extra clothes, and, as a bestie should, offered to hunt down Kyle and beat him senseless.

Emmie's attention drifted from the movie, and she looked around her old bedroom. New Kids on the Block poster above

her bed. White jewelry box on her dresser. *The Baby-sitters Club* book series on the low shelves along the wall. Dollhouse in the corner.

She slid out from under her comforter, nearly boneless in her exhaustion, and made her way over to the dollhouse perched on a round, kid-height white table. She squeezed her sweat-suited butt between the armrests of one of the matching spindled chairs and peered in the tiny windows.

In spite of her dark mood, she smiled a little. The interior was a mishmash of strange furniture, much of it homemade by Emmie out of pieces of cardboard (many a shoebox was sacrificed, she recalled), colored with paint and markers and adorned with scraps of fabric left over from her mother's sewing projects. She had even glued blocks of fabric to the walls and floors—a budding designer's version of textured wallpaper and carpeting. Oh, and there was her favorite piece: a beanbag chair made out of an uninflated balloon stuffed with grains of rice, the latex now tacky and cracked.

She was startled out of her reverie by a knock on her bedroom door. Her ghost of a smile vanished—she still didn't feel like talking to her father, despite the guilt she felt at locking him out—but she called out, as receptively as possible, “Yeah?” then returned her attention to the dollhouse.

The door opened a crack. “Emmie?”

That wasn't her father's voice. She looked up. The door opened wider, and there stood Graham, filling the doorway. Her heart jumped, and her first thought was that she looked like hell and her clothes smelled, and dammit, why didn't he get a gander of her all dressed up last night ...

Then she noticed that he looked terribly uncomfortable—that easy self-confidence that usually surrounded him like a mantle of light was missing. In his right hand were two paper bags. One was a large shopping bag, the other a small, gold-and-red-striped gift bag with red tissue paper sticking out of it. He hooked his right thumb into the pocket of his jeans and shoved his left hand into the other pocket.

“Hey,” he said awkwardly. “Your dad sent me up. I, uh, I’m sorry I didn’t make it to your party last night.” Before Emmie could respond, he rushed on, “I was going to, really. Well, I went back and forth about it for a while—not because of you—definitely not.” His words tumbled out faster. “But ... I was angry with Juliet for ... well, a bunch of reasons, actually, and ...”

“It’s okay.”

“I felt bad about it,” he said, “and I stopped by your house today to ... and I saw ... well.” He stumbled to a halt and gazed at her with a sympathetic expression. God, how she loved it when this man looked at her, because he really *looked* at her. He rustled the paper bags he was holding. “I was going to bring you the hostess gift I had gotten for last night.”

He held out the gift bag and moved forward a couple of steps into the room. Emmie told herself to stand the heck up and meet him halfway, but when she rose a few inches, she found that the kiddie chair was coming with her. It was stuck to her behind—or, rather, her behind was stuck in it. *Oh, good Lord.* She sat back down and let him come to her.

“How did you find out where I was?”

“Ah, well, your home is a bit of a tourist attraction at the moment.”

“Imagine that.”

“And I ran into your friend Trish on the sidewalk. She, uh, seemed to know who I was, somehow.” Emmie was sure her face was crimson with embarrassment. *Why, yes, we had many discussions about you, Realistic Hottie.* “Anyway, she came up, introduced herself, we talked about what happened. She said she had been hoping to get some of your personal items out of the house for you, but she wasn’t sure it was safe to go inside. She was on her way here with this,” he indicated the larger bag, which he put on the floor. “Some of her own clothes and things for you. But instead she asked me to deliver it.”

All the blessings of the gods upon Trish, dearest, bestest friend in the world, Emmie thought. Having Graham deliver the clothes for her—genius. Pure genius. As Emmie welcomed the giddy butterflies back to her stomach, Graham prompted, “Anyway, open your gift.”

She rooted around in the bag until her fingers closed around something quite heavy. She drew out a brass candle snuffer. And she started to laugh.

“I swear I bought that yesterday, not today.” Graham grinned, the relief evident on his beautiful features. “I was really hoping you’d laugh and not, you know, bludgeon me with it.”

Emmie was laughing so hard tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. Or maybe she was crying. She couldn’t tell anymore. She hastily wiped at her cheeks with the overlong cuffs of her old sweatshirt and rasped, “Thank you, Graham. Really. It’s ... lovely. A little too late, maybe ...” And they both laughed out loud. “But lovely.”

“You’re welcome.”

She wanted more than anything to stand up and give him a hug—or, if she were perfectly honest with herself, a little something more—but she didn’t dare attempt to get out of the chair again. So she gestured to the other kiddie chair. “Won’t you join me?”

He looked down at the tiny seat suspiciously, but he gamely wedged himself into the little wooden trap. Graham shifted in the seat, his knees going every which way. “Comfy,” he said, unconvincingly. He looked around the room. “I like what you’ve done with the place. Very retro.”

Emmie rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why my parents left my bedroom like this.”

“I’m sure they’d say it’s a tribute to a wonderful daughter.” Emmie blushed again and studied the candle snuffer. It was engraved with vines and leaves, and she traced the lines with a trembling fingertip. “Nice,” Graham was saying. She looked up to find him peering into the dollhouse. “I can see certain

‘Emmie touches’ in there. May I?’ She nodded, and he opened up the dollhouse on its hinges. He murmured, “Sophie’s been asking for a dollhouse. I was thinking of getting her one for Christmas. Well,” he amended, “I wanted to make her one, but I’ve been so busy with work, I just didn’t have time.”

Emmie studied his profile—that gorgeous face she’d been obsessing over for months—and she found it was even nicer than the images she conjured up in her daydreams. She drank in his handsome profile, the crow’s-feet around his brilliant blue eyes, the slight curl at the base of his black hair and the touch of gray at his temples, the faint trace of stubble on his chin. But as perfect as his face and body were, somewhere along the way she had come to realize that she liked what was inside even more.

Then, suddenly, Graham blurted out, “Emmie?”

“Mmm?”

“I ...”

Emmie caught her breath. What was he going to say? Oh, she desperately needed him to declare his love for her. Right now. Nothing else would do. Surely that’s what he was going to say ... right?

“I ...”

And ... ?

“I’m sorry, but I *really* have to get out of this chair.”

He looked so comically uncomfortable that she couldn’t help but laugh. As Graham fought his way out, Emmie dared to stand up as well. And she didn’t quite mind so much anymore if the chair was still adhered to her butt, because somehow she felt that Graham wouldn’t mind, either. Still, just to make sure, she planted her hands on the armrests to help separate the chair from her behind, and found that one of the arms was jammed into her sweatpants pocket. So that explained it; she didn’t really have that broad of a backside. At least that was something.

She got to her feet and stumbled a little. Graham caught her by the elbows and steadied her. She looked up once again at

that warm smile and in one step closed the short distance between them. She shocked even herself, leaning into him—and was mortified for a moment, as Graham, startled, drew his head back a fraction of an inch. Then relief and warmth flooded through her as she felt his arms close around her, his broad hands spread across her back. She slid her arms around his neck, felt her heart hammering in her chest. She dropped her gaze and noticed a pulse throbbing at the open collar of his striped oxford.

Their foreheads touched, their noses nuzzled, and then Emmie's mouth sought Graham's. Or his sought hers. She wasn't sure anymore, and it didn't matter. Emmie gloried in the sensation of the length of his body fused to hers. They fit. They *fit*! She always knew they would ... but she had no idea just how perfectly. The tip of her tongue grazed his bottom lip. He pulled her tighter and his tongue found hers—just a little, just enough to draw a little gasp from deep in her throat.

“Uh-hum.”

Oh, the air was cold between them when Graham pulled away. She needed to find him again—she leaned in once more. She opened her eyes and followed his gaze. He was looking over his shoulder, at—

“Dad!”

“Sorry! Sorry,” her father blustered, holding his hands up in protest.

Emmie felt herself deflate when Graham pulled his arms from around her. Even if it was temporary—she desperately hoped it was temporary—it was a miserable feeling.

“No, no, my apologies, Mr. Brewster,” Graham stammered awkwardly. “We were just ... uh ...”

“Going to go check out my house,” Emmie filled in. “You know, assess the damage.”

At this, Emmie's father felt more comfortable looking them straight on again. “Ah. Good. About time you started thinking about what to do with the place.”

Emmie rolled her eyes. Trust her father to expect her to pick herself up within hours of the fire and charge ahead with repair plans.

“Well, we do need to take a look at it as soon as possible,” Graham said, “because, well ...” He turned to her. “I want to offer my architectural services, and put my best workers on the job. Free of charge,” he hastened to add.

Emmie gasped. “Graham ...”

“That’s awfully nice of you, young man,” Bob Brewster chimed in.

“Graham, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Please,” Graham interrupted. “I want to. Really.”

She smiled through the tears threatening to spill over again. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Graham smiled back, looking deeply into her eyes, melting her again with his soft gaze. After a second, which felt more like an hour—a blissful hour—he said, “Well. Ready to go check out your house?”

She blinked. “I—I should change first.” And she started looking around frantically, trying to figure out what to change into, hoping the bag that Trish had sent with Graham had something that would fit her—then she heard her father speak.

“Come on downstairs with me, Graham, while Emmaline gets ready. We’ll talk.”

Graham gave her a tiny desperate look, although he dutifully followed Bob out of the room. She waved and smiled. Graham raised an eyebrow as he shut the door behind him.

* * *

“Oh.”

It was all Emmie could manage to utter as she stared into her bedroom—or what was left of it—from the yard. Black, cracked timbers were all that stood between her and her charred bed, nightstand, antique linens trunk, dresser, and

chest of drawers. Her round area rug was filthy and sodden, her framed prints were lying on the ground, the glass shattered. Heaps of swollen, soaked, and frozen drywall slouched where it had fallen. Emmie could barely take it all in. Her house—her *home*—the place she had worked so hard to make perfect, utterly ruined and open to the sky.

Behind her, Graham was on his phone. “Yeah, hey, Steve, sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor. Can you scare up some tarps—those really big ones—and find a couple of the guys, head out to 147 Hickory? ... Right. Had a bit of a fire last night at Emmie’s ... Yeah ... House needs a little protecting from the elements—I hear it’s going to snow again tonight ... No, no plywood—we can get to that tomorrow ... Yeah ... Nope, not too pretty right now. But it’s nothing that can’t get fixed soon enough.”

Emmie half smiled to herself; she was sure that last comment was for her benefit. Graham had spent the drive over trying to cheer her up with optimistic talk about how quickly they could get the repairs done. Now he was taking the initiative to protect the remnants of her home, because he could tell she was completely at a loss about what to do next. She liked leaning on him (emotionally in this instance, but of course physically, too—and she shivered a little as she thought of their kiss). It was such a nice feeling to have someone supporting her instead of dragging her down. Last night—well, heck, up till just half an hour ago—she couldn’t have imagined that anything good could come of this disaster. Funny how life worked.

Graham approached her tentatively, checked her expression. “Well? How are you holding up?”

Emmie nodded as she continued to stare at the innards of her house laid bare. “Okay.”

“Really?”

She nodded again, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, with eyes a little too wide. He said nothing, only put an arm around her shoulder. She fell against him, buried her face in his jacket, and let it all out while he stroked her hair and held her close.

After a few minutes, when Emmie's tears lessened, he murmured, "Let's get some of your things out of the house. I'm sure it's safe to go through the front door. Okay?"

Emmie found it pretty strange to be opening her front door and walking through it, then closing it behind her, while the back of the house was wide open, but it gave her a feeling of normalcy at the same time. The interior was dark and cold, littered with the remnants of her party. Emmie stood stock still in the middle of her living room for a few moments. Then she made a beeline for the bookshelves and picked up a framed picture of her and her mother, taken at her mom's birthday dinner several years ago. She hugged it to her chest and looked around again, certain that she needed nothing else but this one treasured memento.

But then she saw Graham standing patiently near her dining room table, beside the dishes of withered appetizers from last night, and she remembered something important. She retrieved her laptop case and work bag from the front hall closet, where she had put them for safekeeping before the party. Now she was grateful she had taken a moment to tuck away her work items. The bag held all the notes, lists, sketches, fabric samples, and paint chips for Graham's project; if she had put them in her bedroom, she'd have had to start all over. She also grabbed her warmest coat, a hat, and some gloves. Because they had been in the closet, they only smelled slightly of smoke, unlike the rest of the place, which absolutely reeked.

Graham accepted everything from her and took it out to his car. Alone in her house, Emmie tried not to cry again. Graham came back inside saying, "I'd bet anything you need more clothes."

Emmie half laughed. "Well, yeah. Female. But I'm pretty sure they're all torched." Then she brightened. "Except ... I dumped a ton of laundry in the basement before the party. What do you think it's like down there?"

Graham pulled a small Maglite out of his pocket and twisted it on. "Let's find out, shall we?"

"Aren't you well prepared!"

“Would you be surprised to find out I was a Boy Scout?”

“I would be surprised to find out you weren’t.”

Graham’s flashlight revealed that the lower half of the staircase was covered in giant lumps of ice, and icicles dripped from one step to the next. “Must’ve come through the floorboards,” Graham said.

Emmie sighed. “Is there *any* part of this place that hasn’t been trashed?”

“It cleans up, I swear,” Graham reassured her. “But for now, better let me go down.” Emmie hesitated, concerned for his safety. Graham said, “I promise not to even sneak a glance at your unmentionables.”

Emmie had no problem with that—heck, at this point she was more inclined to give him a peek at the unmentionables she had on at the moment, never mind the ones in the basement. As she let her mind wander along some naughty avenues, Graham picked his way down, gingerly stepping around the inches-thick drips of ice, then returned with her laundry basket piled high with so many of her clothes she almost wept again, this time with relief. She appreciated Trish lending her clothes that might fit her, but a borrowed track suit was hardly going to make her feel as good as being reunited with at least some of her own things.

As Graham slid the basket into his car, he asked, “Anything else you want to get from inside?”

Emmie shivered in the cold breeze that had kicked up; it was deep twilight already, and there was really nothing worth going back into the dark, cold house for. They were just things—and mostly things she really could live without, she’d just come to realize. “No. But thank you, Graham. You’ve been a lifesaver.”

“It was nothing.” He closed the hatch, then opened the driver’s side door, leaned in, started the engine, and turned up the heat. “Get in and warm up,” he said. “I have one more thing to take care of.” Turning the flashlight back on, he explained, “I want to check that the water’s turned off;

otherwise your pipes are going to freeze, and you don't need that on top of everything else.”

Wow, she thought, watching him jog back up her front walk. Smart, resourceful, thoughtful. A girl could get used to this.

While she waited, she checked the cars on the street. No Land Rover. Emmie wondered if Juliet had even noticed the state of her house when she'd retrieved her car. She doubted it. But she didn't care; right now, Emmie had Graham and, if there was any justice in the world, all Juliet had was a vicious hangover.

Even better, when Graham joined her in the car, rubbing his cold hands together, he said the words she longed to hear—well, not those, but ones that came a close second: “You must be starving. Let's get you something to eat.”

* * *

Graham took her to a little pub the next town over—his favorite place, he said, with incredible food, including soup as thick as stew. Soon Emmie was warm inside and out—from the soup, the basket of warm bread, the glass of wine (okay, two), the table by the fireside, the soft, high-backed chairs, and, of course, from being able to gaze as much as she wanted at the man across the tiny table from her.

By the time they had finished dinner—and Graham nearly elicited a marriage proposal from her when he said, “After all you've been through, don't you dare say no to dessert”—Emmie was feeling pretty open and expansive. She told him about the party, and the more details she shared, the more absurd it sounded, even to her own ears. And she discovered that she really loved making Graham laugh.

Eventually Emmie got around to all the more unpleasant events as well—including the fact that she had driven Juliet home (but not what Juliet said about him). Emmie definitely didn't want him thinking about Juliet at a time like this, so she rushed on to what it was like to see her house in flames in the snowstorm. When she got to the part about the fire, Graham told her that Trish had shared a bit of information

—“Something about a candle ... ?”—but he waited for her to say more.

“Yeah,” she murmured, spearing a forkful of pie and touching it to the dollop of whipped cream on the warmed plate, where it was melting into a white puddle, “that was only ... part of it.” Graham waited. “Kyle Yates. My ex-boyfriend. One of my biggest mistakes. He, uh, showed up uninvited, with his new girlfriend. His new *drunk* girlfriend.”

She managed a brief description of how their presence had led to her house burning down, then fell silent as he placed his hand over hers on the table, squeezed her fingers. She looked deep into his blue eyes, so much darker in the firelight, and she didn't realize till that moment that a heart could, in fact, skip a beat.

“Emmie, I don't know what to say. The fact that you're not going to pieces over this ...”

Lucky he didn't see me hunkered down in my kiddie bed just before he showed up today, she thought, but instead she gave a casual what're-ya-gonna-do shrug and put on her courageous face. Yes, she was a brave little toaster, and she didn't mind one bit that Graham was gazing upon her with admiration for surviving everything she'd gone through recently. At the very least she could enjoy that. And the pie.

The house was dark, the only light coming from a small lamp in the corner of the living room. Emmie's father had gone to bed. Graham quietly set down the laundry basket as Emmie found a place for the rest of her salvaged items. Then, Emmie noticed, he adopted his familiar stance, hands jammed in his pockets, which she now knew meant he was feeling a bit awkward. Well, so was she ... mainly because she couldn't figure out how to coordinate another attack without freaking him out. Because she so wanted a little more of what happened that afternoon.

“Graham, I really can't thank you enough for everything you've done today. I'm so grateful. And dinner, too—wow.” He smiled at her, so she rushed on, “Do you want to sit down

for a minute?” *Oh, God, it’s worse than coming home after a high school date*, she thought.

He hesitated. Then he said, “Sure,” and followed her to the couch. In the silence that followed, Emmie stared down at the giant brown and yellow flowers on the upholstery and wondered why her parents had never let her give their home a much-needed makeover. This was the same furniture, the same draperies, the same carpet that had adorned the living room in the old foursquare home for as long as she could remember.

She was trying to think of something to break the silence when Graham burst out, “Emmie, there’s something we need to talk about.”

Oh crap.

“I just want to ... clear the air, I guess,” Graham started, a little hoarsely, staring at the floor between his feet.

Time to drag out the brave little toaster face again, because, sure as shootin’, one of the next ten words out of Graham’s mouth was going to be “Juliet.” Emmie held her breath. *Wait for it ... wait for it ...*

“I, er, like you, Emmie. I like you a lot. You’re so great. Beautiful, and smart, and talented. Funny. Brave, too, in all this.” He risked a sideways glance at her, and she forced herself to breathe. *In, out ... wait for it ...* “But ...” Shazaam, there it was—the evil “but,” the scourge of hopeless romantics the world over. Emmie couldn’t say she was all that surprised; she had a feeling it was coming. “I think ... what happened this afternoon ... probably ... shouldn’t have.”

He paused, and Emmie tried to pick her innards up off the floor. She always hated this part—and God knew she’d heard this speech plenty of times before in her life. Up next: “not ready for a relationship,” “let’s keep things casual,” and probably even the dreaded “I like you as a friend.” But this time it was different. She didn’t want to hear that sort of thing from Graham. The more she’d gotten to know him, the more she realized that he was someone worth fighting for. She had been half joking when she told Trish that she was going to

steal Graham from Juliet; now she was 100 percent serious about it.

“... Emmie?”

She blinked. Graham had stopped talking and was waiting for her response. “Um ... sorry ... what?”

“I said, ‘Are you okay with that?’”

“With ... ?”

He smiled sympathetically. “You’re exhausted. I’m sorry I had to bring this up now. You need to get some rest. And I have to get home to Sophie. Annamaria has probably been checking her watch every thirty seconds for the past hour.” He stood up, and Emmie followed. “I guess I’ll check in with you at work, tomorrow or Tuesday—”

As if she were watching herself in a movie—or, rather, watching someone completely unlike herself in a movie—Emmie found herself interrupting him with an entirely uncharacteristic, “So ... you’re ... telling me that you’re not interested?”

Now it was Graham’s turn to stammer, “Er ... what?”

Even though she was already close to him, she stepped closer. “You’re not interested. In me.”

“I—I didn’t say *that* ...”

Emmie was pleased to see that he looked a little flustered. She didn’t usually enjoy power trips, but knocking him back on his heels gave her a bit of a thrill. Suddenly she felt more confident than she had ever felt in her life. Maybe it was the fact that she felt so strongly about him, about the two of them together. Maybe she was still in shock from being rendered temporarily homeless. Maybe she was exhausted, like he said. Or maybe she had completely lost her mind. One thing she did know: Suddenly she didn’t care if she tried and failed; what she couldn’t cope with anymore was *not* trying in the first place. She’d been the meek nice girl all her life, and all it had gotten her was the middle name of “Doormat,” a lousy job with a tyrant of a boss, a self-absorbed father, a selfish

boyfriend-turned-ex who wouldn't go away, and a burned-down house. And that burned-down house was the last straw.

Emmie took another step toward Graham. He took half a step back. Only half, though. "And you're telling me that ... what happened this afternoon ... you haven't been thinking about that?" She put a hand on his chest, her fingertips brushing the edge of his collar.

"Uh ..." He laughed nervously. "Well, of course ..."

"And before today, you didn't think about me ... that way ... at all?" Another step. Graham didn't move this time.

"The truth is," he answered, gazing down at her, "I've been thinking about you for ... quite a while."

Emmie caught her breath. *Oh really?* What Juliet had said to her in the car came rushing back—that Graham had been distracted lately, and she thought he had someone else! Any lingering doubts she may have had about pinning Graham down flew right out the window. She wrapped her arms around his neck, slowly and sensuously, looking him squarely in the eye the entire time. He seemed unable to move. She noticed his Adam's apple working as he swallowed with difficulty.

"Well, then," she murmured, "what *exactly* are you thinking about ... right ... now?"

But he didn't answer with words. As tentatively and tenderly as they had kissed earlier that day, the hungrier and more calamitous their collision was at that moment. Emmie thought she was going to launch herself at Graham? No, Graham launched himself at her; suddenly he was kissing her lips, her eyes, her chin—

Emmie let out an involuntary yip, and Graham immediately pulled back. "What is it? Did I step on your foot?"

And she laughed softly. "No. You ... uh ... that was ... my ..."

He grinned wickedly. "Oh, that's a good bit of information to have. Where was it, now ... here?" And he kissed her again at the base of her neck. Emmie's knees buckled.

Chapter 14

“You *what!*”

Emmie held the phone away from her ear while Trish screamed.

“Let’s just say I gave him something to think about.”

“Oh. My. God.” Trish giggled, then said abruptly, “I want props.”

“What?”

“Props. I want props. Credit. Brownie points. After all, the bag of clothes thing? That was me.”

“Okay, okay,” Emmie relented. “I owe it all to your quick thinking. All praise and props to you, my hero.”

“Thank you very much.”

A shadow fell over Emmie’s desk. Wilma, doing his best Nosferatu impression. “No personal calls, Emmaline,” he ordered before stalking away.

And suddenly the New Emmie, the one that had been born the previous night, took over. “John!” she snapped. “Gimme a break. My house just burned down. I’m emotionally fragile.”

Wilma’s narrow shoulders stiffened, and he pivoted back around slowly. “What?” he bit out.

“I have had a crisis. So I *am* going to be making personal calls, *and* I am going to be on the phone with the insurance company, too, till I get this sorted out. Deal with it.”

Through the handset, she could hear Trish murmur again, “Oh. My. God.” Then, after a moment’s silence, “Emmie? Are you dead now?”

Although Wilma fired his best death-ray lasers at her, Emmie found that they didn’t frighten her. It seemed like nothing would anymore. “I’m going back to my phone call now,” she announced calmly, turning away from her boss. “Oh, yeah—and here’s your mail.” Instead of scuttling toward him and handing it over, Emmie held the mail out at arm’s

length and returned her attention to the phone. She held her breath and waited. After a few seconds, Wilma actually went to *her* to accept the envelopes and catalogs. She fought back a grin. Oh, yes, it was the dawn of a new era.

“Meet me for lunch,” Emmie told Trish. “Someplace nice. And fattening. And with a liquor license. I’m going to have a glass of wine.”

“You. Are going to drink. In the middle of a workday,” her friend said, stunned at Emmie’s new ’tude.

“Not to excess! Just, you know, one glass. Come on!”

Trish started to laugh. “All right, all right! Seems like I just can’t say no to you lately.”

“That’s the idea.”

“But hold on just one second, missy—I’m not going to wait till lunchtime for this: What about Juliet? Didn’t you discuss her?”

Emmie took a breath. “Mm, we did ... sort of.”

“What, you were too busy playing tonsil hockey to have an actual conversation?”

“No ...” Emmie said. “It ... came up, of course.”

“And ... ?”

Graham never did bring up Juliet’s name as she had expected, so, riding high on her new wave of confidence, Emmie decided to broach the subject herself. Graham had made a face and reluctantly said, “That’s ... kind of complicated.”

“Try me.”

Graham played with a strand of Emmie’s hair as he said thoughtfully, “Juliet ... hm. When I met Juliet, I was in a very bad place. I was still mourning my wife. I wanted to be strong, for Sophie’s sake, so I convinced myself that I was fine, that I was back to normal. Of course, I was wrong.” Emmie put her hand on his knee and just listened. “Juliet looked a little like Kat—my wife—and when you’re that devastated over losing

someone, it can be enough to make you think that you love the new person. It's false, but it happens. But she was also very different from Kat. She was ... well, you know how she is—a force of nature. She bowled me over, and not exactly in a good way. I ... never should have gotten involved with Juliet. And for more than just the obvious reasons.”

“Obvious reasons?” Emmie repeated. “Like the fact that she's married?”

Graham rubbed his eyes, looking completely wiped out, and it started to dawn on Emmie that perhaps he wasn't, in fact, anywhere close to comfortable with his relationship with Juliet.

After a moment, he said wearily, “She lied. She lied to me when we first met, first got together. She said she was divorced. And she wasn't even separated—not legally. I admit I should have known. I should have figured it out—I'm not usually that dense. And I know some men wouldn't care—they'd think that was just a technicality, if she was planning on getting divorced anyway, but when I found out ... I should have known then that it was time to run far away.

“But I didn't. The only excuse I have is that I wasn't thinking straight. Not much of one, I know. But there it is. I convinced myself that she was perfect for me, and we would start a new life together. That's one of the reasons I bought a big house—I thought we'd fill it with our combined families. I look back on that now, and it seems so crazy. And I should have taken it as a sign when I couldn't bring myself to introduce her to my daughter. Not as the woman I was dating, that is. Sophie met her once or twice and just knows Juliet as ‘a friend.’

“I thought we were going to move here together. She was the one who suggested we move in together, and she suggested we move to Jemison. She was talking up her hometown, planning our new life, her new business. But after a while, she started giving me some song and dance about the ‘sensitive nature’ of her situation, that her divorce wasn't, in fact, going to happen anytime soon, and the next thing I knew, she and her kids moved into the house they're in now, on their own. That

left me and Sophie to scramble to rent a place, because our house was sold by then.”

“And she lives there with Kevin?”

“No. He’s still in Williamsport.”

Emmie was puzzled. “But ... the night of the cookie party, I saw him there. Juliet introduced him as her husband.”

“Williamsport is a bit of drive, but Kevin still takes the kids a lot, after school and some weekends.” Graham smirked. “I’m not surprised she called him her husband. They still aren’t divorced, and lately I’ve been thinking they never will be.”

“So when Juliet said Kevin was with the kids last night, he was babysitting?”

“Yes.”

“So she could go to my party with you.” Emmie thought a moment. “She told me Kevin doesn’t know about you ... ?”

“She was adamant about that. She said she was worried that it would affect her getting spousal support. But the more I think about it, I get the feeling that she just wanted to have both of us on the hook. If there’s one thing Juliet loves more than life itself, it’s having lots of admirers.” He turned to face her, looking grim. “Emmie, I want you to know that when I found out Juliet was stringing me along—and Kevin, too—well, that was the end of it. I was so humiliated, I nearly packed everything up and moved back to Williamsport, but I had the house to deal with, and Sophie was just getting settled again, and then ...”

“Then what?”

“I kept meeting this beautiful woman—three times, wasn’t it?” Emmie blushed. “And then living in Jemison started to look pretty promising. But as for Juliet ... I didn’t want to have anything more to do with her. That night of the winter festival? Agony. I tried to tell her that we were done, but she just wouldn’t listen. She’d just talk over me and change the subject, kept acting like we were together. That’s when I started avoiding her.”

“And then she got desperate and invited herself to my party—so you two could be there as a couple. She told me.”

“She did?”

“She got *so* drunk, Graham.”

“She does love her gin and tonics.”

“But—”

“I know.” He sighed. “It was because we argued about it and I never showed up.” He rubbed his eyes again, then studied her with a tortured expression.

She knew what was on his mind. “Do *not* go thinking that if you were there, I wouldn’t have had to drive Juliet home, and Kyle and Caitlynn wouldn’t have lit candles and ... *you know* ... in my bed, and my house wouldn’t have burned down. That’s too much of a stretch.”

“I can’t help but think just that.”

“Well, don’t. Come on, crazy Kyle and idiot Caitlynn probably would have figured out another way to bring my house down around my ears, whether or not I was driving Juliet home.”

Graham cupped her chin tenderly. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For listening. For understanding. For not judging, even though I’ve acted pretty stupid—and crazy—lately.”

“Oh,” she whispered, “we all have our particular brand of crazy. I don’t think yours is so severe. Not by a long shot.”

“Hey,” Emmie murmured, hanging back in the doorway of the gutted library, suddenly nervous. It was, after all, her first face-to-face contact with Graham since their ... extended contact ... over the weekend. They had exchanged a few texts during the week, and Graham had asked her to come 2 house thurs @ 3? and she had replied with :) , but other than that, all she had been able to do was relive Sunday night in her head. Over ... and over ... and over ...

“Hey!” A delighted smile brightened his features as he glanced up from his laptop. *Oh, phew*, she thought. “Come on in, stranger. I’m just—” The rest of his words were drowned out by an incredibly loud *brrrrrrpppp-brp-brp* coming from the back of the house, the offending power tool echoing through the empty rooms. When the noise stopped, Graham started over. “I’m just—”

Brrrrrrpppp-brp-brp.

“I—”

Brp.

He rolled his eyes and slammed his laptop shut, then walked past her through the doorway, crooking his finger at her to follow. In the kitchen, three of the guys were taking down the god-awful fake-walnut pressboard cupboards. Emmie decided the ear-shredding, conversation-destroying noise was worth it, as long as those hideous wall warts were heading for the Dumpster.

The power drill started up again as the workers unscrewed the cabinets from one another and from the cleats in the wall. Graham let out a piercing whistle from between his teeth to cut through the noise, and he waved his arms for good measure.

When he’d gotten the workers’ attention, he said, “I’m going to be meeting with Emmie—show her what we’re doing with Sophie’s room. Pete, you need me for anything?”

The man wielding the power drill, standing with one steel-toed boot on a ladder and the other on the orange countertop, asked, “You want us to clear out the butler’s pantry, too, when we’re finished with these?”

“*NO!*” Emmie yelled. All male eyes settled on her in surprise. “I mean ... that is ... don’t change a thing in there. Just ... just leave it.”

Graham grinned. “Better listen to her, boys. She knows her stuff.”

The man called Pete nodded. Emmie let out a relieved puff of breath, thinking how close they had just come to smashing up antique all-wood cabinetry. *Yikes.*

As they made their way up the still-rickety stairs, Emmie asked, “What have you been doing with Sophie’s room that you want to show me?”

In answer, when they reached the landing, Graham grabbed her hand and yanked her into the master bedroom, slammed the door shut behind them, spun her around, and pinned her to it. When she had recovered from a kiss that rearranged her insides, she smiled at him, and said, “Oh, I see.”

“Hello there,” he murmured.

“Hello.”

“I can’t believe I haven’t seen you all week.”

She closed her eyes as he pushed her hair back to nibble on her ear. “Mm. You smell like sawdust.”

He chuckled. “Is that a good thing?”

“The best.”

“I had no idea that the smell of wood shavings was an aphrodisiac.”

“Depends on who’s wearing it.”

“I’m honored.”

He kissed her again, and the door, ill-fitting in its frame, made little thumping noises as he pressed her against it. She dropped her bag to the floor as she completely gave herself over to his kisses. She tried to tell herself that the interior designer making out with the architect on the job site was entirely unprofessional, especially with a bunch of construction workers swarming all over the house, but her concerns were drowned out by the static that filled her head when Graham reached under her canvas skirt and slid his hand up the outside of her thigh.

“Oh, dear,” she breathed, feeling the burning heat of his hand through her tights, suddenly unsure that she was going to be able to continue standing.

Graham sighed and removed his hand. “I agree. Unfortunately.”

“You are terrible, Mr. Cooper.”

“But in a good way, right?”

“Oh, very good. Very bad. Whatever.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“Do *not* apologize.” Emmie smoothed out her hair, straightened her skirt, and said, with fake formality, “Now. Do you or do you not have any progress to show me here on the second floor?”

“Er ... not really. But I do have something else I want you to see. Consider it an early Christmas present.”

“I thought *that* was my Christmas present.”

Graham ushered her back downstairs, grabbed his coat, and shouted to the workers that he was going to be off site for a little while. He opened the passenger door of his car for a curious Emmie.

“Where are you taking me?”

“I thought we’d see how our other project is going.”

On the way to her house, Graham told Emmie that there’d been a great deal of progress already. When they got there, Emmie could see what he meant. A large railcar Dumpster sitting in her driveway was nearly full with the wrecked bits of her house. Pieces of furniture, some slightly scorched and some severely torched, sat in the open garage.

“I didn’t want to presume that you’d want to throw all your personal items away,” Graham said, “so I had the guys put them there. Just say what’s too far gone, and we’ll throw it out; point out what you want to keep, and I’ll put it in storage.” He added, “The mattress was a goner. That’s in the Dumpster already.”

She gave him a look. “After the very last thing that, er, happened on it? *I* would have set fire to it.” She looked around and sighed. “Graham, this is a wonderful early Christmas present. Thank—”

“Oh, this isn’t your present.”

“It isn’t?”

“Not quite.” He scanned the yard, put his arm around her shoulders, and pointed. “There. Try that on for size.”

Emmie’s jaw dropped. Around the back corner of the house came a familiar figure, pushing a wheelbarrow piled high with ragged, water-bloated pieces of drywall, and grumbling and cursing the entire time.

Kyle.

Emmie thought she would burst with the giggles that bubbled up inside her. “*How* did you manage that?”

Graham looked quite pleased with himself. “Oh, I just looked up his number, gave him a call, had a little man-to-man talk—you know.”

“Really.”

“Well, okay, I told him that you were going to sue the pants off of him, but if he joined my crew, I’d be able to get you to reconsider.”

“Wait a minute. Sue Kyle—and Caitlynn, for that matter—and all you’d get would be a case of beer and a couple dozen giant cans of Aqua Net.”

“Not necessarily.”

“The only thing he has that’s worth anything is his truck.”

“Exactly. Laid down his life to save his ride.”

Kyle tipped the contents of the wheelbarrow into the Dumpster’s open end and frowned in their direction.

“Kyle!” Emmie called, pointing at some of the pieces of drywall sliding out onto the driveway. “Don’t leave that stuff lying around. Pick it up.”

Her ex glowered at her, but at a stern look from Graham, he started picking up the pieces and flinging them, Frisbee-like, into the Dumpster.

“Anyway. Merry Christmas.”

Emmie hugged Graham tight around his waist. “It’s the best present ever.”

Chapter 15

“What in the blue blazes are you doing?”

Emmie fell backward out of a tall, dusty box and blew at a cobweb in her hair that dangled in front of her face. “Looking around.”

“Cripes, for a minute I thought the mice were on steroids, all the noise you’re making up here.” In the dim light of the single bulb hanging from the attic rafters, Bob Brewster craned his neck to see around his daughter, who was clumsily trying to block his view. “What have you dug into?”

Emmie ineffectively brushed at the cobweb again. “Nothing.”

“Emmaline, is that a box of Christmas decorations?”

“It is that time of year, you know, Dad. We really should figure out what we’re going to do about Christmas.”

“‘Do’ about it? What’s to ‘do’? December twenty-fifth, Christmas shows up, all on its own.”

“You know what I mean.”

Bob Brewster sighed. “I know.”

Emmie and her father hadn’t celebrated any holidays last year—understandably, as her mother had died only months before. They let Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s slip by. Then, before they knew it, they were well into the new year and didn’t have to worry about the holidays again for months. But Emmie knew that if they didn’t celebrate Christmas this year, they likely would never celebrate it again.

“It’s one thing to miss Thanksgiving, like you did, but *Christmas* ...”

“I know.”

“So?”

He sighed again. “Whatever you want to do, Emmaline.” He looked away. “I just don’t know that it would be all that enjoyable without your mother.”

Emmie's father did have a point. Her mother was the driving force behind all their holiday celebrations: keeper of the decorations (and she had designated, color-coordinated decorations for even minor holidays—Emmie had come across her vivid green St. Patrick's Day stash as she hunted for the Christmas decorations), maker of the special meals, enforcer of the traditions. She knew there was no way she could ever measure up to her mom's structured habits. But she was willing to try. Her dad, however, apparently wasn't.

After thinking for a moment, he brightened and suggested, "How about you join me for a trip to the casino instead, eh? I hear it's a lot of fun on Christmas Eve, and they have a big buffet on Christmas Day ..."

Emmie cocked an eyebrow. "Er ... no, Dad. Just ... no."

Bob shrugged. "I thought it was a good idea."

"Just let me take care of everything, okay? You don't even have to get me a present."

"Oh, I've already gotten you your presents."

"You have not." Emmie knew that her mother had always taken care of gifts. "Live tree?"

"God, no!" he burst out. "Here's my contribution—I'll carry that nice pre-lit tree down to the living room. Paid enough for it the year before your mother died—might as well get our money's worth out of it. If you miss a live tree so much, I think there's a spray can of pine scent in the bathroom."

"Okay, we'll use your fake tree. But everything else—I plan."

"I'll bet it won't be just you and me, am I right?"

"Not if I can help it. Will Aunt Phyllis come if I ask her?"

"No, she's going to want to be with her grandchildren."

"Okay."

"So it *is* just you and me."

"I happen to have friends, Dad."

“What about your new young man? I thought you’d be out with him tonight, in fact—Friday night and all.”

Emmie dug into the box of decorations again. She mumbled something that her father couldn’t catch, but instead of giving up and wandering off, as she hoped, he persisted. “Speak up, Emmaline.”

She stood up and fidgeted. “I said, we were supposed to. But ... he got a call.”

“Work?”

“Something like that.”

The truth was, late that afternoon, Graham had called to cancel their dinner plans, because *Juliet* had called him, all distraught. He told Emmie, regretfully, that he should go over to her house to talk to her while Kevin had the kids. Emmie wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She wanted to be furious at Juliet for clinging to Graham. And she wanted to be furious at Graham for caving and going back over there. Instead, she tried to be mature and understanding—Graham had to talk Juliet off the ledge. That made sense. She admired his compassion.

When he’d told her his plans, Emmie had blurted out, “Are you going to tell her about—” then froze. She had almost said “you and me,” but then she wondered if a couple of make-out sessions constituted a “you and me” that required an announcement.

She could hear the smile in Graham’s voice when he said, “You and me, you mean?” Emmie let out a breath she hadn’t noticed she was holding. “That’s the plan.”

And he had promised to call her as soon as he was through. So she had her cell phone in her pocket at that moment and was trying not to pay attention to how late it was getting.

“Don’t worry about Graham,” she said to her father. He would call. He had promised. “Speaking of special friends, would Concetta come for Christmas Eve?”

“No, she has her own people.”

“Okay, have it your way.”

“Well, who’s that leave you with, then?”

“I’ll ask Trish—her family is enough to fill the whole house.” Emmie had no intention of reaching beyond her immediate circle again—not after last week’s fiasco. Trish and her family, and possibly Graham and Sophie (she hoped, she hoped), were quite enough.

“Ain’t that the truth. She still got those two annoying boys, or has she sold them to a traveling circus?”

“Dad! They’re good kids.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s what they said about Frank and Jesse James.”

As her father made his way back downstairs, Emmie’s phone finally rang. She yanked it out of her pocket, bobbed it, kept it from falling into the cardboard box, answered the call. “Hey,” she said breathlessly.

“Hi.” He sounded penitent. Penitent was good. She could work with penitent. “Sorry I didn’t call sooner.”

“S okay. What’s going on?”

“Don’t you mean, ‘How’d it go?’”

“Oh ... you know ...” *Maintain casual tone. Maintain casual tone.* “I mean ... yeah. How’d it go?”

Graham sighed into the phone, and Emmie wished he were there with her. She loved it when he was close enough that she could feel his breath on her ear, when he unabashedly inhaled her scent. *Focus, soldier!* Graham was saying, “... was really, really upset. This is gonna be tough.”

“What did she say?”

“Oh, you know. The usual. I don’t really want to ...”

“Wait, let me guess. She loves you, she never loved Kevin. Or she never loved Kevin the way she loves you. She can’t live without you. Give her one more chance, pleasebabyplease. How’m I doing?”

“Pretty darn good, actually. But she was a bit more desperate.”

Emmie absently wrapped a length of silver garland around her neck like a scarf. “More desperate than pleasebabyplease?”

“Much. She, er, said some things ...”

“She did *not* tell you she’s pregnant.”

“Oh, God, no! *No!* Hey, what do you take me for?”

“Wimmins have done far worse to far wiser men than you, grasshopper.” And Emmie coiled a length of red garland around her head. She hoped it looked like the band Devo’s red hats and looked around for a mirror so she could check. “Okay. So what *did* she say?” she prompted.

“I don’t know if I should ...”

“Hey, this affects me, too, you know.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“She sort of ... you have to know she was really upset, and she said ... she ‘might not be responsible for her actions’ in the near future.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t really know. But apparently it was sort of a threat.”

“And your response was?”

“I told her she was being ridiculous and not to do anything crazy.”

“Yeahhh, that was exactly the wrong thing to say.”

“What?”

“Telling her ‘don’t be ridiculous’? That translates into ‘don’t be a stupid hysterical female’. Women tend to get offended at stuff like that.”

“What should I have told her, then?”

“Well, *she* would have preferred you to throw yourself at her feet and tell her she was right all along and can’t we be

together just like she said. Pleasebabyplease. But since you don't agree with her on that ... you, er, *don't* agree with her on that, do you?"

"Of course not," he said, and Emmie's toes tingled at his warm tone.

"Then there really was nothing you could have said, I guess. She's just trying to win this battle with you. She wants you to go along with what she's decided. And since you don't want the same thing ... you, er, *don't* want the same thing, do you?"

"You know I don't," he said in the same warm tone, but it was warped by some weird audio effect.

"What's that noise?" Emmie asked.

"What noise?"

"There it is again. It's like some strange echo. I'm hearing everything you say twice."

"Huh."

"Are you going through a tunnel or something?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"It's getting louder."

"Maybe your attic has an electromagnetic energy field in it."

"My attic does not have an electro—Hey, how did you know I was in the attic?"

Then a floorboard creaked, and Emmie whirled around to see Graham leaning in the attic doorway. "Tinsel. That's a good look for you."

She rushed at him, and the tinsel tumbled off onto the dusty floor.

"So I was thinking ..." Emmie began.

"Dangerous."

"You bet. Hand me one of the whatchamajiggers there."

"One of the ... ?"

“The ... the ... thingy.”

“Oh, that’s clearer. Thanks.”

Emmie sighed and tapped her foot. She looked down into the box at Graham’s feet from her vantage point on a stool. “One of the small candy canes.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Graham started untangling one from a marvelous knot of ornaments. Emmie had taken down the tree two years before, and it showed. Her mother would have wrapped each ornament, breakable or not, in new tissue paper, and placed them in neat rows in the box. And perhaps labeled each one.

Despite the problem of Juliet hanging over their heads, Emmie was really enjoying the fact that Graham was helping her do something so sweetly domestic as decorate the Christmas tree. He had even told her father to relax with a cup of coffee while he got the tree down from the attic, which likely endeared him to Bob Brewster for life.

He handed the ornament up to her. “Now ... what were you thinking?”

“About Juliet.”

“Emmie, I really don’t want to spend all our time together talking about her.”

“I know. I don’t, either. But I was just ... thinking, you know?”

“Okay. And?”

“Well, first, I’ve gotta ask ... what can she do to you? All that ‘might not be responsible for her actions’ stuff.”

Graham focused on untangling more ornaments and said slowly, “I think it’s more of a threat of what she’d do to herself.”

“You don’t think she’d really—”

“No, definitely not. People who are serious about ... that ... don’t call someone to let them know.”

“What she’s counting on is that you’ll come running every time she calls you. Snowman, please.”

“Glass or tin?”

“Um, tin. Still, just implying ... that’s pretty crazy in itself.”

“True.” Graham handed one up and said thoughtfully, “Juliet ... she’s more the type to get sort of ... overly emotional. Then there’s no talking to her. She even threw something at me once.”

“She *did*?”

“Yep. A vase. How clichéd is that? Shattered against the wall next to my head and everything, like something out of the movies. Went *everywhere*. I’ll bet she was vacuuming up glass splinters for a month.”

“Yikes. I didn’t think she was the type. By all means, let her down gently before she kills you.”

“I tried that. Didn’t work, did it?”

“Do you ... want me to talk to her?”

“That’s, um, crazy. Sweet, but crazy.”

“Well, just be careful with her, all right?”

“Of course. I just wish she’d taken the hint weeks ago. Then I could have ...”

“Could have what?”

He glanced up with a sly grin. “Been free to pursue you earlier, of course.”

“Oh *really*,” Emmie said. “You really liked me before? Even when I was rude to you? Even when I brought down that wall with my bare hands?”

Graham laughed out loud as he pulled another mess of ornaments out of the box at his feet. “Oh, hell, by then I was already half in lo—” He froze, and trailed off, his last half word more of a squeak as he realized what he had just nearly said.

Emmie bit her lower lip to hide a smile. “This part seems to be done,” she announced, checking out the top half of the tree for bare spots. Graham held up a steadying hand as she stepped down off the stool, and she nearly swooned right there. She also dipped into the box of decorations; while her head was low, she said, “Oh—and Graham?” She glanced up, and he dared to look her way, blatantly jumpy. She smiled. “You’re cute when you’re freaking out.”

Chapter 16

The doorbell rang, and Emmie's father started grumbling as he looked through the window and realized the Campo family and their patented brand of chaos was about to descend upon his normally quiet home.

"Dad!" Emmie hissed. "Be nice!"

"I'm always nice," he muttered, ambling to the door.

Even though Emmie was responsible for an entire Christmas Eve dinner, keeping her father from grumbling, amusing three children, and spending the evening with Graham without bursting into flames (he had accepted her invitation without hesitation), Emmie felt much more relaxed than she had before her fancy cocktail party. Somehow everything came together easily: food in the oven, house decorated thanks to Graham's help, presents under the tree.

As she finished setting the dining room table with her mother's china, she paused to examine a strange feeling that had been growing deep inside her all afternoon. What in the world was it? And then she realized: It was contentment. Happiness, even. About everything. Despite the fact that her house was half destroyed and she was living back home with her dad for the time being. For the first time in a long time, she got the feeling that even the unpleasant stuff was going to work itself out, and she liked the feeling. She liked it a lot.

Trish and Rick bustled in with their sons and, when Justin and Logan lost their bashfulness (about one minute after they arrived), they repeatedly asked Bob Brewster whether he had any video games.

"I said no the first time you asked! Keep it up, and I'm going to dig out our old Pong console!"

That stopped them in their tracks for a moment. "What's that?" Logan asked, while his brother demanded, "Is that new?"

"It's the best," Bob said in mock seriousness, but with a twinkle in his eye.

They almost bought it, till Emmie scolded her father for teasing the children and Rick told his boys to get out their own Nintendos and stop bothering Mr. Brewster. Trish sent Rick back out to unload the car, which Emmie considered suspicious. When they first walked in the door, the Campos carried in some gifts, numerous bottles of wine, and Trish's butternut squash casserole that Emmie loved so much. What else could they have to contribute?

While Rick went back to the car, Trish turned to Emmie and said, "Why don't you get changed, and I'll keep an eye on the turkey."

Emmie frowned. "I am changed."

"I mean get ready for dinner."

"I am ready for dinner."

Trish sighed, exasperated. "Will you please go upstairs and ... freshen something!"

"But—"

"Just do it!" her friend ordered, pushing her toward the stairs.

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because I said so, missy. Now *get*."

Emmie went, only because she knew she couldn't fight Trish. While she wasted some time upstairs, she heard noises from below that sounded like dishes clinking and bags rattling. Then more voices—new ones. Had Graham arrived already? She barreled down the stairs with one shoe still in her hand.

Only the kids were in the living room, pummeling each other with the couch throw pillows, so she checked the dining room. There were Trish and Rick—and Avery and Adam.

"Merry Christmas, happy Hanukkah, blessed Yule, happy Kwanzaa, and whatever else goes on in December," Avery said, crossing to her and kissing her on the cheek. "Hope you don't mind us barging in."

“What’s going on?” Emmie asked, hugging Adam and taking in the added seats and settings at the table, the relegation of three place settings to a newly appointed kids’ table, and more side dishes than she remembered making.

Trish said, “Well, we thought we’d try to wipe out the memory of that ... *other* party. Avery and Adam were traumatized, too, you know, even though it wasn’t their house that got torched.”

Adam looked around furtively. “You aren’t expecting any drunk blondes to show up tonight, are you?”

As Emmie laughed, Trish went on, “So I invited these guys and made some extra food. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? You could’ve made the whole meal as far as I’m concerned.”

“Everything’s ready. We can eat as soon as Graham and Sophie get here.”

Avery cocked an eyebrow at Emmie. “Oh *really*?” Emmie blushed. “Oh *really*!” he repeated. “I want details. Pour me a glass of something and start talking.”

Emmie glanced nervously at the front door. “But he’s going to be here any minute.”

“So talk fast. Go!”

Emmie tried to fill him and Adam in as best she could while craning her neck at every random noise outside in case it was Graham and Sophie climbing the porch steps. She had pretty much covered everything when she caught a glimpse of someone tall at the front door and her stomach leaped accordingly. This time Graham had come to her gathering, no fuss, no bother, with his young daughter, yet another bottle of wine, and, best of all, a big smile on his face.

Emmie took Sophie’s coat and crouched down in front of her. “I’m really glad you’re here, Miss Sophie,” she said to the girl, who looked pleased to see her but overcome by bashfulness at the unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar people. “I’m going to introduce you to two special friends of mine named Justin and Logan, and then maybe you could help me

investigate a package by your plate in the dining room—whaddya say?”

Emmie had picked up an inexpensive beaded bracelet (yellow, of course) for her and some trading cards for the boys, as well as some Christmas crackers, so once the kids had been introduced, they merrily set to pulling those apart even before the meal started. Soon enough the three were acting like old friends—especially when Sophie informed the boys that she could whip their butts at Mario Kart.

Graham was happy to see Avery again, and pleased to meet Adam, and soon the wine was flowing and the adults were having as good a time as the children. Trish discreetly directed Graham to the chair beside Emmie’s, and they enjoyed some private conversation between bites of turkey and stuffing as well as contributing to the general raucousness that Trish and Rick inspired. It was so contagious that even Emmie’s father found himself forgetting that he was supposed to be maudlin about the holiday, and was soon laughing and telling as many jokes as the rest of them.

When dinner was over, Emmie leaned against Graham’s arm and enjoyed his fond look as he gazed down at her. She felt warmer and safer than she had in ages. Those unfamiliar feelings of happiness and contentment that had made their presence known earlier in the day were definitely real. This was enough. Nearly. As everyone was pushing away their half-finished pie—or, in her father’s case, scraping the plate clean of the crumbs from his second piece—she announced, “Presents!”

She asked the children to help her distribute them, but once they had found their own gifts, they were a lost cause; the boys focused on tearing open their Nerf guns to the exclusion of their distributing duties. As the adults unwrapped their trinkets—and Avery and Adam insisted that the only thing they wanted from Emmie was another bottle of wine opened—Emmie turned to Sophie, who was looking a little lost.

She took the girl’s hand and said, “There’s something for you upstairs. It was a little too big to bring down here.”

Sophie's eyes lit up at the magic words "a little too big" and allowed herself to be led up the stairs. Graham followed, also curious. Emmie turned on the light in her room and ushered the little girl inside. Sophie looked around for a second before her eyes were drawn to a big red bow—the siren song of Christmas presents.

"A little bird told me you've been wanting a dollhouse," Emmie said, and Sophie spun around to look at her, as if she had forgotten Emmie and her father were there. She nodded mutely. "Well, then, I hope you'll like this one. It was mine when I was little."

Sophie stood still, gazing at it from across the room, so Graham gave her a tiny nudge. "Go ahead." And his daughter ran toward it. She eagerly peeked in the windows and poked at the door. Graham gently turned the dollhouse, showing her where it latched and how to open the one wall on its hinges. In quick order, Sophie discovered the homemade touches—and laughed at the beanbag chair—as well as the family of four that Emmie had hunted down in a box of toys that had survived periodic purges over the years. "Wow," she whispered, more than once.

"Emmie ..."

She turned to Graham, who was looking at her in amazement. Emmie was certain every inch of her was melting and spreading all over the floor. That look, those eyes ...

"I can't believe you did this," he murmured. "You shouldn't have. It's yours—a piece of your childhood."

"And now I play with real houses," she said. "So I want Sophie to have this one."

Graham's gaze was full of gratitude, but still he hesitated. "That's too generous, Emmie. It's such a nice piece—an heirloom."

Emmie thought, *Well, it'll still be in the family when we're married, won't it?* But she only said, "I really want Sophie to have it. Honest."

After a moment, he said, "Thank you."

“My pleasure. Think she likes it?”

“Oh, I think maybe. Whaddya say, Sophie girl? Do you like it?”

“I *love* it. Can I really have it?”

Emmie knelt down beside her. “Well sure! But it’s gonna cost you.”

“Cost me what?”

“A hug.”

The little girl immediately flung her arms around Emmie’s neck, gave her a tight, grateful squeeze, then went back to the dollhouse.

Emmie looked up at Graham; he was smiling as well, happy that his daughter was happy. He started to say something to Emmie when his phone rang. As he pulled it out of his pocket, he said, “Sorry,” and answered it quickly. “Graham Cooper. This had better be good.”

Emmie showed Sophie how to turn the lights on in the dollhouse, which also lit up the “fire” in the fireplace, eliciting even more oohs and aahs, while Graham edged out into the hallway to focus on his call. Emmie watched as Sophie touched every stick of furniture, every fixture, every accessory, then studied the dolls closely.

The little girl frowned. “This mommy doll has yellow hair.”

“Yep. Why? You don’t like it?”

“I want her to have brown hair. Like yours.”

“Why is that?”

Sophie shrugged, still studying the doll. “I just do.”

“Well,” Emmie said, “I happen to know of a really great store where they have all kinds of things for dollhouses, including dollhouse families. We can go there, and you can pick out a new family—one with a mommy with brown hair. And maybe we can get a few new pieces of furniture while we’re there too, hmm?”

Sophie brightened again. “Can we go now?”

“Oh, the place isn’t open on Christmas Eve! But I promise we’ll go there soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

While Sophie played with the dollhouse, Emmie, hearing Graham speaking a little louder, peeked into the hallway. He shrugged as if to say “sorry” again, and held up his finger in a one-more-minute gesture. Emmie went back into the bedroom to give him his privacy. She had a sneaking suspicion who was on the other end of the line.

Sophie, working busily, had taken the bow off the roof, but something else was in its place—the mommy doll was perched precariously on a gable, her bent legs sticking up in the air.

“What’s up with the mommy doll?” Emmie asked as casually as she could. “You hate her yellow hair so much you banished her to the roof?” *I know one particular blonde I’d like to banish to the roof*, she thought.

“No,” Sophie answered plainly. “That’s heaven.”

“Oh?”

“My mommy died,” she said, still matter-of-factly. “Did you know that?”

“I did. Your daddy told me.”

“And he said she’s in heaven, so that’s where that mommy is.”

“I get it.” Emmie sat in one of the kiddie chairs and studied Sophie. She didn’t seem upset—she was just dealing with her mother’s death as best she could, and for her, that meant stating the facts. Emmie took her cue from the girl. “You know what? My mommy died, too.”

Sophie stopped playing to look her in the eye. “Really?”

“Really. A little over a year ago.”

“Did you cry?”

“Oh, sure. She was my mommy, after all.”

“I cried, too.”

“I’ll bet you did. It’s only normal to cry.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Yes, I do. I’ll always miss her. But I know that someday it won’t hurt as much as it does now.”

“I miss my mommy, too.”

“You know, you’re very lucky to have such a great daddy who loves you so much.”

“I know,” Sophie replied. “Do you have a daddy?”

“Who do you think that old guy downstairs is?” Emmie laughed.

“That’s your daddy?”

“Sure he is!”

Then she laughed. “I thought he was your grandpa!”

“What’s going on in here?” Graham’s voice came from the bedroom doorway. He crossed to his daughter and put a hand on her head. “Not tired of it yet?”

“Daddy!”

“Okay, okay, just checking. Hey, look, you two, I’ve got an emergency to take care of. Nothing huge; I should be back by the time you guys whip up some turkey sandwiches. Soph, would you be okay hanging with Emmie till I get back?” No answer. “Sophie?”

Sophie, so wrapped up in playing with the dollhouse, barely heard him. “Sure, Daddy. I’m fine.”

Her father rolled his eyes. “Stupendous. Good to know that you’ll miss me so much. Emmie? Is that okay?”

Emmie made an are-you-kidding face. “Of course! We’re doing great here. Go, do your stuff.”

Graham breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Hey, before I go, it might be wise if I brought that downstairs; otherwise she’s going to trap you up here.”

Graham gently wrested the dollhouse away from his daughter, reassuring her it would arrive on the first floor in one piece, and, hoisting it carefully, headed for the stairs, his daughter following closely. After Graham put the dollhouse in a clear spot on the living room floor and kissed his daughter good-bye, Emmie followed him to the door.

“Everything okay?” she asked as he shrugged on his jacket.

“Oh, yeah. It’s nothing, really.” And he gave her an unconvincing smile.

“Graham, what’s going on?”

He looked away and sighed. Emmie was getting pretty familiar with what that aggravated sound meant, and sure enough, he murmured, “That was Juliet on the phone.”

“What did she say?” Emmie didn’t mean for it to come out clipped and angry, but she was getting pretty fed up with the other woman’s manipulative tactics. Calling Graham, likely crying her eyes out, on Christmas Eve? Predictable. Tacky. And unacceptable.

“She ... well, you called it. She’s alone—she doesn’t have the kids till late tonight—and she’s been stewing—”

“You mean she’s stewed?”

“Probably.”

Now it was Emmie’s turn to sigh. “All right. But nip this thing in the bud, understand? Or she’s going to keep doing this till you go back to her.”

Graham tucked his hand under her hair, cradling the back of her neck. “I’m never going back to her.”

“Then you’d better let her know that. Tonight.”

“I will. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He kissed her, called out a good-bye to his daughter, who barely waved because her hands were full of small furniture (*already redecorating*, Emmie noticed—*girl after my own heart*), and he ducked out the door.

Emmie returned to the dining room, where her friends lounged among the remains of the meal.

“What’s going on, kid?” Trish queried, noticing Emmie’s stormy expression.

“Pour me some of that and I’ll tell you.” Adam reached for her glass and tipped some wine into it. “More than that. Amateur.” He obeyed. Emmie dropped into her seat and glanced over at Graham’s empty chair. They could have something really great ... if only Juliet would get the hell out of the way.

The house was virtually silent. Emmie carried a stack of plates into the kitchen and glanced at the rooster-shaped clock. Ten fifteen. Graham had been gone for more than two hours. The rest of her friends had just left; Emmie wouldn’t let them help clean up. She found washing dishes a soothing meditation, and she wanted time to think. Her father was in his recliner, already snoring. Emmie had tucked Sophie under a multicolored crocheted afghan with a black border—one of those items that had been in the living room since the dawn of time, it seemed—and she had nodded off about half an hour before. SpongeBob prattled on the TV at a low volume.

With a sigh, she turned on the old radio on the shelf and started filling the sink with water. Her mother had never believed in dishwashers, so she had at least a good half hour with her arms in sudsy water. She plunged the first round of dishes in, thinking back on her conversation with her friends. She had been gratified to find that they were as incensed at Juliet’s behavior as she was, and they agreed with Emmie that she could very well have a field day taking advantage of Graham’s compassion. But they hadn’t been able to come up with any suggestions for stopping her. It all came back to the same “what if”—what if Graham ignored her and she actually did do something drastic, like harm herself? What then?

Emmie was wiping down the kitchen counters when she heard the front door open and close. She let Graham come find her in the kitchen, but she took a peek as he stopped in the

living room to kiss his daughter on the forehead and pull the bottom of the afghan over her feet. When he turned toward the kitchen, Emmie ducked away from the doorway so he wouldn't see her staring. Dammit, she sure didn't want her heart to get all oozy—not for somebody whose attention was divided, like Graham's appeared to be—but she just couldn't seem to stop it. Yep, there it went, all melty, seeping into her shoes.

“Hey.”

Oh, that melodic baritone always got her. Damn, damn, damn. She took a deep, steadying breath before she spoke. “Hey yourself.”

“I'm sorry I was gone so long.”

She shrugged. “You do what you have to do.”

“Was Sophie okay?”

“Oh, she was fine. We had a great time.”

“Really?”

Emmie smiled tightly. “Don't sound so surprised.”

“I—I didn't mean it that way,” he stammered.

“Relax,” she said, reaching up to push his jacket off his shoulders and hanging it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. “Sit. Want some pie?”

“There's pie left?”

“One slice. Be honored—I usually booby-trap the fridge to prevent anybody else from getting the last piece.”

She retrieved the plate from the fridge, along with the last half bottle of chardonnay. “I'm not sure this goes with apple pie, but I don't think either one of us is going to be picky at this point.”

“You're not going to get any argument from me. Let's have it.”

Emmie put the pie, the wine, two glasses, and two forks on the enamel-topped table in front of Graham, then sat down

beside him. “You look tired.”

“I am tired.” Chivalrous to the last, he gestured to her to take the first bite of pie.

“So what happened? If,” she added hastily, “you feel like sharing. I realize I’ve been pretty nosy about all of ... this ... lately, and I don’t want to be that kind of person.”

“You aren’t. And you have every right to know what’s going on.”

“Okay.” She rested her chin on her hand and waited for him to talk.

After a bite of pie, Graham said, “So I went over to Juliet’s —”

“And she was sozzled ...”

“Hey, were you a fly on the wall?”

Emmie rolled her eyes. “The odds are always good.”

“So ... she was ‘relieved’ to see me and started going on and on about how she was afraid she’d lost me forever—”

“And you said, yes, she had ...”

“Well, I said that I was still her friend.”

“And then she hung on to you and begged you not to leave her.”

“You could make a lot of money doing this for a living, you know—call yourself Madame Emmaline, get yourself a nine-hundred number. I should buy you a crystal ball for Christmas.”

“Well, Juliet’s not really that hard to figure out.”

“I guess not.”

“And?”

“She had ‘conveniently’ arranged a bunch of pill bottles on the kitchen island where I’d see them. When she left the room, I took a look.” He shook his head slowly, in disbelief.

“What?”

“She was so out of it, she didn’t even realize she had ...”

“What?” Emmie asked again, fearing the worst.

Graham gazed at her with his deep blue eyes. “Baby aspirin ___”

“Baby aspirin!”

“Some expired antibiotics ...”

Emmie rolled her eyes.

“And ...”

“There’s more?”

“Old suppositories. For their dog. Who died three years ago.”

“What!”

“She just grabbed every plastic bottle in the cupboard, for effect. If she thought she was going to convince me that she was actually going to harm herself, she was sorely mistaken.”

Emmie let out a huge sigh of relief. “That’s something, then.”

“It is.” Graham drank some wine. “But it’s still not normal. I just ... don’t know what to think. But I do know I am *so* glad to be out of there and back here. With you.” And he took her hand under the table.

She gave his hand a squeeze. “So it’s over, then? You did eventually tell her you two were done?”

“Y-yeess ...”

“Oh, that didn’t sound very definite.”

“I know. I tried. *Again*. Believe me, I tried. But I have no idea if she heard me or, if she did, that she understood what I was saying.”

“Or she understood what you were saying and chose not to listen.”

“There is that distinct possibility. She told me Kevin was going to be bringing the kids back in a couple of hours, and he

was going to be staying at the house for a ‘family’ Christmas morning—just to make things even weirder. Still, I was glad to know she wasn’t going to be alone, so I put her to bed.”

“And she tried to get you to stay.”

“I suppose it doesn’t take a psychic to figure that out.”

“Not really.”

“And I peeled her off me and ran like a coward, right back here. The end.”

“That’s the end of this chapter, not the end of the whole story.”

“I don’t want you to be right about that.”

“But I am.” She fed him the last bite of pie, which he took gratefully.

“I wish I had better news.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. A Christmas tune jingled away in the background as Emmie put the empty plate in the sink. That song ended and another began, and Graham stood up. “C’mere.” He pulled her close, wrapping his right arm around her waist and tucking his left hand, holding her right, against his chest.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mr. Cooper?”

“Wooing you, Miss Brewster. It’s not much, but it’s all I’ve got for now—a slow song on the radio and dancing under a buzzy round fluorescent light.”

“Mm,” she said, pretending to consider it. “I guess it’ll have to do.” She rested her head on his chest as the Eagles begged their loved one to please come home for Christmas. And, despite her uncertainty about how long it would take to get Juliet out of their lives, it was enough for now.

Chapter 17

Emmie always loved Holiday No-Man's Land, that week between Christmas and New Year's, for one reason: no Wilma. He and Travis took their annual vacation around the holidays—a different tropical location every year. Emmie couldn't for the life of her picture Wilma in a beach setting; she was sure he spent the entire vacation under an umbrella, wrapped up in a bathrobe, turban, and sunglasses like a latter-day Truman Capote, with just his black socks and huaraches sticking out of the shade.

But she didn't really care what he did or didn't do in Fiji or Hawaii or wherever the hell they were going this year, because Wilma had given her the best Christmas present of all (certainly better than his usual gifts of a cheese log and a ten-dollar supermarket gift card). This year, he and Travis were going to be away for *weeks*. She was sure it was Travis's doing, and although she couldn't figure out how he convinced Wilma to take the extra time off, she didn't care. She was just going to enjoy the peace and quiet.

And freedom. The best thing about Holiday No-Man's Land was that her only tasks were to keep the lights on at the office for at least part of the day and answer the phone *if* it rang. Now here she was, puttering around at home after nine A.M. and not even worrying about it. Well, a tiny nagging voice in her head was telling her to move a little faster, but she told it to shut up as she leisurely hunted for her phone. She found the pesky little device on her dresser and checked it for text messages as she made her way back down the hall. As she passed her parents'—er, her father's—bedroom (she wondered how long it was going to take before she automatically thought of her parental unit in the singular), she heard the familiar *zzzzzzp* sound of a suitcase being closed.

She stuck her head in the doorway. "Dad?"

"Oh, hello, Emmaline," he said, all too casually. Sure enough, his suitcase was lying on the bed behind him.

"What are you doing?"

“Packing, of course.”

“For ... ?”

“A, uh, a cruise,” he said, looking embarrassed, because of course he hadn’t mentioned this to Emmie before now. “It’s a New Year’s cruise. Supposed to be very nice.”

“Uh-huh. Were you going to sneak out while I was at work and leave me a note?”

“Well, no, of course not,” he replied, not very convincingly.

“Geez, Dad, I thought you were done with ... you know ...” *Running away*, she thought, but she kept it to herself. “I mean ... I thought you’d be here for New Year’s.”

New Year’s Eve had never been a big deal in the Brewster household, but she had been hoping they’d spend it together. After their successful Christmas Eve dinner and a peaceful Christmas Day, Emmie thought they were headed in the right direction toward forming some new sort of relationship—one without her mother in the middle. But now her father was taking off again. She couldn’t help but take it personally.

What else was she supposed to think, after all? Bob Brewster got a taste of home life after her mother’s death and decided he didn’t like it. At least, that’s what it looked like to Emmie. And if he was uncomfortable, or unhappy, at the thought of celebrating the holidays without his wife, shouldn’t he explain himself? Or at least think about how this affected his only child?

“Not very nice, leaving your daughter alone in your house, is it?”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Emmaline,” her father chided. “It’s only for three weeks—”

“*Three weeks?*”

“Okay, three and a half.”

Emmie let out a little groan and plopped down on the bed next to her father’s suitcase. “Dad—”

“What?”

Honestly, she wasn't sure what she wanted to say. She looked up at her parent, her hands working in her lap. Suddenly she burst out, "Do ... do you not *want* to be around me?"

"What!" her father said again, shocked this time. "Emmaline, how could you think such a thing? You're my daughter!"

"Then why are you always leaving?"

He sat next to her on the bed and put an arm around her. "Emmie, I love you so very much ..."

Emmie's jaw dropped. She didn't think she'd ever heard her father say that to her before.

"But," he went on, "this whole thing—establishing new traditions, doing things without your mother ... it's so ... hard."

"You seemed to be doing pretty well, there, Dad. Vacations by yourself, adapting to living alone without a fuss, new girlfriend—"

He smiled grimly. "I'm quite a good actor, aren't I?"

Emmie looked at him closely, saw the glimmer of unshed tears in his eyes. "Yeah," she whispered, softening, "I guess you are. I wish you wouldn't be—not with me, anyway."

Her father shrugged, rubbed the heel of his hand at the corners of his eyes roughly, and laughed a little. "Hard to change—in a lot of ways."

"Will you try?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Emmie rolled her eyes at him, but affectionately. She tucked her head under his chin, and they sat there for a few minutes, silent. Eventually her dad jostled her gently.

"Come on, now, Emmaline, you're a grown woman—you shouldn't be looking for your old dad, anyhow. I thought you'd have plans with your young man."

"We haven't really talked about it."

“Well, you *should*.”

“I don’t want to pressure him.”

“Bah, pressure,” he scoffed. “Make plans!”

Evidently her dad had regrouped and was back to his old self.

Emmie eyed him suspiciously. “Dad, since when do you take such an interest in my love life?”

“Emmaline, you’re my daughter. I worry about you. You think your situation doesn’t keep me up at night? You think I don’t wonder what’s going to become of you when I’m gone?”

“‘Become of’ me?” She laughed in disbelief. “This isn’t the eighteen hundreds, Dad. I don’t ‘require’ companionship.”

“But don’t you *want* companionship?”

“Of course I do! And I have it. So there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Graham is a good man,” he said. “Solid. Dependable. Trustworthy. And he cares about you—that’s easy to see. You need to grab this opportunity with both hands. He’s your best bet—”

“For what? Marriage, home, kids? Dad, we’ve only been seeing each other—sort of—for a few days. Let’s not get crazy here,” she cautioned, even though she had already thought the same thing. But if her father was going to be rambling in such an odd vein as this, she was going to counter him by being the voice of reason. Somebody had to; this conversation was getting too strange even for her.

“Why not? Your mother and I were married before we’d even known each other for a month.” Emmie knew the story well—their whirlwind courtship, their rock-solid knowledge that each other was The One. She had always envied it. “Plus, he’s got a darn sight more potential than that other one.”

“Who—Kyle? Well ... *yeah*.”

Her father chuckled. “I can’t tell you how relieved I was when you gave him his walking papers. Had me worried there

for a while, Emmaline.”

“You and me both, Dad.”

“Anyway, your old man can see, quite clearly—even if you can’t—that it’s time to move on. Don’t waste any more time—build your own life with someone. You don’t need me; I’m going to get out of the way and let you get on with your life.”

“You make it sound like you’re going to push yourself out to sea on an ice floe.”

“Nonsense. This cruise ship is going through the Panama Canal, not the Northwest Passage.”

“That’s not what I—never mind. Do you and Concetta need a ride to the airport?”

Her father set his suitcase on the floor and pulled up on the telescoping handle. “Oh, Concetta’s not coming with me.”

Emmie was surprised. “Why not? Does she have plans with her family for New Year’s?”

“I have no idea; we’re not seeing each other anymore.”

“What!”

“Ahhh”—he grunted with a dismissive wave of his hand—“she was getting too clingy.”

Emmie was about to give her father a piece of her mind—the nerve, insisting that she marry Graham tomorrow, when he’d dumped his ladyfriend for wanting to get more serious—when her cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen; the call was forwarded from the office.

“Wilman Designs, Emmie speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi. Er, can I speak to John, please? This is Matthew Hudson.”

Emmie moved into the hall as her father pulled his suitcase through the doorway. “I’m afraid he’ll be out of town till after the new year. May I take a message?” And she glanced around for something to write with and write on. She came up with nothing, so she barreled down the stairs to the living room before the caller started rattling off room dimensions or

drapery styles. She had no idea who this Matthew guy was, and she wracked her brain trying to remember if he was a client already or not.

“Well, we, uh ... I don’t know if you remember, but we met with you and John a while back about redoing our living room?”

Oh, this was Plasma TV Guy, married to Scrapbooking Wife. Wilma had written them off ages ago, blaming Emmie for opening her big yap and “confusing” them.

“Right! You had that wonderful living room space,” she lied.

“We thought we’d stop in to the office to talk about getting started. We didn’t think John wouldn’t be available, though.”

Emmie lightly bonked her forehead against the living room wall. Oh, hell, not this again—just like with Annette, she was torn between putting potential clients off until Wilma was available, or risk invoking his wrath by signing them up without him. Not for the first time (and likely not the last), Emmie cursed Wilma for not trusting her with more responsibility. The damned control freak could delegate things like this if he wanted, but noooo ...

“Hello?”

“Oh, sorry, Mr. Hudson. I’m here. I’m just ... checking the schedule ...” And suddenly New Emmie got her dander up again. “You know what? Give me a few minutes—I’ve got to, uh, step out for a moment—and we can sit down, have some coffee, and get started on your project.”

“Great,” he breathed in relief, and Emmie got the sense that Scrapbooking Wife had something to do with the sudden need to start renovating. Either she was pregnant and nesting, or Plasma TV Guy had come up lacking in the Christmas gift department. Didn’t matter in the end. What did matter was that they were ready to pay—and, after Wilma got through with them, pay big—to give that “great space” some character.

“Twenty minutes?” Emmie suggested.

“We’ll be there.”

After she hung up, she hunted down her father to say a quick good-bye. He was going to have to find another ride to the airport. Now there was no time to play chauffeur for her globe-hopping parental unit.

Despite her best efforts, it was closer to thirty minutes later when Emmie the Interior Decorating Tornado came hurtling down the sidewalk, balancing a box from the bakery down the street, her bag falling off one arm, her purse falling off the other, her knit cap askew. She was sure she looked like a crazy homeless woman; she was about to smell like one if she spent one more minute perspiring in her new winter coat, a three-quarter length chocolate-colored suede number she'd gotten from her father, most likely via Trish, for Christmas.

She hustled faster when she saw Plasma TV Guy and Scrapbooking Wife—*the Hudsons*, she reminded herself—standing in the doorway, coat collars turned up against the cold.

“Sorry, sorry,” she panted, pulling out her keys and unlocking the front door. She stuck out a hand from under the pastry box for handshakes. “Good to see you again.” As she pushed open the front door, her work bag slid from her shoulder down to her wrist with a heavy jerk. She winced. “Please, come in.”

She turned on the lights with her elbow, the bag pulling even harder on her wrist. She bypassed her desk, intending to dump everything on the meeting table at the back. She slid the box onto the table and dropped her bag and purse onto a chair, took off her coat and hat, accepted the couple's coats, and started zigzagging all over the office. To the front to hang up the coats. To the thermostat to turn up the heat. To the kitchenette for coffee. Emmie veered off once more as she changed her mind and decided to collect the couple's file, thin though it was at the moment, with only the initial meeting notes and a few of Wilma's sketches, from the filing cabinet.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” she said as she blew past the Hudsons again. The couple pulled out seats at the table.

Emmie decided to move her gear to give them more room. File in one hand, she spun around, grabbed her bag and purse with the other, and tugged.

The portfolio bag snagged on the underside of the table. She pulled harder. And the strap of her old bag promptly snapped. She stumbled backward a step, tried to grab the bag, missed. All the papers and sample cards sticking out of it hit the floor with an avalanching *shoosh*.

Emmie groaned and crouched down to collect it all; as she did, everything fell out of the Hudsons' folder. Emmie dropped to her knees and covered her eyes for a moment. Why? Why did she try, when this was the result? *Why?*

Plasma TV Guy came to her rescue. He crouched his large frame down as well and started to pick up the papers. "Don't worry about it," he said reassuringly.

Emmie smiled at him gratefully ... then realized he was not looking at her the way a client looks at, well, any type of professional. He sure hadn't leered at her like that—hadn't even noticed her at all—when she and Wilma had met with him and his wife last time. And a smart thing, too, considering his wife had been sitting right next to him—and hey, there she was now, only half a step away, although she had her back to them at the moment (and thank goodness). Emmie gave Plasma TV Guy a shame-on-you frown, and she glanced up at the back of his wife's legs. But he missed her silent message entirely, as his gaze was definitely not focused on her face, but several inches lower instead.

Then, as she looked down to collect the scattered papers, Emmie saw why he was staring at her cleavage: because suddenly there was too much of it on display. Somehow, in her frantic rushing about, the next button on her ivory satin blouse had come undone, her bra had shifted, and she was perilously close to giving Plasma TV Guy a nip-slip of Hollywood starlet proportions.

Blushing furiously, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Thanks for the help," she muttered, getting to her feet.

“Excuse me one moment, won’t you?” And she ran for the bathroom.

Emmie slammed the door shut and flicked on the light. She felt a slight stab under her left breast. Was she having a heart attack? What did that feel like, anyway? But on further investigation she found that—“Dammit!”—the crescent-shaped strip of plastic that had once buoyed her left breast had snapped in two, and the jagged edges were poking mercilessly at the underside of her boob through the underwire’s fabric sleeve. She tried wiggling it around, but that just made it worse. She had two options: ignore the pain of the stabbing underwire and tough it out, or take off the bra and release her ... inner hippie. Neither choice sounded ideal.

She decided to keep her boobs contained and ignore the pain. How bad could it be? She’d talk to the Hudsons, give them coffee, figure out which of Wilma’s concepts they wanted. Then, when Wilma came back, he could create more detailed sketches and plans, draw up a contract, and hit them with a monetary amount. Yes, she could deal with that—half an hour to reel them in, then get them the heck out. She could take the jabs till then.

Emmie examined her face in the mirror—makeup was still intact, but her hair was all over the place. “Good grief,” she murmured, reaching up to adjust her hair clip. Jab. “Ow.” *Ignore it.* She rearranged her ’do, trying for a more severe spinster-schoolmarm look to deter Plasma TV Guy. Jab. “Ow.” *Ignore it.* She moved to button up her blouse, and at the third jab, she lost her temper completely.

She reached behind her and frantically undid the bra through her blouse. Two shrugs later, she yanked the offending garment through her shirt sleeve and deposited it in the trash. There it sat, the cups jutting up provocatively from the tiny wastebasket. She couldn’t leave it there, on display. What if Plasma TV Guy used the bathroom? He might think it was some sort of message for him. She grabbed the bra and stowed it in the vanity, behind several rolls of toilet paper.

She opened the bathroom door and bolted for the front of the office, arms crossed again, keenly aware of the Hudsons

watching her. In a flash (so to speak) Emmie pulled on a brown, shapeless cardigan that was draped on the back of her chair and wrapped it tightly around her. She turned back to the Hudsons. “Chilly in here, isn’t it?”

The husband and wife eyed her with a little trepidation, but Scrapbooking Wife mustered a nervous smile and stepped back from the table. “You seem to be having a busy morning,” she said tactfully. “So I hope you don’t mind if I took the liberty of starting the coffee, and I sorted your papers out as best I could. I collected what looked like ours; the rest are over there on the sideboard. We took a look at the drawings while you were ... indisposed. There’s one sketch we really like ...”

“Okay,” Emmie answered as brightly as she could. “Let’s get the coffee poured and get started, then, shall we?”

She scooted into the kitchenette and, holding the sweater closed with one hand, picked up the carafe of coffee with the other. She turned around—only to run smack into Plasma TV Guy.

“Can I help?” he offered/leered.

“Step back, Jack,” Emmie hissed, narrowing her eyes. “My wardrobe malfunction was an accident, not an invitation! You got that?”

Emmie must have been channeling the fury of Kali, because his face turned beet red and he tripped backward not one step, but several.

She thrust the coffeepot at him. “Take this. Start pouring. And watch where your eyes go.”

Plasma TV Guy cast his eyes at the floor as he scuttled back to the meeting table, while Emmie grabbed the tray and started plopping coffee cups, plates, and utensils on it.

When they were all seated and the coffee and kuchen handed out, Scrapbooking Wife eagerly pushed a sketch toward Emmie. “This is the one I—we—were thinking about. It’s so different from the others, and more like what we were thinking of ourselves, but *so* much nicer than we could ever come up with on our own.”

Emmie took a look, and a little gasp escaped her. She recognized this concept—it was the one she had drawn up in the middle of the night, what felt like ages ago. How had it gotten into the Hudsons' folder? Then she realized it must have been buried in her bag—it was sort of wrinkled—and when Scrapbooking Wife organized all the papers that had mixed with the folder's contents, she assumed it belonged in their file.

This was bad. Really bad. If Wilma even got a whiff this, he'd see it as her attempt to stage a coup—another coup, that is—and she'd be out on the street for sure. She had to nip this (so to speak) in the bud immediately.

“Oh, Mrs. Hudson—”

“Stacey, please.”

“S-Stacey,” she stammered. “You ... you don't want this design.”

Stacey put a hand to her bosom. “Why ever not?”

“Well ... because.” She paused. *Think, Emmaline, think!* “Be-because ... the other designs are so much more dramatic ... and innovative ... and ...”

Stacey frowned delicately behind her overlarge pink-framed glasses. “We're not really dramatic people, Miss Brewster.”

“Call me Emmie, please.”

“We want something we can actually live with ... and live *in*.” She brightened as she pointed out the things she liked on Emmie's drawing. “See here—it's the storage areas we asked for, and here's the craft corner. Everything we talked about! And it looks so warm and inviting—the colors, and the woodwork. This”—she indicated one of Wilma's sketches—“is just ... A white carpet? Seriously?” She shook her head disapprovingly. “That's just not realistic. Emmie, do you have children?” Emmie shook her head. “Neither do we, but we're planning on it. And children and a white carpet do not mix.”

“Well, it doesn't have to be a *white* carpet,” Emmie said desperately, even though she knew Wilma brooked no messing with his “vision.”

“Well, now, that’s not the point, is it?” Stacey smiled patronizingly. “Look at this ... thing.” She pointed out a giant wall hanging that filled nearly an entire section of what was currently a vast blank expanse in the living room. “What is this? Metal?”

“Er ... yes?”

“Little fingers can get cut on that. And besides, it’s so ... cold.”

“It’s very ... European ...”

“Emmie, this is America,” Stacey said, slowly and clearly, as though she were talking to a three-year-old. “*We are Americans*. I’d be more willing to drape something decent across that space, like a nice dried floral wreath, or a tapestry of *The Last Supper*, rather than put up with a nasty piece of recycling that somebody thinks they can call art.”

Emmie bit her lip. “I understand what you’re saying ...”

“Do you? Do you really?”

“Yes, of course—”

“Then you’ll understand that we want this.” And she tapped Emmie’s drawing with one finely manicured, pink-nail-polished finger.

“Well, there’s something else ...” How in the world was she going to tell them that she had come up with it, and according to Wilma’s rules, that was forbidden?

“*What* else?” Stacey looked at her suspiciously.

“I’m ... I’m afraid that this isn’t ... available. It wasn’t in your folder. It was—”

Stacey narrowed her eyes. “Was this done for one of our neighbors? Did the Mackenzies contact you as well? It would be just like them—we mention Wilman Designs, and then they go running to the same place. Such copycats!”

“I’m really not at liberty to say who the sketch is for.”

“Well, we want this. And we’ll pay you extra to get it, if we have to,” Stacey declared. Her husband choked on a bite of

pastry. “So please draw up the contract to complete this design here.” Stacey covered Wilma’s design with Emmie’s. “And we will be more than happy to write you a check for the deposit. Won’t we, Matthew?”

Matthew, his mouth full, merely nodded at his wife.

“I don’t have the authority to draw up a contract, I’m afraid,” Emmie said quickly, spying an escape route. “Only John can do that. And he can hammer out the details with you at that time. However, I can schedule an appointment. I’m sure he can see you as soon as he gets back.”

Scrapbooking Wife looked disappointed—perhaps she thought that as soon as they signed the papers, a team of contractors would show up at their house and start working—but she put on the steely yet sad look of a martyr who would wait as long as necessary to get the living room she wanted. “Fine. But don’t you go giving this design to anyone else. I want it that much.”

Not bloody likely that would happen, Emmie thought. “Let’s get you on the calendar, then,” she said, rising. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Plasma TV Guy morosely down the rest of his coffee and stuff the last bite of pastry into his mouth. She sort of felt sorry for him, so she said, “How about if I wrap up the rest of that kuchen and you can take it home?”

As soon as she retreated to the kitchenette, Emmie could hear heated whispers coming from the outer office. She took her time reboxing the pastry. She’d been witness to couples arguing over plans and costs more times than she could count, and she knew how to stay out of the way while they tussled. The whispering got louder, so Emmie wasted more time washing the coffee cups and carafe.

When she turned off the sink, the office was quiet. She plastered on a smile and brought out the pastry box. The Plasma-Scrapbookers were at opposite sides of the room, Stacey messing around in her purse, Plasma TV Guy carefully scrutinizing the photos of Wilma’s previous projects on the wall by the meeting table. They followed Emmie to her desk, and she turned on her computer to pull up Wilma’s calendar.

When the meeting was set, Emmie wrote the day and time for them on one of Wilma's business cards (she didn't have any of her own, of course), and sent the Hudsons on their way.

As soon as they were out of sight, Emmie raced to the folder that was still on the table and rifled through it. She was afraid Scrapbooking Wife might have stolen her sketch—for “safekeeping”—but it was still there. Not for long, though. Her plan: make the sketch go missing and hint to Wilma that Stacey the Scrapbooker was completely delusional and had imagined the whole alternate, homey-design thing. Wilma would have to recreate what Stacey saw—er, thought she saw—and he would put his own spin on it. Everybody'd win. Emmie slipped her design out of the folder and buried it in her voluminous bag once again. Where it belonged. Before it got her ass fired.

“So you're not wearing a bra *right now*?”

Emmie rolled her eyes at Avery. “A little louder there, pal. I don't think the fry cook down at Johnny Rockets heard you.”

Avery and Trish had met up with Emmie at the mall for lunch, but first she had pulled them into the post-holiday, tomblike silence of a department store for a quick bra purchase.

“And why are we in the old-fart support-hose department, here?”

A salesclerk, as dusty as the racks of sturdy, full-coverage undergarments she tended, frowned at him from behind the cash register.

“Where else am I supposed to go?”

“You mean, you just can't resist buying more of ... these ... because they're so darned sexy?” And he flicked the bras she had in her hand—industrial strength and unadorned, one white and one beige.

“What's the matter with these?”

Avery groaned and looked over at Trish for help. She shrugged, grinning. Avery tried, “Sweetheart, you have a hot boyfriend—one that you actually *like*—now. Do you want to make him happy or”—he flicked the bras again—“punish him?”

“And what do you wear for Adam?”

It was Avery’s turn to roll his eyes. “First of all, we’re not cross-dressers. But ... doesn’t matter. We broke up.”

“What?” Emmie gasped.

Avery shrugged. “It just ... happened. Not a big deal.”

“*What* happened? You guys were perfect for each other!”

“Maybe we weren’t as perfect for each other as you and Graham are.”

“Don’t try to change the subject!”

“I’m not!”

“When did this happen? You were fine Christmas Eve.”

Trish gasped. “It was the curse of Emmie’s party, wasn’t it?”

Avery winced, not disagreeing, while Emmie demanded, “What curse, if you don’t mind? Somebody else’s house burn down?”

“Well, no, but you’ve gotta admit, things haven’t been pretty since that night. We ended up with a dead washing machine—”

“That was your spawn’s doing.”

Trish ignored her and continued, “Annette came to blows with Wilma, Juliet’s a wreck—”

“I’m starting to think Juliet’s always a wreck.”

“And Adam and Avery got an eyeful of their future—Wilma and Travis going toe-to-toe all night. No wonder the poor kids freaked out.”

“I’m not buying it. But it does suck, Avery.”

“You know what sucks worse? Standing around in this depressing dump talking about it.” Ignoring the steady glare from the clerk, Avery took the bras from Emmie, hung them on the nearest rack, and grabbed her arm. “Let’s go somewhere a little more ... interesting.”

Avery marched her straight to Victoria’s Secret, which didn’t surprise her, but did embarrass her. “I don’t know ...”

Trish laughed. “Nobody’s making you buy the red lace see-through stuff. It wouldn’t look good with your skin tone—you’re too pale—but you can get something a little more attractive in here.”

“Oh, really? And what do you know about it, old married lady?”

“How do you think I’ve managed to stay married this long?”

Emmie and Avery put their hands over their ears. “Okay, that’s enough,” Emmie said. “I’ll go in if you promise not to elaborate. Avery, help me?”

“You know, contrary to popular belief, not all gay men enjoy dressing straight women’s lady parts like they were life-sized Barbie dolls.”

“Oh, come on. Please?”

Avery sighed heavily. “All right. But you have to give me some sort of idea of what Graham likes.”

“Excuse me?”

“What he likes. You know. Lace? Satin? Classy? Trashy? Wholesome? I’ll bet he’s a wholesome kind of guy, isn’t he?”

Emmie said nothing, just marched past the flannel and fleece pajama sets and hoodies and headed for the serious lingerie at the back of the store. Avery and Trish rushed to catch up with her, and she hid her blush by rooting around in a sale bin in the middle of the floor. She didn’t hide it very well, however.

“Oh. My. God,” Avery said. “Do *not* tell me you haven’t slept with him yet.”

Emmie remained silent and examined a striped cotton bra in her size. Avery took it out of her hands and threw it back in the bin.

“You haven’t, have you? And no clearance bins.”

“It’s only been a week!”

“Two,” Trish corrected.

“Whose side are you on, Campo?”

“Well, you’ve gotta admit, it is a little unusual.”

“Especially for a woman your age,” Avery added.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean—I’m not long for this world, so I’d better get my jollies before I take a dirt nap?”

“No! Just that ... you know what you want at ... your age. And you don’t make a fuss and get all insecure or paranoid or whatever. You just go for it. Well, you should, anyway.”

Emmie put her hands on her hips, indignant. “Has it ever occurred to you that I care enough about Graham to want to take this slowly?”

Avery only considered for a nanosecond. “Um, no. And your headlights are on.”

Emmie slammed her coat closed again and went to another rack. Trish and Avery followed, grinning like idiots. “It just so happens,” she said, “that something like that isn’t exactly easy to ... arrange, when he’s got a child at home, and I’m”—she shuddered involuntarily—“you know. At Dad’s. For the time being,” she rushed to add. “So what am I supposed to do? Attack him on the couch after my father’s asleep? Sneak him into my twin bed? Jump him in the back of his Subaru? What?”

Trish and Avery burst out laughing. “Okay, none of those options sounds all that good,” Trish admitted.

“There are these newfangled things called hotels, you know,” Avery said.

Emmie made a face. “‘Get a room’? Too icky.”

“You want to look into farming the kid out for a night,” Trish suggested.

“Where? They’ve got all-night daycare or something, just for couples who want to get it on?”

“You know, that isn’t a bad idea. Could be a great franchise,” Avery said, moving to another rack of lingerie.

“As a matter of fact, there is something like that,” Trish said. “They’re called slumber parties. More fun for the parents who get to ship the kids off than the kids themselves. And that bit of wisdom comes to you courtesy of my upcoming book, *Raising a Couple of Rug Rats without Losing Your Mind*. So you’re welcome.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s very nice to tell Graham to get rid of his kid for a night, do you?”

Trish considered. “Yeah, I suppose that would be his call. Your bringing it up would put you into the category of Wicked Stepmother a little early.”

“That’s too bad,” Avery murmured, selecting a few lingerie sets for Emmie to try on. “I was kind of curious about Graham’s, um, talents.”

“Oh, like I’d tell you,” Emmie scoffed, putting Avery’s selections back on the rack.

“Come on! Give me a little something.” He pulled the sets back off the rack.

Emmie studied him. “Okay, here’s a little something: He’s straight.”

“I know *that*. Good grief, I spent half a semester hoping I was wrong. Of course, it was nearly impossible to tell. He was an equal-opportunity ignorer—didn’t notice the girls hanging off of him, and didn’t notice the boys, either.”

“Like you?”

“Can you blame me? Here, try these on,” he directed, pushing her toward the dressing rooms.

Once the salesgirl had let her into one, Emmie said, as she wrestled with the first bra, “Well, of course he ignored the students drooling over him, no matter what his sexual persuasion. He was still grieving for his wife, for God’s sake.” *That is*, she thought to herself, *till Juliet steamrolled him. Poor guy.*

She took a look in the mirror, turned sideways, and sucked in her stomach. Not bad. She might be able to let Graham see her in this, a comfortable silver-gray demi and matching bikini accented with blue curls and swirls.

“How is it?” Avery called.

“It’s all right,” she answered, sounding a bit surprised.

“Well? Show it off.”

“No!”

“Emmaline, let’s review: I don’t care about your lady parts. Now let’s *see*.”

With a sigh, Emmie yanked open the dressing room door and flung her arms wide. “There! Happy?”

Avery grimaced. “Too much coverage. Try on the other ones while I look around some more.”

“No push-ups!” she called. “And no thongs or other things that’ll give me a wedgie! And no animal prints!”

“If you don’t at least try on a leopard-print bra, the terrorists win,” Avery called back.

“*No* leopard print!”

“Why do you hate America?”

Emmie slammed the door and grabbed the next bra.

After half an hour, Emmie reluctantly burned a three-digit amount into her credit card balance and walked away with a startlingly small amount of fabric to show for it. On the plus side, she had escaped the mortification of having to try on, let alone buy, anything with garters or weird straps and, true to her word, Trish let her steer clear of see-through lace in some lurid color that would just make her look ill. Instead, she went

for the more modest satin-and-lace combos with little bows, girly flower patterns with lace trim, and some boy shorts—once she realized that they made her butt look pretty incredible.

“Now the best part,” Trish announced as they left the store.

“Deciding where to eat lunch?”

“Inviting Graham over for some nookie.”

“Will you cut it out!”

“We’ve established that spontaneity goes out the window with a kid in the mix. You have to schedule it.” Trish reached into her purse and then muttered, “Damn. Hey, Emmie? Do you have your cell phone on you? I promised ... babysitter ...” she drifted off as she dug around in the depths of her bag.

“Yeah, sure,” Emmie said, handing it to her. “Forget yours again?”

“Mm,” was Trish’s noncommittal answer. She scrolled through Emmie’s phone, pushed a button, then after a moment said, “Graham? Hey, it’s Trish—just using Emmie’s phone. How’ve you been?” Emmie lunged for her cell, but Trish was faster; she dodged away from her and lifted her elbow so her shorter friend couldn’t grab it, all the while talking cheerfully with Graham. Teenage girls loitering nearby nudged one another, admiring her technique. After some generic chitchat, Trish said, “So, Graham, I think Emmie wants to ask you something. Here she is. Talk to you soon, okay? Take care! Bye.” And she handed the phone to her friend, who grabbed it, glaring.

“Hi?” Graham said tentatively, not sure who was going to be on the other end of the line. Emmie, scooting away from her laughing friends, reassured him that it was indeed her this time. “What in the world is going on? Where are you?”

Emmie sighed. “In hell, I think.”

“What’s up? You don’t sound like you’re in the office.”

“I’m not. Just getting some lunch at the mall. Are you at the house?”

“I was, earlier. I’m knocking off a little early to spend some time with Sophie.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah—just making the most of her time off from school. We might go to a movie. Um, Emmie? Did you ... have Trish call for you just to say hi?”

“Oh! Uh, well, no ...” she drifted off when she spotted her friends across the mall, hopping up and down and making rude gestures, apparently to remind her of what she should be talking about. “That is ... I was just wondering if you’d like to ... um ...”

“Get together?” *That’s one way to put it*, Emmie thought. “That’s a great idea. When, do you think? Are you busy this week?”

“I’m pretty free. My dad went on a cruise for a few weeks, actually.” *There we go*, she thought. A great way to telegraph that she had the house to herself without coming right out and saying she had the house to herself. Also a great way to feel sixteen years old again.

“You know,” he said brightly, “you’re more than welcome to join me and Sophie for New Year’s Eve. It’s no big deal—just us and a pizza and the ball drop on TV. And I’m afraid Sophie’s a lightweight—she gets hopped up on sparkling cider and then passes out around nine o’clock—but if you’re interested ...”

“I’d love to,” Emmie said. She couldn’t think of a better way to spend New Year’s Eve.

Of course, when she shared this great plan with Trish and Avery, they were hardly enthusiastic.

“What?” she demanded. “It’s wonderful that he likes me enough to ask me over to spend time with him and his daughter.”

“We said *nookie*,” Trish reminded her. “Pizza and the ball drop is not nookie.”

“Unless that’s what the kids are calling it these days,” Avery sniggered.

“Nookie can wait,” Emmie said primly, her nose in the air.

“Yeah, well, we’ll see how you feel after *weeks* go by without a chance at a little sumpin’. You’ll be going insane,” Trish declared.

Emmie didn’t want to admit to her friend that she just might be right.

Chapter 18

When Emmie arrived at Graham's apartment on New Year's Eve, cradling a bottle of champagne for them and a bottle of sparkling cider for Sophie, she was more nervous than any "nookie plans" would have made her. Graham was letting her join in on a family tradition; she thought that said "commitment" far more than any other gesture she could imagine.

The temporary Cooper household was in a divided house on the edge of a questionable neighborhood, although their building was well kept. Three brass mailboxes hung on the porch wall, with a doorbell under each one. She pressed the one under the slip of paper that said "Cooper" and waited.

Within a minute, she heard footsteps thundering down a staircase. Graham pulled open the door with a smile. "You found the place all right! I'm so glad you're here. And Sophie's looking forward to it, too—she can't wait to show you what she's done with the dollhouse."

He took the bottles from her and gestured up the stairs, and Emmie made her way up, looking around at the fairly bleak front hallway. "This is nice," she said politely.

"It's awful." Graham laughed. "Imagine—me, an architect, living in a house that's been carved up—and so crudely. I keep wanting to fix it," he said, as they reached the landing and he opened the apartment door for her. "But it was all I could find on such short notice."

"Emmie!" Sophie barreled into her and gave her a death-grip hug.

"Whoa there," Graham said, peeling his daughter off. "Let the poor woman take her coat off."

"Oh, I don't mind," Emmie said, and she really didn't. Graham took her coat, and Emmie said to Sophie, "Okay ... now." And when Sophie hugged her again, she was able to hug her back, just as tightly. "How are you, my girl?"

"Great! It's New Ear!"

“I heard that rumor. Happy New Year.”

“You’re not supposed to say that yet. Not till midnight. Daddy said I can stay up till midnight, and I’m going to. We’re going to get a pizza. And some ball is going to fall off a building. Just on TV,” she clarified, in a serious tone, in case the idea frightened Emmie.

“Well, that sounds like a great time. Count me in.”

“What do you like on your pizza?” Graham asked as he picked up the phone.

“Anything but stinky little fish,” she replied, mostly for Sophie’s benefit.

And sure enough, the little girl wrinkled her nose. “Ewwww.”

“Ah, you guys don’t know what’s good,” Graham said with a wink, waiting for the pizza place to answer. “But all right, we’ll skip the stinky little fish ... this time.”

While he placed their order for non-stinky-fish pizza, Sophie said to Emmie, “We never have a party on New Ear.”

“What are you talking about? I think pizza with you is a great party.”

“No, I mean a big party, like the kind you see in movies, with fancy clothes and balloons and stuff. Know why?”

“Why?”

“Because daddy asked mommy to marry him on New Ear once, so today always makes him sad.”

Emmie didn’t know how to answer that. Yet again, Sophie didn’t seem maudlin about anything to do with her mother, just stated the facts quite plainly. Emmie glanced over at Graham, who had finished his call and heard everything his daughter said. There was silence for a moment. Then he busily put the phone back in the charger and collected himself.

“I agree with Emmie,” Graham said. “I think the three of us and a pizza—and maybe a Disney princess movie before the

ball drop?”—here Sophie nodded eagerly—“is the best kind of party there is.”

“Can I pick the movie? Can I pick the movie?”

“You’re the authority,” Graham said, ruffling his daughter’s hair. “Go ahead.”

While Sophie sorted through a pile of DVDs by the television, Graham glanced at Emmie. “Sorry about that,” he murmured.

“Don’t apologize. I’m sorry that ... well, I don’t want to pry, and—”

“No, you should know. Sophie’s right.” He led her into the sparsely decorated living room and directed her to the couch. Graham sat beside her. “I proposed to Kat in Times Square. How cheesy is that?”

Emmie smiled gently. “I don’t think it’s cheesy at all.”

“Not very original, though.”

“I’ll bet she loved it.”

He glanced down and shrugged. “It was what she wanted. So I obliged. At least we didn’t end up on TV, with the cameraman egging her on to flash her engagement ring or anything. It was more private than that. It’s funny how being in a huge crowd can be private.”

“I think it’s sweet.”

“Yeah, well.” He paused. “Look, it’s not like I sit in the dark and stare out the window every New Year’s Eve or anything.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself.”

“Well, I want to. You deserve to know.”

“Movie’s starting!” Sophie called from her perch about five inches in front of the TV.

“Oh, not *this* one again!” her father groaned.

“Daddy! It’s the best!”

“I know, sweetie. Can you sit back just a little? It looks like you’re trying to climb into the TV.”

Sophie giggled but scooted back on the rug a couple of feet, and Emmie smiled at the sight of the little girl bouncing to the opening zydeco tune of *The Princess and the Frog*. “Well,” she whispered to Graham, “she’s got good taste in music.”

After watching the movie for a few minutes, Graham asked Emmie, “Have you ever been to New Orleans?”

“Nope, never have. You?”

He nodded. “I went down to help after Hurricane Katrina.” Emmie, amazed at this little bit of information that he tossed off so casually, sat up and gave him her full attention. “Incredible place.”

“I can’t believe you went there—right after the hurricane?”

“Not *right* after, no. When the rebuilding started. I knew a couple of contractors there, and I wanted to help out, so I went. It was kind of soon after Kat and I got married, but she wouldn’t let me come back, said she was fine, and it worked out all right.”

“What’s New Orleans like?”

“Beautiful, in a complicated way, I guess you could say. I’d sure like to go back sometime, just as a tourist, to enjoy the sights, the food.”

Emmie nodded and reached out a hand toward his. He squeezed her fingers.

“Maybe you could come along, see it for yourself ...”

She grinned, but didn’t answer, because Sophie called, “Daddy! You’re missing the good parts!”

He leaned over and whispered into Emmie’s ear, “It’s the part with the princess dresses. She can never resist princess dresses.”

“Girl after my own heart,” Emmie whispered back, keenly aware of how close they were to each other now. She made a mental note that she would get Sophie the biggest, yellowest, poofiest princess dress when she was flower girl at their wedding. What could she say? She liked to plan ahead.

Just as Graham predicted, after Sophie ate half a slice of cheese pizza and drank three cups of sparkling cider, she ran around like a madwoman—including giving Emmie a whirlwind tour of their little apartment and a full report of the decorating she had done on the dollhouse—then landed on the couch in a heap between the two adults and conked out long before midnight.

Graham carried her off to bed, while she weakly protested in her half sleep, “Noooo, I want to say Happy New Year,” and Emmie busied herself with putting the leftover pizza away. She started to run the water to wash the plates, but Graham caught her.

“Now, now, none of that,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind.

Emmie leaned back against him. *If he kisses my neck, I will jump him right here in the kitchen*, she thought, and then had to restrain herself when he did just that. She sighed and turned in his arms. “Sophie’s asleep?”

“She is indeed asleep. And *you* must come over here with me.” He pulled her back into the living room and sat her down on the couch once more. He reached up to turn off the floor lamp next to the sofa, leaving the room lit only by two strings of fairy lights, one around each window, and the glow of the muted TV. Graham looked deeply into her eyes, which set her heart hammering.

“So,” she said, and her voice caught. She cleared her throat. “What’s new?”

He ran his index finger through the hair at her temple, then drew it along her cheek and chin. He kissed her, trailing his finger along her neck, over her collarbone, and down into her blouse, over the curve of her left breast. A little “eep” escaped from her, and she forced herself to pull away from his kiss.

“Now, how in the world is that at all fair?” she reprimanded him.

“What?”

“You expect me to keep my composure when you do ... that?”

“You don’t have to keep your composure with me.”

“Ahem. Your daughter is asleep in the next room.”

He smiled. “Don’t worry. I am a regular Boy Scout when my daughter is within a ten-mile radius.”

“Yeah? They give a merit badge for breast exams?”

“Okay, you’re right,” he conceded. “I just ... can’t help but wonder what’s under that pretty shirt of yours.”

“A backhoe, a lava lamp, a potted African violet, and the lost treasure of Atlantis, what do you think?”

“You know what I mean.”

“And you know precisely what’s in the current no-fly zone. You entered that territory a couple of weeks ago.”

“Only briefly. I prefer to explore at my leisure.”

Ooh, an opportunity to bring up a delicate subject. Emmie jumped on it. “Well, nothing we can do about that tonight, but ... since I have the house to myself for another couple of weeks, wanna come over sometime?”

Graham’s eyes lit up. “Absolutely.”

“Really?” Emmie was sort of surprised it was just that easy.

“Maybe next week sometime? I’m taking Sophie to visit my sister in Albany tomorrow.”

Emmie was fascinated by the fact that he had a sister and wanted to hear more about her, but the news that he was going away was, suddenly, incredibly depressing. “Oh. How long will you be gone?”

“Just through the weekend. Sophie starts school again on Monday. Going to my sister’s first, and on the way back I’m going to check in on a couple of Habitat for Humanity jobs I’m advising on, near Syracuse. So it’s a thruway type of vacation—there and back—nothing thrilling. I don’t think I ever told you I had a sister, did I?”

She shook her head. “Just the one?”

“Yep. She’s a couple of years younger than I am, married, has a boy and twin girls. Our parents live in Phoenix but visit the grandkids whenever they can. They don’t like to come back east in the winter, though. I’m hoping they’ll be able to see the house when it’s done. And that,” he said, “is the full Cooper family report.” He studied her with a small smile. “I wish you weren’t holding down the fort for John while he’s gone; I’d love for you to meet my sister. I think you’d like her a lot.”

“I bet I would. Maybe another time?”

“Definitely. So,” he said, moving closer to her again, “how about I ... visit you”—and here he waggled his eyebrows till she started laughing again—“sometime next week?”

Any disappointment Emmie felt at the thought of him leaving town disappeared at his touch. But after a few moments, she pulled away to look around for a clock. “Oh, God, what time is it? I shouldn’t be here; you need to get some sleep if you’re going to drive across the state tomorrow.”

“Uh-uh,” he murmured, gently turning her face back to his. “I can sleep when I’m dead.”

“It’s almost midnight,” she whispered.

“Then I should get that champagne you brought. We need to toast what is shaping up to be a really great new year. Be right back.”

Emmie straightened her clothes and smoothed her hair. Yes, she had to agree that it looked like the new year was going to be incredible. She heard the muted *thoomp* of the champagne cork giving way, then Graham returned with the open bottle and two juice glasses. “Sorry,” he said as he poured the champagne. “The fine crystal is still in storage.”

He handed her one of the glasses, and they watched the new year arrive on the silent TV. While the bundled-up partiers in Times Square jumped up and down and waved at the cameras sweeping over the crowd, Emmie and Graham toasted the turn

of the year and rang it in with Passionate Kiss No. 397 of the night.

Any more of that, Emmie realized, and she was going to start wondering just how deep a sleeper Sophie really was ... but no. She did not need to be responsible for the permanent psychological scarring of a six-year-old if she woke up and saw something that shouldn't need to be explained for another half dozen years at the very least. No way, no how. So, taking a deep breath, she removed Graham's wandering hands. He gave her an exaggerated disappointed look, but kissed her again anyway. When she had completely turned to a puddle of goo, he sat back, rested his elbow on the back of the couch and his head on the heel of his hand, and said, "Okay, let's have a conversation."

"You suck."

"There is one thing I want to talk about."

Emmie blinked at his serious tone. "Go on."

"What I said that night when we were decorating the tree ... I don't want you to think I'm some sort of desperate weirdo or anything—someone who declares his love for a woman after knowing her for ten minutes."

Emmie pretended to contemplate this seriously for a moment. "Mm, I guess you don't seem the type." Then she smiled and nudged him. "Come on, I'm fine with it ... as long as you don't try to deny what you said." She put a dramatic hand to her forehead. "I'd be completely distraught."

She meant it as a joke, but he said, "I ... can't deny it. There, I said it. Sort of said it. Too much too soon?"

"No," she murmured.

"Yeah, but what about the guy code—I'm supposed to be all sorts of cool and aloof, keep you guessing and all that. That's what keeps women interested, right?"

"What keeps me interested is your interest in you and me. And I adore your honesty."

To Emmie's surprise, Graham suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Okay, about that ..."

"What?"

"I should be honest with you about everything, then. Including this."

And he reached over to the end table for his cell phone. He pushed a couple of buttons and then turned the screen toward Emmie. She found herself looking at a list of incoming calls. Most of them were from Juliet, all within the past several days. Graham scrolled and showed it to her again. More from Juliet, some in blocks of three or four ... or more.

"What's that all about?"

"She won't leave me alone is what it's all about. I don't know what to do with her."

Emmie was crushed. She had been desperately hoping that Graham had been able to write her off on Christmas Eve, or soon after that. But it seemed that Juliet was more tenacious than either one of them had expected.

"She says she needs me," Graham said quietly. Emmie wasn't sure what to think. She was glad that he had told her the truth, but she was truly upset that Juliet wasn't about to let him move on. She must have looked grave, because he whispered reassuringly, "Hey, what did I tell you? I'm done with her."

"But *she's* not done with *you*." Emmie pursed her lips. "Think she's going to call tonight? It is a holiday, after all. She seems to like interrupting special occasions."

"Don't even *think* it! I don't want to deal with her tonight. Or any night, for that matter. I just want her to go away."

"Unfortunately, you'd probably have to be really, really cruel to her before she gets the message. But you're not like that—and I don't want you to be like that—so, for now, at least, you're pretty much stuck."

"Great." Graham rubbed his eyes wearily.

“Lucky you’ve got a really understanding girlfrie—” Emmie swallowed the word, but not before Graham seized on it with a wicked grin.

“Did you just call yourself my girlfreh?”

Emmie blushed and looked down at her hands fidgeting in her lap. “Maybe it was ... similar to your saying you were half in lo’ with me.”

“Touché. So ...” he wheedled, ducking his head and trying to meet her downcast eyes, “*are* you my girlfreh?”

“How could I not be, when you half lo’ me?”

He tipped her chin up till she was looking him in the eye. “Oh, I’m thinking it’s way more than half by now.”

Emmie felt tingly down to the tips of her toes. “Me, too,” she whispered, and sought out the warmth of his lips again before extricating herself, with reluctance, from Graham’s arms. “You need to sleep,” she said.

“So do you. You shouldn’t go out now. Stay here. Take the bed; I’ll stay on the couch,” he added.

“No way,” she said as she stood up. “I’d sleepwalk, no matter what promises I made to myself, and then you sure would have some ’splainin’ to do to your daughter in the mor—” And then Graham’s cell phone rang. “Your sister calling to wish you a Happy New Year?” she asked. She hoped.

Graham looked at the screen and got that familiar frown on his face. But he answered. “Hello,” he said coldly, not looking at Emmie. She moved to get her coat, but he reached out a hand to stop her. “Happy New Year to you, too,” he said into the phone. “Why are you calling me at this hour? ... Yes, I know most people are awake on New Year’s, but ...”

She could faintly hear Juliet’s babble. Emmie wondered how long she was going to keep this up, and if Juliet would end up in a rubber room sooner or later. If she didn’t, Emmie sure was going to.

Graham continued, still coldly, “Oh, I see.” Another pause. He glanced at Emmie.

“Be strong!” Emmie mouthed silently, putting on a tough look and clenching her fist.

Graham smiled at her and seemed to gain confidence from her encouragement. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that,” he said brusquely, “but there’s really nothing much I can do from here. So good luck with that, Juliet. Happy New Year again.” And he clicked off.

“What did she have to say this time?” Emmie asked, not sure she wanted to know.

“Oh, same old, same old. Nothing new. Oh, yeah—and that she was going to stick her head in the oven.”

Emmie gasped. “*Seriously?* What are you going to do?”

“Kiss you good night, I hope.”

“But—”

Graham smiled again and shook his head.

“What’s so darn funny? Juliet gassing herself is no laughing ...” She trailed off and thought a moment. Then she said, “Oh.” Graham nodded encouragingly. “Electric oven?”

“We have a winner.”

Emmie sighed and rubbed her forehead. “She’s exhausting.”

The next several, Graham-less days were torture for Emmie. When he finally called on Sunday evening, from thirty miles out of town, she was relieved that she could finally stop pacing the proverbial widow’s walk; he was in the vicinity. Almost the first words out of Graham’s mouth were, “When can I see you?” He had really missed her! She was thrilled that she hadn’t been the only one pining. She wanted to say, “Right now!” but instead, she said, calmly, “Well, you need to unpack, get settled, and I know you’ve got jobs to check on here—”

“They can wait.”

“You know they can’t. Plus you need to ask Annamaria to babysit, so why don’t we say, um, Tuesday or Wednesday?”

He jumped on “Tuesday” immediately. Sooner rather than later, evidently. The impatience in his voice was like an aphrodisiac. Not that she needed one.

So Tuesday it was. That was forty-eight hours away. *How the hell was she supposed to get ready in only forty-eight hours?* she thought in a panic. She had gone back and forth repeatedly while he was out of town—be casual, just hang out, watch TV, and let nature take its course? Or choreograph the evening to within an inch of its life? Avery’s and Trish’s lectures echoed in her head, and in the end, she caved and decided to make the night special.

She hoped her plan wasn’t too cheesy, or too blatant. But then again, blatant was pretty much the point.

At eight o’clock, as ready as she’d ever be, she paced back and forth in the darkened living room. Finally she saw headlights sweep across the front windows, and she ran to get ready. *Places, everyone,* she said to herself.

When Graham rang the doorbell, she called seductively, “Come in!” and waited. The door didn’t open. He couldn’t hear her. So she had to bellow, not very attractively, “*Door’s open!*” Graham entered with a smile on his face, which disappeared in an instant. Her happy nerves turned to frightened ones. What if she was freaking him out already? She put on what she hoped was a carefree and sexy smile. “Come on in,” she said over her shoulder. Her voice sounded strangled. She hoped he didn’t notice.

He crossed the living room slowly. “Emmie? What the ...”

“How was your trip?” *Lame,* she berated herself, but he wasn’t helping matters, gawping like that. Suddenly she wasn’t sure she had done the right thing. Maybe what she thought was seductive just looked stupid. *Say something, for Pete’s sake!* she wailed inside.

He stood over her in silence. She looked up at him nervously. Finally he whispered, “Wow.”

“Care to elaborate on that?”

In the same hushed tone, he said, “You look ... so beautiful.”

Phew! Her confidence returned, she tossed her brushed-out and slightly curled hair and patted the rug beside her in front of the fireplace. “Have a seat.”

He yanked off his leather jacket and tossed it on the sofa. He was wearing a shirt she especially loved, a form-fitting black knit polo that accentuated his shoulders. He knelt beside her in front of the fire and kissed her so passionately she would have fallen over if she hadn’t been lounging up against the leather ottoman she’d moved in front of the fireplace (exactly as she’d planned), new silky robe loosely tied and falling off one shoulder (exactly as she’d arranged it), revealing just a bit of one of her new lingerie sets, her legs tucked to one side like a 1940s screen siren (exactly as she’d oh-so-carefully positioned them).

Graham sat back and drank in the sight of her, and she loved it. She waved a long, slim stick back and forth in the air—gracefully, she hoped—then offered it to Graham. “Toasted marshmallow?”

“You go ahead.”

Oh cripes, how do you eat a toasted marshmallow seductively? she wondered. And why hadn’t she figured this part of her plan out beforehand? Well, she was just going to have to wing it. She pulled the marshmallow off the stick with what she hoped was a sultry move and took a bite. Some of it stuck to her bottom lip and she licked it off, slowly (good), then held out the rest of the marshmallow to Graham. As she’d hoped, he ate it out of her fingers (better), then licked them, very, *very* slowly (perfect).

He eyed her with a devilish look and, after a second holding the gaze, they both burst out laughing.

“This,” he said, settling next to her, still chuckling, “this is *great*.”

“Not too much, you think?”

“No such thing. And I really liked the hair flip—that was a nice touch.”

“Rita Hayworth. I practiced that specially, till I got it just right.”

He looked her up and down again and said more seriously, “You really do look amazing. I’ve missed you a *lot*.”

“Mm, I’m glad to hear it. I’ve missed you, too. Another marshmallow?”

“Allow me.” He picked up another stick, stuck a marshmallow on the end, then added a new one to hers.

Emmie rested her head on his shoulder, and they simply sat like that for a little while, content in each other’s company.

“So,” Graham said, licking the last of a marshmallow off his thumb, “do I get to see what else is under that robe?”

“You so totally do.”

He put his stick down on the hearth and turned to her. She froze under his hungry gaze; he was doing that super-hot thing again: giving her his full attention. His eyes locked on hers, he hooked one finger in the satin sash of her robe and pulled. What little coverage it provided vanished as the sides fell away. Graham pushed the robe farther down her shoulder and kissed her bare skin. Emmie forgot to breathe.

As he worked his way from her shoulder toward her neck, he murmured between kisses, “Emmie?”

“Mm?”

“Your marshmallow.”

“What?”

“It’s burning.”

She could relate. She had completely forgotten she even had the stick in her hand, and in a matter of seconds, the marshmallow had gone from white to brown to black to melted and hanging off the stick, and it was giving off a noxious odor. She murmured, “That’s nice,” tossed the entire

thing, stick and all, onto the fire, and wrapped her arms around Graham.

She could taste the marshmallow sweetness on his tongue. She held him tighter as his hands moved across her back under her robe. He ran one hand back and forth for a moment, then muttered, “Where’s the damned clasp?”

She laughed again. “In the front, under the daisy.”

“You know,” he mock-complained, between dotting her skin with kisses, “for years you expect the clasp to be in the same place—in the back. All through your youth, you envy the guys who say they can undo it with one hand. And then they go and give you *Undoing Bras for Dummies*, with the thing in the front.”

“I should have bought one of those breakaway bras with the magnets.”

“They have those now? Why wasn’t I told?” And he popped the latch with a skill that belied his complaints.

Emmie reveled in the sight of Graham reveling in the sight of her, the feeling of his slightly rough palms on her smooth skin. She was hypnotized, yet she managed to have the wherewithal to start tugging on his polo shirt—because the only thing she wanted more than seeing Graham’s shoulders defined by the dark knit fabric was seeing Graham’s shoulders *without* the dark knit fabric. She pulled the shirt free and tossed it behind her onto the ottoman. Graham eased her all the way to the floor, and she nearly imploded from the feel of his hard chest, the scattering of rough chest hair, tight against her. His touch was already making her ears ring. Or ... wait ...

Graham rose to his knees and fumbled in his back pocket. “Shit.”

“Oh, *God*, if it’s not Sophie, turn it *off!*” she moaned, still prone and unable to move.

In a panic about his daughter, he hit the green button on his phone without even looking. “Of course it’s Sophie. Who else would it ... Annamaria? Is something wrong?” He sat back on his heels, his face falling. “Oh.”

Emmie sat up and pulled her robe back over her shoulders. “What is it?” she whispered, just as fearful as Graham that Sophie was hurt or ill.

Graham looked her in the eye and shook his head slightly.

“What—” she started to say, but then had a chilling thought. “No. No way ...”

“What’s wrong now? I’m—”

“How does she *do* that?” Emmie groaned. “How does she know?”

Graham turned his head and gazed at the floor while Juliet—because by now Emmie was sure it was her—prattled on. Emmie glanced around her house, certain that Juliet had planted tiny spy cameras; it seemed she always knew the perfect time to interrupt with her latest manufactured crisis. The thought made her take a moment to close up her bra.

“Hang up,” Emmie hissed. “Hang up now! Don’t fall for it!”

But instead, Graham said into the phone, “Are you sure? Juliet, so help me, if you ... All right, all right. Yes. Fine.” And he hung up. Pocketing the phone again, he dragged his eyes back to Emmie, who was now on a slow boil.

“You’re not going over there,” she said in a low voice. “Are you?”

He sighed and reached past her for his shirt. “I have to.”

“You *don’t* have to.”

“She sounded really distraught. I think she really might—”

“She *always* sounds like that.”

“Well, I can’t assume that she’s lying this time.”

“She’s *always* lying.”

“Emmie, I have to go over there. Just for a few minutes. Otherwise I’d never forgive myself if she ...” he trailed off. “But I swear this is the last time.”

“I wish I could believe that,” she said as he hastily pulled his shirt on. “But I can’t,” she continued, swallowing her tears of disappointment and anger, forcing the quaver out of her voice. “You know what I think?” she went on, her voice getting stronger. “I think that no matter what you promise me, you will go running to her every time she calls. Every. Time.”

Her unusual tone brought him up short, and he stopped running his fingers through his hair to stare at her apprehensively. “That’s not true—”

“And you know what else? I think you enjoy it.”

“Okay, that is *not* fair—”

She ignored his defensiveness and plowed on, even though she hated what she was going to say. “You do,” she said bleakly. “It’s obvious to me, even if you can’t see it. You love having her need you. You love saving her. You love the drama of it all, of being able to be the knight on a white horse.”

Graham angrily lurched to his feet and grabbed his jacket off the sofa. “That’s crazy and you know it—”

She stood as well, and her voice rose over his. “You need to have someone need you, and the more helpless the woman, the better. You couldn’t save Kat, but you can save Juliet—” He spun around and glared at her with a fury that made her take a step back. But she couldn’t seem to stop herself—she needed to get it all out. “I think ... I think you prefer a damsel in distress over ... over anyone. Including me. Maybe you *aren’t* ready for a real relationship yet.”

“Emmie,” he said, deadly calm, “you’re over the line.”

“Graham,” she said carefully, reluctantly, “if you go over there now, don’t bother coming back.”

The pained look on his face would have broken her heart if it wasn’t in the process of splintering already. His voice was ragged when he pleaded, “Don’t ...”

Emmie bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling, and she forced herself to keep looking him straight in the eye. “I mean it. Don’t come back.”

He stood stock still for a moment, then moved for the door. “I have to check on her. I thought you’d understand.” And with one last agonized look at her, he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

Emmie stood, frozen, in the middle of the living room. Had she just done that? Given Graham an ultimatum? And he had chosen Juliet over her? She put a hand to her mouth, disbelieving. She felt weak and a little sick. What if he really didn’t come back? She collapsed on the couch but sat staring into the shadows the flickering fire cast on the walls. She drew her knees up and knocked her forehead against them. That was ... so stupid.

And finally the tears came.

Chapter 19

Graham didn't come back that night, and he hadn't called since. She knew he was a proud person—not overly so, of course, but enough that he would stay away from her if she told him to. And she had told him to, in no uncertain terms.

So day after day, she woke up in the morning, dragged herself to work, sat at her desk, performed only the most minimal of her duties, then dragged herself home again. She dodged calls from Trish and Avery, but when she knew Trish was out taking Logan to get his cast off, she called her friend's home phone and left as cheerful a message as she could without saying anything at all. Somehow that worked, because her bestie left her alone after that, evidently accepting her "so busy with work" excuse and assuming she was spending all her time with Graham. Thank goodness she never told Trish or Avery about her ... er ... *plans* for Tuesday night. Otherwise nothing would have kept them from tracking her down to find out how it went. *Oh, yeah*, she could have told them, *it was just like the movies. Titanic, to be precise. Without the nookie—just the iceberg.*

She also barely acknowledged her father's return from his vacation, and Wilma's as well. While she brought her boss up to date on the status of their various clients, Wilma, sensing a change in her but unsure of the cause, eyed her suspiciously. He didn't say much of anything, however, except, "Here. This is from Travis," as he dropped a cheesy tiki statue on her desk. The thing's wooden grimace drew a smile out of her, and she positioned it next to her stapler.

About an hour later, however, a bellow of "Emmaline!" came from behind her, bringing their stilted detente to an end.

"*What*, may I ask," he said with a sniff, his voice dripping with disdain, "is ... *this*?"

She turned around to find Wilma standing halfway between her and the back of the office, dangling something from his fingers like a dead rat. Her old, broken bra.

Before she could speak, he blurted out, his face turning a fascinating shade of oh-so-last-decade dining room crimson, “What in *God’s* name have you been doing in my absence?”

At this point, the Old Emmie would have hurriedly come up with some excuse, obsequiously apologizing and babbling some long-winded tale of how her bra came to be squirreled away in the vanity. (How had he found it? Why was he rooting around at the back of the cabinet? Then again, maybe it was best not to know.) But not now. The New Emmie—the also depressed, Graham-less, and homeless Emmie—was feeling more self-destructive than apologetic. She shrugged and went back to her work. She knew that giving Wilma the blank expanse of her back would really get him going, and she couldn’t resist tipping him over the edge. Keeping her eyes on her computer screen, she teased, “You don’t *really* want to know that, do you, John?”

“Emmaline,” he said in a choked voice, as if the bra had come to life and was now throttling him, “if I find that you have been using this office to ... to engage in some ... sordid ...” He couldn’t even finish, but Emmie got the gist of what he was trying to say.

She almost laughed. The office! Why hadn’t she thought of that? Well, probably because it was the last place she’d want to do anything of the sort. Not even Graham’s magnetic draw could get her to consider that. But she gave her boss an evil grin over her shoulder and said, “I’ll never tell.”

“Emmaline!”

For a split second she thought he really was going to choke to death—or have a heart attack. He’d gone from early twenty-first-century dining room red to an alarming exterior-accent aubergine. Emmie didn’t really want to be responsible for his demise (despite her frequent daydreams to the contrary), so she said hurriedly, “Relax, John. My bra broke when the Hudsons were here, and I didn’t want it to be sitting there on display in the bathroom wastebasket, so I hid it in the vanity. I just forgot to get rid of it. All right?”

The cartoon steam whistle Emmie thought she could hear accompanying his rising blood pressure faded, as did his unusual color. When it was back down to a mere powder-room muted-currant red, he started to turn away with a disgusted, “What else I’m going to find in the dark recesses of this place, I’m afraid to think—” when Emmie cut him off.

“You know, John,” she snapped, “you could say thank you.”

“For what? For leaving your undergarments all over the office?”

“For holding down the fort, when I could have been on vacation myself.” She didn’t say that it was only a short drive to Albany with Graham; it would have been like a trip to Paris to her. “For nailing down new clients—the Hudsons—for you, while you were gone,” she said, thinking, *And you have no idea how much of that was my doing.* “And,” she muttered, turning back to her desk, “for putting up with your crap.”

“*Pardon me?*”

Oh, yeah, that was a bit much. But it had been a long time coming. So she went with it. Spinning her chair around to look him squarely in the eye, she said, quite clearly, “You heard me. For putting up with your crap, I said. And you dish out plenty.”

Wilma’s color started rising again. “You ... could be replaced ... so easily,” he hissed.

She grabbed her purse off the floor and stood up. “You couldn’t get anyone else to last more than a day and a half, and you know it. Let’s cut to the chase: You’re a pain in the ass. Everybody thinks it, even though very few people actually say it. To your face, that is. You should be grateful *I’ve* put up with *you* this long. Plus I’ve brought in two—no, three—clients for you in the past few months, and you haven’t even bothered to say thank you, let alone give me any additional responsibility or, God forbid, a bonus. So who’s in the wrong here?”

“Three clients? What in the world are you talking about? You’ve done no such—”

She ticked them off on her fingers. “Annette Polschuk.” Wilma crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “The Hudsons.” He added a scoffing noise. “And Graham Cooper.”

He pounced on that. “I’ll have you know that Graham Cooper sought me out because I’m the best in the business.”

“Graham Cooper sought you out because he’d heard of you, but he *signed* with you because he wanted *me*,” she said, her voice tripping over tears she didn’t think she still had left inside. “And don’t you forget it.” She stomped over to the coatrack. “And, *not* that I owe you any explanation, but I’m going over to Mr. Cooper’s house now, in fact, to check on the painters’ progress. Then I’m going to lunch. A long lunch. I’ll be back when I’m back.”

Emmie had been avoiding Graham’s work site, but she had to go there now, and not for the reason she gave Wilma. She had received a check—a very generous one—from the insurance company, and she had already decided to sign the entire thing over to Graham. She knew that the hours his workers were putting in on her house, including overtime, even on Saturdays, to get it back into shape as quickly as possible were costing him a fortune, not to mention slowing down his own renovation. And although she knew he was a man of his word and would stick to his promise of fixing her house for free—no matter that their relationship had imploded almost before it began—she couldn’t expect him to be that generous.

Her stomach was in knots on the way over, but she didn’t see Graham’s car parked out in front of the house. In fact, there wasn’t another soul in sight—they’d all knocked off for lunch. Perfect. She could leave the check on Graham’s makeshift desk in the front room.

Emmie pushed open the front door she’d found at her favorite architectural salvage company. It was bare, stripped of all the layers of old paint and sanded smooth. She and Graham had discussed painting it a glossy forest green, but that hadn’t been done yet. The foyer smelled strongly of paint stripper; the

pocket doors were leaning up against the wall, cleaned up and repaired, waiting to be stained and reinstalled in the library and parlor doorways. She wandered through the house, astonished at the progress the workers were making in record time. Although Emmie was glad Graham wasn't around at the moment, she couldn't bear the thought that, about eight months from now, the house would finally be finished, and she'd have no connection to him at all. That would be the end of it—of them, or the possibility of them. Completely. He would be off in Julietland, and she would be ... Where, exactly? She didn't know.

Emmie slipped into the master bedroom and shut the door with a muted snap. She had every right to be in the room, but she still felt like an interloper. She leaned against the closed door, remembering how Graham had pressed her up against it, had kissed her so passionately. She refused to cry again. Her makeup costs had been going through the roof lately.

The room was empty, except for a pile of paint-spattered canvas drop cloths. The old, faded wallpaper had been stripped, the ceiling and wall plaster repaired, and the walls sanded smooth. She had gone back and forth for the longest time, trying to decide on paint or wallpaper to replace the forget-me-nots. Graham had voted for paint—a deep, rich color, something sensuous, he had said—and the way he had rolled the words around on his tongue had made her heart flutter. Hypnotized by his warm baritone, she could barely stammer her professional opinion of adding a very subtle faux finish to give the walls some depth. He had been open to that. So the walls were going to be a rich, burnished copper, accented by the lightest of tan brush strokes that wouldn't stand out unless you were looking for them, up close. The colors would complement the bricks of the repaired fireplace perfectly. Even now, just the thought of spending an evening in that room, in a vast canopied antique bed, with horn-shaded wall-sconce lights dimmed, the moon hanging outside the bank of windows, the fire glowing in the shadows, made her swoon ... or perhaps it was the thought of spending an evening in there *with Graham* more than the trappings. Of course,

having him there *among* all that other stuff would be the best scenario of all. She wasn't greedy. Much.

She shook herself. Didn't matter. Wasn't going to happen. Not now, not ever. *Get used to it*, she ordered herself, and opened the bedroom door. There was no reason to spend another second there; it wasn't healthy to remember Graham's kisses, or to fantasize about a future that was about as likely as her getting a chance to decorate the governor's mansion.

She stepped into the hall—and there was Graham, on the top step of the staircase, looking as shocked as she felt. Every nerve ending in her body went on high alert. She felt like she had been caught, even though she hadn't been doing anything wrong. Sure enough, Graham glanced at her, then at the doorway to the bedroom, obviously wondering what she had been doing in there.

"I, uh ... I was just," she stammered, "you know ..."
Thinking of you naked. "Checking the walls. They're nice and ... smooth ... I think the walls will take the paint really well ... now." *Oh, God, shut up.* Her face felt like it was on fire. She sputtered to a halt and cleared her throat slightly.

"Hi," he said. He looked more sad than angry, but no matter what his emotion, his guard was certainly up.

"Hi," she answered, but couldn't form more words. Finally she managed, "How ... how's it going?"

"Fine."

Fine. It was quite evident that everything was most certainly not fine. "Okay. Good."

"The guys are at lunch," he said.

"I'm here to see you, actually."

Was it her imagination, or did he brighten up a little? "Oh?"

"Yeah, I ..."
She wanted to throw herself on his mercy, fling her arms around him, and beg him to take her back. But she didn't. New Emmie wouldn't let her. She kind of hated New Emmie at the moment. "I came here to give you this." And she took a step toward him, holding the envelope containing the

check at arm's length. He looked at it for a moment, then took it from her slowly.

He glanced into the envelope and said, "Emmie, I told you ___"

"I know. No charge. But *I* told *you* that I wanted to pay you for your trouble, so here it is. Please take it."

Graham studied her. She knew he wanted to seize on her cruelly distancing words "pay you for your trouble," but he refrained. Instead he said, patiently and not unkindly, "We've gone over this. This is way too much." He almost smiled. "This isn't just for rebuilding your house; you're also supposed to use it to buy furniture and replace your personal items."

"I know that," she replied, somewhat irritated that he was treating her as though she were as stupid as ... well, Juliet. But the last thing in the world she wanted was to cruise her usual haunts for an authentic iron bedstead with the springs still intact, or an armoire with a vintage shellac finish or the original milk paint. The way she felt, she might as well just order a dozen items of flat-pack furniture from IKEA and have done with it. She really didn't care.

He just looked at her, silent, until she sighed and said, "Fine. Then I'll give you two thirds of it."

"Nope. Too much."

"Three quarters, then."

"You're going the wrong way."

"One more word out of you and the only thing I'm going to keep is the spare change."

She definitely saw the corner of his mouth turn up a little bit that time. Finally he held up his hands in surrender. "All right," he said. "Deposit that and let's go with a third. Which is still too much."

Emmie sighed in frustration. "Half."

He acquiesced. "Okay."

Another pause. To fill it, Emmie blurted out the first neutral thing she could think of. “Did the kitchen counter come in yet?”

Graham’s half smile failed, as he likely was disappointed to be talking work. “Not yet. Early next week, they said.”

Emmie nodded slowly. “Okay. Good.”

“Uh ... the guys reinforced the staircase and put the new spindles in yesterday. Did you see them?” She looked past him—yep, those were spindles. “They did some good work, don’t you think?”

She nodded, then said, “I should go—” and started to move past him.

But Graham stepped in front of her. “Wait. Please. I ... was going to ask you to do something for me. For the house.” She waited. “I know we’ve talked over pretty much every detail, but I realized there’s one thing that we haven’t covered.”

Emmie wracked her brain to figure out what he was talking about. They had conferred on every point—every stick of furniture, every accessory, every color for the walls, every roll of wallpaper, every light fixture, every tile, every appliance. There wasn’t one thing they had left out. Was there?

He glanced past her, at the door she had just exited. “Can you outfit the master bedroom—a bed, mattress, chairs, chests, lamps, whatever else you can think of?”

“I thought you said you were going to use the furniture you had. Did I get that wrong?”

“No, you’re right—I did say that. But I’ve changed my mind.”

“Okay. Sure,” she stammered. “What sort of style did you have in mind?”

“Why don’t you take care of it?”

“What?”

“Just ... whatever you like best. What you would want to, uh, wake up to. As a woman,” he rushed to add.

Well, that last bit sure was a pin in the ol' balloon, she had to admit to herself. For a split second she thought ... but no. He was asking not for the opinion of Emmie Brewster, Erstwhile Girlfreh, but the opinion of Emmie Brewster, Female, Generic. *Humph.*

“I see,” she said, while inwardly she groaned, *Are you trying to kill me?* Selecting furniture by pretending to be the mistress of the house, and then wondering who was going to benefit from her artistic skill and personal preferences in the long run, was going to make her crazy.

“Okay,” he breathed, with a tight smile. “Great. Thanks.”

Their conversation essentially over, they both stood there, knowing that it was time for Graham to go back to work and for Emmie to leave, but neither one moved. Emmie fidgeted. “Um ... I ... I’m surprised to see how much progress the guys have made on the master bedroom.”

“Oh. Yeah,” Graham said, shoving his hands in his pockets. His nervous gesture. “I asked them to. I liked your design so much, I really wanted to see what it would look like, finished. You know?”

Emmie didn’t know. These were not the sentiments of a professional architect. Those guys were usually more interested in underlayment. Drainage. Supporting walls. Fluidity of form. Making a house strong and sturdy and built to last. They were never preoccupied with finishing touches—not till it was time, anyway. Emmie didn’t want to add to her thoughts, *That’s why I love this man.* That wouldn’t do. At all.

As if from a great distance, a phone started ringing, but that didn’t rouse Emmie, who found herself mesmerized by the steady gaze of his deep blue eyes.

“I think that’s yours,” he said quietly.

She blinked. After a moment, her brain caught up, and she pulled her cell out of her coat pocket. “It’s John. I ... I have to go.”

She stuffed the phone back in her pocket without answering it and forced herself to keep her eyes downcast as she moved

past Graham. She couldn't get caught up in his gaze again.

And suddenly Graham said in a rush, "Emmie, please. Talk to me. I miss you—"

She opened her mouth, not sure what was going to come out—a rejection? a desperate "I miss you, too"?—when there was another sound. This time *his* cell phone was ringing.

He looked at the screen, then at her. "It's John." She started to shake her head, to tell him not to answer, but he pressed a button and said, "Graham Cooper ... Oh, hello, John. Emmie? Yes, she's here ... Did you try her phone? ... Oh." He glanced at Emmie. Her eyes must have been as big as saucers, because he said to Wilma, "Well, you know, I think she's busy with ... er ... " Emmie mimed a roller in the air. "Washing windows?" Emmie rolled her eyes and pretended to paint the wall nearest her. Graham tweaked to it. "I mean, with the painters right now ... Yeah. Can I give her a message? ... Okay, John. Will do."

When he ended the call, Emmie asked, "Did he sound angry?"

Graham looked concerned. "Yeah, he did. He said he wants you back at the office right away."

She swallowed heavily; apparently Wilma was ready for Round Two. "I'd better go."

"I think I should come with you."

She shook her head, incredulous. "Graham ... why? What in the world could you do?" He opened his mouth but remained silent, closed his lips, shrugged. She went on, softly, "You're doing it again."

"Doing what again?"

"Trying to protect everyone, fix everything."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I ... ? Are you serious—you don't see this?" She took a breath and decided to dive in, but leave Juliet out of it this time. "Look at how you fill your life: You fix *everything*. Houses. People. You're constantly trying to single-handedly

save the world.” Graham started to protest, but she rushed on, “You do. Even now—you’re probably completely furious with me, and *still* you want to help fix something for me that isn’t even your fight.”

The handsome man before her was silent, his eyes searching her face for ... what? She wasn’t sure.

“Look,” she tried again, “you want to help me, to take care of things, make everything better ... and I could really, *really* get used to that. But I won’t. I can’t. I’m a big girl, and I need to slay my own scary dragons. That’d be John, in case you’re wondering,” she added.

Graham smiled in spite of Emmie’s earnestness. “He is sort of scary, in a dragon-y kind of way. Maybe it’s the ... you know ...” He gestured loosely, drawing his fingers into a cone in front of his face. “Maybe it’s the teeth.”

She smiled a little, but stayed on topic. “You understand, right?”

He sighed. “Honestly, no, I don’t understand. I want to help you ...” He stopped, changed his emphasis. “I want to help *you*, because I—”

“Don’t,” she cut him off. “Don’t say it.”

“Why not, if I mean it?”

“You know why.” Her phone rang again. She tore her eyes away from his anguished gaze, glanced at her phone. “It’s John again. I really have to go.”

Chapter 20

Emmie dutifully took her sorry butt back to the office as fast as her little Honda could carry her. While it had been cathartic reading Wilma the riot act and gloriously stalking out, she knew she was now going to pay for it, and every additional minute she was late getting back was going to cost her even more dearly. So when she flew into the claustrophobic parking lot behind the small brick building that housed Wilman Designs, she nearly freaked out when she saw that somebody had planted a Hummer H3 in her parking spot. (Okay, technically it wasn't *her* spot, but she figured it was hers by four years' worth of squatter's rights.)

She took a quick moment to marvel at how the driver had, in fact, not only successfully squeezed the automotive behemoth down the narrow drive between buildings, but also had managed to swing nearly 180 degrees to park without playing bumper cars with the other vehicles. Then she pulled out to find a spot on the street, vowing to submit an expense report for whatever she ended up paying at a parking meter.

As she drove past the office at a crawl, searching for an open parking space, she caught a glimpse of Wilma through the front windows. She noticed his nervous pacing (thank goodness he wasn't looking out the window as she passed) and her stomach clenched. And then New Emmie quietly stepped forward. Why should she voluntarily go to her own flogging? She knew it was going to be ugly, and she knew she was going to have to face him sooner or later, but it didn't have to be now. Dear God, not after the gut-wrenching experience of seeing Graham. She was tapped out.

Emmie swung her car into an open spot down the block, dug out some change for the meter, and started walking—in the opposite direction from the office. There was no time like the present to look for the bedroom set Graham had requested. It was a bit of a hike to get to Rod's Roost, her favorite haunt for vintage furniture, but she needed to clear her head.

When she pulled on the glass door of the cavernous warehouse, she let out a huge, relieved, satisfied sigh. She inhaled the familiar scent of mildewy fabric, aged leather, and old wood. There was nothing like antique hunting to make her feel better.

She strolled among the furniture, running her fingertips over the decorative tacks on the arm of a low, deep leather club chair and the delicate carving on a fine walnut armoire. Rod's wasn't the fanciest place in the area, not by a long shot, and there was a lot of junk mixed in with the good stuff. But with a little bit of patience and persistence, she always found amazing treasures in the dusty corners of the sprawling building.

Rod was in the back, behind the Formica counter, on the phone. He waved to her and she smiled and pointed up. She was headed for the second floor, a vast loft expanse where the bedroom sets were on display. He nodded. She knew he'd follow her up when he was done with his phone call, but for the moment she was glad for some time alone.

It was cold upstairs; some of the grimy windows of the former factory were broken, and at least one or two were still propped open from summer, when the place was stifling and any breath of air was welcome. The dusty floorboards creaked under her snow boots. It was so silent, she would have been a little weirded out if she hadn't been so familiar with the place. She passed a row of nightstands and wash-basin tables, then dozens of head- and footboard sets leaning up against the walls, as she made for the full suites farther back. As she wandered in the gloom, she heard Rod coming up the stairs behind her.

"Miss Emmaline!" he said in a jovial, lilting voice, puffing a little after his exertion of getting up the staircase. Rod used to be in a Motown group back in the record company's '60s heyday, and Emmie could still hear the music in his voice. "To what do I owe this honor today?"

"Hey, Rod."

“Whatcha looking for?” he asked. “Because I got it. You know I do. And if I don’t got it, I’ll find it, just for you.”

“I know you will.” The briefest of smiles flitted across her face—not her usual reaction to Rod’s kindness.

“Now, what’s the matter, little girl?” he said, frowning. “You don’t look so good.”

She pushed her hands into her coat pockets and shrugged. “I’m fine, Rod. Just one of those days, you know?”

“Aw, now,” he said, “I don’t like to hear that from my best girl.”

“I’m okay,” she reassured him. And the more time she spent in his presence, the better she felt. “Really.”

“Maybe buying up some nice furniture make you happy.”

“It always does.”

“You still working on that old house on West?”

“Yep. Master bedroom this time.”

“Well, whatcha got in mind?”

Emmie said, “Well, Graham—Mr. Cooper—gave me free rein for this one, and I have to admit, it’s a little intimidating.”

“Aw, he trusts you.” Rod winked. “That’s quite an honor.” Then he went to work. “Well, you know we got all these lined up by era. You want 1820s, like the house, you start here and go about halfway back. Mahogany, oak, you name it. You get into the later Victorian stuff, though, it’s dark—heavy. Bedroom big enough to handle it?”

“You have no idea.”

Rod laughed his deep, gurgling chuckle. “Well, all right.” The shop’s phone rang again. “You look around. I be back to check on you. You find something, I know it. And I get you a good deal—you trust your Uncle Rodney now.” And he lumbered back down the stairs, talking the entire time, mumbling variants of what he had just said to her.

Emmie wandered the full length and breadth of the warehouse's top floor. Rod did indeed have everything, from sets that might have been brought over on the *Mayflower* to bright brass that looked like it had done time on the set of *Miami Vice*. She snickered at one of the more modern pieces, loaded with brass and plastic. She knew she shouldn't laugh, though. Right now the style was a joke, but give it fifty more years, and it'd be a collector's item. Not yet, though. Right now it was the height—or depth—of tacky kitsch.

She made her way to the period pieces, considered a sleigh bed, rejected an ornate French Provincial set, toyed with a Shaker theme. What to get? What would Graham like? Then she remembered his instructions—to get what *she* would like. What she would like to wake up to, he said. The images that conjured up in her head made her shiver. *Focus, Emmaline*, she commanded herself. She sighed and closed her eyes, picturing that beautiful bedroom space. What would she pick if it were hers? But dammit, Graham was in her mental picture anyway. So she indulged her fantasy: What would she pick if the bedroom were *theirs*?

And then she knew exactly what she wanted. She went back through the rows of matching furniture. Rod had to have what she was thinking of. He had everything.

Moments later, Rod rejoined her in the loft. He stood beside her in front of her choice, nodding in approval. “Nice,” was all he said.

Emmie gritted her teeth, pushing her hands deeper into her coat pockets and hunching her shoulders against the cold. Why had she decided to walk to Rod's, again? Oh, yeah—to clear her head. Well, it was clear all right—cleared clean out by the frigid wind that barreled down the street, funneled straight at her between the tall buildings, carrying what felt like splinters of ice jamming themselves into her watering eyeballs and numb cheeks. The only thought in her head right now was to get someplace warm—even the office would be a welcome respite at this point.

She rounded a corner, and the cutting wind eased up. She had left the warehouse district behind and entered the quainter area of the city, with small shops and wide sidewalks. The last time she had strolled around this area was the night of the winter festival, when she and Avery had gone on their date and run into Graham and Juliet. God, it seemed so long ago. And Juliet had dragged them to her shop ... and she and Graham had had their little tête-à-tête in the back room. Under other circumstances, she would have cherished that memory, especially since she knew now that Graham had already been attracted to her. It cast that evening in a whole new light. As it was, though, the thought of their moment in the shadows just plunged her back into the despair she thought she had shaken off by chatting with Rod.

And then there it was—Juliet’s shop, on the next block. Emmie considered crossing the street. But she steeled herself. New Emmie would never cross the street just to avoid an empty shop. Fer chrissakes!

The wind picked up again, and her eyes watered against the cold. As another blast of frigid air hit her, Emmie turned up the collar of her coat as far as it would go, which wasn’t anywhere near far enough. She buried her nose in the faux fur around the top button and pushed on, occasionally bumping shoulders with other pedestrians because she wasn’t looking up, but instead down into her coat to keep her nose warm.

She stopped at the corner, at least retaining the presence of mind to wait for the light to change so she could cross the side street. She squinted at the crossing sign—still a red hand—and then she focused past it.

Juliet.

Juliet on the sidewalk, shivering in tan riding pants (designer, of course) tucked into expensive-looking leather boots and topped by a deep green chunky-knit turtleneck sweater. Of course only Juliet would still look slim in that hefty a sweater. She had her arms crossed just below her chest, and she was talking with ... Graham.

Emmie felt stuck to the curb. Even though the stoplight changed, she stayed on the corner while other people bumped around her. She couldn't take one step forward, wouldn't get any closer to them. She watched as Juliet reached out a hand and rubbed Graham's upper arm briskly. She smiled, didn't she? Emmie could see that. And then she felt her stomach flip over. The couple before her embraced and stayed in a tight hug for a moment.

Graham and Juliet parted, and Emmie knew she had to disappear. *Move*, she commanded herself. *Move before he sees you*. But she was still rooted to the spot by the sight of the two of them together. Why had she ever even dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, Graham had gotten rid of that millstone around his neck? Then again, why had she ever dared to think that he *wanted* to be rid of her?

After exchanging a couple more words, Juliet went back in her shop. As Graham turned to go, he seemed to glance her way. That finally got Emmie to dislodge herself from the corner. She spun around and practically sprinted the other way, on alert for his voice calling her name.

And she wasn't sure if she wanted him to come after her or not.

By the time she got back to the office, her feet were so frozen she felt as though she were walking on stumps. But she didn't go inside. Instead, she hurried to her car, jumped in, and drove off. She just wanted to go home and hide ... and then she remembered that her father was back. She couldn't bear having to make small talk, hear about his trip, explain to him why she was home in the middle of the day. Good grief, she had no place to go.

She drove to her house, parked on the street, watched the workers come and go. She needed her house back, she decided. Sooner rather than later. Then she could hole up in her sacred space and not come out again. For anything. Ever.

Emmie tumbled out of her car, flew past a couple of carpenters, and burst through her front door. "Mitch!" she

called, almost in a panic. “Mitch?”

“Down here!” she heard a voice shout from the basement.

Emmie rushed down the stairs, the same ones Graham had so chivalrously navigated to get her some clothes to wear the day after the fire. Now the steps were clean and dry, and a couple of them had been replaced, the yellowish-green pressure-treated wood, still to be painted, standing out from the others. The basement was brightly lit, the block walls gleaming with a new coat of glossy white paint.

The job foreman was in the corner, fingers hooked in his tool belt, talking with the electrician, who was noodling with something in the breaker box. When she rushed up to him, he said, “Hey, Emmie. What’s up? You okay?”

She nodded and spoke quickly. “I need to get back in the house. To live. Right away.”

He frowned. “Well, we’ve still got a lot to—”

“Please,” she begged. “I just ... I *need* my house back. Please.” Mitch studied her with concern, and she tried to hold it together and sound calm. “I promise I won’t get in anybody’s way. I’ll sleep on the sofa. I’ll go in to work early and stay late, too; I won’t come home till you’ve left for the day.”

After considering the implications for a few moments, he sighed and scratched his chin beneath his beard. “Okay, how about this. We work double-quick for the rest of the week, and you can have your house on Friday. How’s that sound?”

Emmie’s eyes lit up. “Really?” It was more than she had hoped for.

“Sure.” Mitch smiled gently. “Yeah, we can do that.” He shook his head and chuckled. “My men are gonna hate me, but ...”

“Oh, please, Mitch.”

“Can you hold out that long?”

“I’ll try.”

With something to look forward to, Emmie's spirits rose, and she decided she could manage to spend the rest of the day in the office, no matter what Wilma flung at her. On the drive back, she thought of one more thing that would make her feel even better. She pulled into a strip mall parking lot and called Rod.

"Miss Emmaline!" he cried. "Talking to you twice in one day—now that's a *good* day. You calling with a delivery date for Mr. Cooper's bedroom suite?"

"Not yet, Rod. I'll let you know when they're ready for it. But there's something else."

"You name it, little girl."

"I've changed my mind. About the furniture."

"What's that you say?"

"I think a different set would suit Mr. Cooper's master bedroom better. Got a pencil?"

She rattled off the specifics, and Rod dutifully wrote them down, then asked hesitantly, "Emmaline, my girl, you sure about this?"

"Completely."

"Well, all right. I'll set it aside, and you let me know when they want it delivered to the house."

"I'll do that, Rod. Thanks for everything. I owe you one."

Chapter 21

The night before she moved back home, Emmie left Wilma a voice mail telling him that she was going to be taking the day off. She didn't *ask*, and she didn't care how Wilma felt about it. In fact, they hadn't spoken since their last bust-up. For some reason, Wilma had chosen to hit her with the silent treatment instead of another round of aggravation, and Emmie was fine with that, even though the tension in the office was so thick you could slice it with an upholstery foam cutter.

Emmie finally got in touch with Trish, just to tell her she was moving back into her home, but like a bloodhound, her bestie picked up on the scent of trouble and dragged the truth out of her. Not that she put up much of a fight. Even though Emmie had been operating on autopilot for days, Trish's concern broke down her barriers, and she told her that she and Graham had broken up, and why. She tried to tell Trish everything that happened after that, but she couldn't manage to get it all out, so she just stopped.

Although she turned down Trish's offer to help her move, her friend declared, "Then I'm bringing some groceries over. And alcohol. Just the essentials. We'll talk more then."

"If you insist."

Emmie's father reacted differently, much to her surprise. He actually looked dejected that she was moving out again.

"Dad!" she chided. "You're supposed to be glad to have your bachelor pad back."

Her father nudged his dinner plate away. "Are you absolutely sure, Emmaline?"

"What, that I want to go home? Yeah, I'm pretty sure," she said sarcastically. She couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

"This is always your home, too, you know."

She smiled gently. "No, Dad, it isn't. And that's fine. You were right, you know—I have to move on, live my own life. And so do you."

“And whatever happened with that Graham fella?”

Emmie took a sip of her tea to stall. “Uh ... the timing was bad,” she said lamely.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Emmaline—”

“He’s got somebody else,” she said abruptly. No use watering it down.

Bob Brewster frowned. “And he was stringing you along? I didn’t think he was the type—”

“He’s not. Graham is a good person. He’s ... one of the best people I’ve ever met, in fact. It’s just ... he thought he was over this other woman, but it turns out he’s not.”

“He told you this?”

“I figured it out.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, punkin.”

Her father hadn’t called her that in more than twenty years. She went around to his end of the table, gave him a hug. “I am, too, Dad. But I’ll be fine. Now let’s talk about you—you should get your act together, too.”

“What! My ‘act’ is together, young lady. Has been for years. Decades.”

“I’m talking about Concetta. She seems to be a very nice lady. Why don’t you call her, see if you can get back in her good graces.” When he hesitated, she added, “What was that you said about not wasting time?”

Her father let out a sigh. “I knew that advice was going to come back to bite me in the ass.” She laughed and gave him another squeeze. “But Emmaline ... what about ... ?”

“What about what, Dad?”

“Who’s going to cook me my dinner?”

She cuffed him gently on the shoulder. “Dad! You can cook! I know you weren’t starving to death all last year when I wasn’t here.”

“But you’re a girl—you’re better at it.”

“Chauvinist. Get back together with Concetta, see if she lets you get away with that sort of crap.”

* * *

Friday morning dawned bleak and cold, just like most mornings in the dead of winter in the hinterlands of New York. Emmie’s cell phone rang at eight thirty, and she was still in bed—no need to wake up early just to move a handful of items into her old home, she reasoned. She squinted at the screen with bleary eyes.

“Shit,” she muttered, then answered, “Lo?”

“Emmaline.” Wilma’s voice was as cold and dry as the winter wind rattling the bedroom windows. Just as cutting, too.

“Yeah,” she croaked.

“When we began Mr. Cooper’s project, what did I instruct you to do, at *every* step of the way?”

She sighed deeply, not caring if it came across as a loud “whuf ” in Wilma’s ear. “To clear everything with you,” she recited dutifully. “Which I have been doing right along.”

“And yet you left me a voice mail, which I only discovered this morning, that you would not be in today. But you did not give me an update on the status of Mr. Cooper’s project. This morning Mr. Cooper called, asking about bedroom furniture. Imagine my *embarrassment* , Emmaline, when I did not have any information for him!”

Emmie rolled her eyes. “What about it?”

“He asked to talk with you, and when I told him you weren’t in, he was *quite* distraught—” *Oh, yeah*, Emmie thought, *Graham was so often “distraught.”* “So he asked *me* about the furniture delivery. Yet because you did not tell me where you purchased it, I could not schedule a delivery! He says he wants it *today!*”

Oh, the horror. How could one bear it? With another sigh, she said, “Relax. I’ll take care of it. He’ll get it today.” And

she hung up and sank back into the mattress, pulling her comforter up over her head.

About an hour later, she contacted Rod and, true to form, he promised her they'd get the furniture over to Graham's house before lunch. *Good ol' Rodney*, Emmie thought. *That's the way you do business*. The kindly gentleman could teach Wilma a thing or two or twelve about keeping one's cool.

After the furniture delivery was settled, Emmie showered and dressed, then put her remaining clothes in her laundry basket. Unable to bear the sight of her new lingerie, she buried it deep in the pile. She was tempted to throw it all away, but since she didn't have much in the way of underwear lately, practicality won out and she kept it. But as soon as she could, she decided, she was heading back to the mall to buy her usual old-lady underthings. After all, look at what venturing out of your comfort zone got you. Just heartache. And chafed hipbones from lace trim.

She went downstairs and found a note from her father on the kitchen table stating that he was at the senior center. She let out a rueful laugh. That was her dad, all right—still running away from stuff he didn't want to deal with. At least his frantic dash didn't involve cruise ships or international flights this time. Then she saw the PS that said, "Hope to be playing euchre with Concetta." Well, that was something, anyway.

When Emmie got to her new/old home, she didn't know what to do with herself. There was nothing to unpack, except for the boxes of salvageable knickknacks and personal items the fire restoration company had collected and cleaned. There was no food—thank goodness Trish was bringing some later—and no coffee ... and even if there were, she didn't have a coffeemaker. She started to make a list of the appliances she needed to buy. Graham had been right; she definitely needed the insurance money to replace not only all her bedroom furniture, but also all the items in the rest of the house that were ruined from the water and smoke damage. She sat on her couch, which had survived the fire and been cleaned

beautifully, but she realized she had nothing to do in the living room. *Note: Replace TV. And iPod dock. And iPod.*

She wandered from room to room with a distinct feeling of unease. What the heck—she was home, for God’s sake. What she had longed for, for nearly two months. But she didn’t feel comfortable. She entered her rebuilt bedroom, which echoed in its emptiness and smelled strongly of the fresh coat of dusky lavender-gray paint on the walls. Emmie listened to the once-familiar soundtrack of life in a half-commercialized neighborhood: a car stereo thumping, a siren wailing in the distance, her neighbor’s yappy dog berating the car and the fire engine for daring to make noise—*rarf, rarf, rarf ... Didn’t miss you one bit, you mangy thing*, she thought.

Then she heard the sound of a truck putt-putting much closer to her home. Curious, she went out onto the front stoop, and sure enough, a large white delivery van was slowly inching up her narrow driveway, backup beeper piercing the air. The brakes screeched, the motor settled into an idling chug, and a familiar person jumped down from the driver’s seat.

The young man waved as he came around the front of the truck. It was Rodney III, Rod’s grandson, a tall, whip-thin young man who had been paying his dues on the loading dock and in the delivery truck for the past several years, as he learned the business from Rod Senior. He was waiting patiently till the older man felt Rodney III was knowledgeable enough to start working in the store. By the time his grandfather was ready to hand over the keys to the business, Rodney III would likely be an old man himself. But he was always cheerful, just as he was at this moment.

“Hi, Emmie,” he said, swinging a clipboard. The other two deliverymen climbed out of the passenger door of the cab, went around the back of the truck and, with a clank and a rumble, pulled out the metal ramp and rolled the back door up.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s your bedroom set.”

“My what? Rodney, there’s been a mistake. The bedroom set goes to West Street, to Mr. Cooper’s house.”

Rodney grinned; when he did, he looked just like his grandfather, even though he was a foot taller and far leaner than the old man. “Nope. We went to Mr. Cooper’s. He said to bring it here—signed off on it and everything.” He tapped the clipboard and leaped up her steps to show her his signature. “We didn’t even have to pull it off the truck for him to inspect. Said he trusted us. Real nice guy—paid us for the extra trip. Oh—he said to give you this.” He tugged a square envelope free from the clipboard’s clasp and handed it to her.

Shivering, although she wasn’t sure if it was from the cold or nerves, she ripped it open. A small piece of paper inside read:

Emmie—Sorry for all the cloak-and-dagger stuff, but I knew you wouldn’t accept this gift if I told you about it ahead of time. This was always meant to be your new bedroom set—my housewarming gift to you. I hope you picked something that will work in your place—I know your master bedroom and this one are a bit different. But you’ve got style and great taste, so I’m certain you’ve chosen something beautiful. I wish you all the best. Welcome home. All my love, Graham.

Emmie covered her eyes and hung her head. “Oh, no.”

“Emmie?” Rodney hesitated, then awkwardly patted her back. “Emmie? ... Should we go ahead and unload now?”

Emmie looked up at him, and although tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes, she was laughing. She swiped at her cheeks with the heel of her hand, looked at the note again, and took a quivering breath. “Yes, Rodney,” she said. She shook her head disbelievingly. “Yes. Please unload my new bedroom set.”

Emmie heard Trish let herself in the front door, but she didn't move to greet her friend. "Emmie? You here?" She didn't answer. "Hey, this looks good!" Trish called, her voice coming nearer as she made her way down the hall. Then she entered Emmie's new master bedroom and dropped her purse and keys on the floor. "What the hell."

Emmie was standing a few steps inside the doorway, arms crossed, hands cupping her elbows. "I know, right?"

"You lose a bet?"

"You could say that."

Filling the entirety of her otherwise-stunning bedroom squatted some of the nastiest furniture ever to escape the twentieth century. A low king-sized bed dominated the room. Trish and Emmie could see their reflection in the mirrored headboard, which was framed by swirls of pitted brass and chipped white tubing. The white nightstands, which barely fit on either side of the bed, even in Emmie's generously sized room, had mirrored drawer fronts and mirrored tops to match the headboard. Their legs were also made of the white tubing. The dresser and chest of drawers followed the same theme, with mirrored tops, but mercifully, no mirrored drawer fronts, although the edges were graced with gold paint, also chipped and discolored.

"It's like living inside a disco ball," Trish marveled. Then she nudged the dead animal at her feet. "And this?"

"Come on, white fur rugs were all the rage back in ... okay, never."

Trish pointed at a huge, hideous painting leaning against the wall and started to laugh. "What the ... What's *that*?" The image, of a woman's face, was blindingly white overall, her colorless skin blending with the white background, the only color a shock of garish red lips and cheeks, black eyelashes and thick black eyebrows, and a teased-up rooster's comb of black hair streaked with white.

Emmie looked at her helplessly. "Rod threw it in for free."

“Emmaline Helen Brewster, what did you do?” Trish demanded.

Emmie wasn't sure it was safe—structurally or health-wise—to sit on the caved-in, stained mattress, but she was beyond caring. She plopped down. Way down. “I was trying to be mean.”

“To?”

“To Graham.”

“What?”

Emmie flicked Graham's note at Trish, who plucked it out of her friend's fingers and read it. “You were mean to him and he got back at you by sending you this? Doesn't seem like him.”

“No.” She sighed. “He never even saw it. *I* bought it because he asked me to choose his bedroom furniture. I had something really nice picked out—an Eastlake tall-post bed, dressers with tiger maple inlay on the drawers, washstand with a marble shelf, rocking chair, the whole shebang. Gorgeous stuff. And then I saw him with Juliet and I just ... lost it. So I switched the nice stuff with the worst thing I could find in Rod's loft. But it turned out he really intended to give it to me the entire time—as a housewarming present.”

Trish let out a stunned grunt and sat beside her friend. “Wow.”

“Yeah, wow.”

“Why did you let them bring it into the house?”

“Because I totally deserve it. I deserve to stare at this nasty shit for the rest of my life, as a reminder that I'm a jealous, petty, horrible person, and Graham ...” She couldn't finish her sentence.

“Oh, you are not. And—wait. You saw him with Juliet? Are you sure?”

Emmie looked down at her lap and nodded. “I saw them outside Juliet's shop. I was walking back from Rod's, and I saw them from a distance. They didn't see me. They hugged

and ...” Her heart ached all over again as she related what she saw. She groaned. “I’m an idiot. I blew it. If I had stood by him while he tried to help her, we might still be ... But instead I just pushed them back together.”

“Hey,” Trish said, putting her arm around her. “No. That’s not true. You were right—he was being stupid, letting her control him, running off to her every time she whined, putting her first instead of you. That was no way to start a relationship.”

“But if I had waited ... just a little longer ... maybe he would have gotten rid of her.”

“Or maybe not.”

“Ultimatums are stupid things. They never get you what you want.”

“Pssht. Sometimes they’re necessary. It’s how Rick got me to marry him.” Trish rested her chin on the top of Emmie’s head.

“What?”

“Oh, yeah, don’t you remember? I was dragging my heels something fierce. He had to give me a deadline. If he didn’t, I’d probably still be waffling about it.”

Emmie laughed a little. “Twelve years later?”

“Maybe so.”

“No. That wouldn’t have happened. Because you, Patricia Ann Campo, are one smart cookie. I envy you so much; you always make the right decisions.”

Trish shook her head ruefully. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” she growled.

Something in her tone made Emmie forget her troubles for a moment. She looked her friend in the eye and demanded, “What is it?”

Trish shook it off. “Nothing. Come on, let’s get the groceries out of the car—and get away from this ridiculous furniture. And what’s that weird smell, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Emmie said, following her out of the room.
“I think it’s thirty-year-old Polo.”

Chapter 22

Despite her long weekend, Emmie overslept on Monday morning. By a lot. When her eyes focused enough to read the time on her new alarm clock, she jumped out of bed in a panic. The last thing she needed was to piss Wilma off even more.

But it seemed she had. The very second the front door bell jangled as she entered, her boss stalked out of his inner sanctum and struck a pose, arms crossed, a piece of paper in his hand. Not good. Not good at all.

Emmie glanced his way, then tried to act nonchalant as she hung up her coat. “Hi, John,” she said, crossing to her desk. She busied herself with turning her computer on so she wouldn’t have to look at him while she recited the lie she had concocted on the way over. “Sorry I didn’t call—I was, you know ... out getting ...” And then she trailed off as the day’s calendar loaded. There it was, already shaded out, as the time had passed: the meeting with Scrapbooking Wife and Plasma TV Guy.

Crap. Crappity crap, crap, crap. Was it that day already? On the one hand, she was glad she had missed it; on the other, apparently it hadn’t gone well—Wilma’s gargoyle grimace communicated as much.

Her boss held his pose in the middle of the room. She tried to keep her attention on her computer screen as if nothing was wrong, but that wasn’t going to work. She decided to dive in and get it over with. “How was the meeting with the Hudsons?”

Bingo. Wilma waved the piece of paper sharply, slicing the air with its edge. “Would you care to tell me what *this* is all about, Emmaline?”

“I would if I knew what it was,” she said disingenuously. He *couldn’t* have her drawing. She had made it disappear—took it out of her work bag and hid it in her old bedroom at her dad’s. So what was he holding?

Wilma got just close enough to slam it down on her desk, then stepped back as though she might take a swing at him.

Somewhere in the back of her mind it occurred to Emmie that he might be frightened of her. But she didn't have a chance to examine the thought, because her attention was arrested by the piece of paper before her. It *was* her concept for the Hudsons' remodel, only a little smaller, and black-and-white. A photocopy.

She looked up at her boss; his nostrils were pinched, as were his lips, and he was breathing heavily. She asked carefully, "Where did you get this?" But she knew. At the end of her disastrous meeting with the Hudsons, she'd left them alone long enough for Scrapbooking Wife to run her drawing through the copier while she was mucking about in the kitchenette. That woman didn't trust Emmie to leave the drawing in their file (well, she had been right about that), so she had made a backup.

Wilma said, "Mrs. Hudson said she wanted *this design*." He gestured at it with disgust. "Which she thought *I* had created. I assured her I had done no such thing, but she insisted the original had been in their file, *you* told them that it had been done for someone else, and you were trying to get more money out of them by acting reluctant to commit to this design unless they paid extra."

Emmie's jaw dropped. "John ... no. I swear—"

"Are you contradicting a client, Emmaline?"

"You bet I am!"

"I certainly didn't draw this. So that leaves you. Now, did you push your design on the Hudsons? Or have you been moonlighting, working for one of their neighbors?" he demanded.

Emmie rubbed her forehead. He was expecting her to confess to one false scenario or the other, but all she said was, "No."

"*No?*"

Emmie felt queasy. "I did not draw this for the Hudsons. Or anyone else. I did it for *myself*."

That stopped Wilma in his tracks. It was clear from the expression on his face that he didn't understand that in the slightest.

"I *do* have ideas, you know, John. In this case, after our meeting with the Hudsons, I put them down on paper, just to get them out."

"And then you waited until I was out of town, called them for a meeting, and proposed your concept over mine."

"*No*," Emmie insisted again. "*They* called and wanted ..." She couldn't continue. She couldn't stand there and explain what had happened that morning. Wilma wouldn't believe it. Hell, *she* couldn't believe it, and she had been there. So instead, she said, "I never meant for them to see it."

"It's terrible," he sniffed. "Amateurish. A five-year-old could do better."

Emmie knew he was trying to get a rise out of her, and she had to admit that it was working. She forced herself to take a breath. "What did you tell the Hudsons?"

He snapped, "I told them that if this is the sort of thing they want, they can take their business elsewhere. I recommended they take a decorating class at Home Depot and stop wasting my time."

"*Wow*," she marveled.

"Emmaline," he said in a clipped voice, "your excuse is unacceptable. And unbelievable. I cannot trust that you will not try to influence another client in the future, thereby jeopardizing my business and my reputation. Collect your things. You're fired."

Wilma couldn't look at her, as though he were ashamed of his decision. But he said it anyway. And when he was through, he marched back to his office, tossing over his shoulder, "I want you out of here in ten minutes."

"How do you feel?"

"... I'm not sure."

Fifteen minutes of quiet later, Trish ventured, “How about now?”

“Kinda numb.”

Half an hour of tea drinking later, Trish tried again. “Now?”

“You know, I’m a little hungry, actually.”

“There we go. I’ll make you a sandwich.” Trish got up from the dining room table to poke around in the fridge.

“Can you make some pudding, too?” Emmie called.

“Honey, after what you’ve put up with for the past four years—”

“Nearly five.”

“—nearly five years, I’ll make you a vat of pudding so big you can swim in it.”

Over the sound of Trish clattering around in the kitchen, she called, “Shouldn’t I be more ... I don’t know ... devastated?”

“Curled in a fetal position, wondering where your next meal is going to come from?”

“Something like that. Although I know I can always show up at your house for dinner every night.”

“Absolutely you can.”

“So how come I’m not blubbering and frantically trying to figure out what to say to Wilma to convince him to give me my job back?”

“Because, first of all, your tears reservoir has gone dry because of Graham.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Second, you should have told Wilma to stuff it years ago,” Trish declared, setting a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on honey wheat in front of her. “Getting fired is the best thing that could have happened to you. Now you can do whatever you want.”

Emmie considered for a moment. “I suppose I could go back to work at Michael’s,” she said, thinking of her first post-

college job at a craft store, back when she didn't know what to do with her design degree except sell yarn and hope to work her way up to the framing department.

“Er ... no.” Trish took the plastic clip off a half-full bag of potato chips. “I think you're beyond that, don't you?”

Emmie shrugged. “Somebody's gotta restock the bead racks.”

“And what about that little conversation we had, about going into business for yourself?”

“Maybe I can return all my new appliances for the cash,” Emmie mused, ignoring her friend.

“Honestly, woman!”

Emmie's phone rang from deep in the pocket of her coat, which was draped across the end of Trish's sofa. Emmie got up, dug out her phone, and turned it off. Then she calmly went back to eating her lunch.

“Hey, what if that was Wilma—he's seen the error of his ways and wants to beg you to come back to work?” Trish grinned.

Emmie shrugged. “I didn't look. Not interested.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, now we're making progress.”

* * *

But Emmie's curiosity got the better of her. Before she pulled out of Trish's driveway to head home, she put in her earpiece, fired up her voice mail, and listened to her messages as she started down the road. Both were from Graham, which made her catch her breath.

The first was, “Emmie? It's Graham. I was just, uh, calling to see ... how you're doing, if you'd slain your dragon. Or whatever. Hope you're all right. Please give me a call, okay? Okay. Uh, bye.”

In the second message, he sounded more worried. “Emmie, I just talked to John. He wouldn’t tell me anything, just that you don’t work for him anymore. I’m really concerned about you. I know you don’t want me to be, but I can’t help it. I care. So *please* call me and tell me what’s going on. I need to know you’re all right. If you don’t call me, I will hunt you down. I know where you live, you know.”

Emmie found herself melting, so much so that she had to pull over and get herself together. But she couldn’t, just couldn’t let herself fall into this once more. Not after seeing him with Juliet again ... still. Maybe someday he really would get rid of her (or she’d drop off the face of the earth—that’d be fine, too), and Emmie could have another chance. But there wasn’t any indication that was going to happen, and she’d be a fool to wait around, nursing her broken heart. She had been right to shut him down the other day, Emmie insisted to herself. She needed to get him out of her system. Even talking to him as a friend would kill her resolve. So she wasn’t going to call him back. Definitely not. Nope. Not going to call him back. If her finger just *happened* to scroll through her list of contacts, and then just *happened* to hit the “call” button, well, that would just be a crazy coincidence.

When her phone rang again, right in her hand, she yanked that wandering finger away as though she’d been burned. Was it Graham? Did they have some sort of psychic connection? Did he know she was thinking of calling him just then? She looked at the name on the screen and groaned. *Somebody* was psychic, but it wasn’t Graham.

“No fucking way.”

“Emmie? It’s Juliet! Juliet Winslow! Well, of course, you knew that, right?” Emmie was speechless as the voice she least wanted to hear peppered her ear with laughter. As though nothing were wrong. As though she hadn’t threatened to overdose on dog suppositories or stick her head in her electric oven because Graham wanted to break up with her. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you, young lady!” Juliet was saying in a mock-scolding voice. “I’ve been looking all over for you! When are you going to put me on your schedule, Miss

Busypants? We have *got* to get together—I want to hear your ideas for the shop!”

Stunned, Emmie could only choke out, “Um, I—I don’t ... I hadn’t—”

“Where are you?”

“Er, on the road.”

“Well, I’m at the shop. You get over here right now, ma’am! Do you hear me?” And Juliet laughed again to take the edge off her demands. “I won’t take no for an answer!”

Graham had once called Juliet a force of nature, and he sure knew what he was talking about. Juliet was like a tsunami of chatter, an avalanche of intense energy, and Emmie felt overwhelmed, powerless against her. Before she could stop herself, she heard herself say, in a voice far duller and more vacant than Juliet’s, “Um, all right. I can be there in about five minutes.”

Emmie sat in her car in a parking space just down the block from Juliet’s shop and wondered what the heck she was doing there. Had she really buckled, just like that, obeying the commands of the Almighty Juliet just because she was more forceful? What was the *matter* with her? This was the *last* place in the world she wanted to be. Juliet was *last* person she wanted to work with. What had happened to her newfound independence, the inner strength she had been so proud of? Beaten out of her by the events of the past few weeks, she supposed. After all, she had stood up for herself, and it had gotten her nowhere, except broken up with Graham and fired from her job. *So much for the New Emmie*, she thought. Lesson learned.

So she took a deep breath, reminded herself it was a paying job (even if it was Juliet), which she could use right about now, and forced herself out of her car. She headed down the block toward Juliet’s shop, feeling very much like the Old Emmie once again. So this was what it was going to be like from now on, then? Juliet was still the golden girl, still the

perfect female who called all the shots, got whatever she wanted, just like in high school? Juliet won, she got Graham after all. And Emmie was going to be relegated to the background, an extra in Juliet's big movie—*All About Juliet*, of course. Shit, she might as well apply for the job as Juliet's lady's maid. The guys working on Graham's house hadn't taken out that little hamster run of a servant's bedroom yet. Maybe they could leave it there, just for her. If she lost her house because she couldn't make her mortgage payments, she could live in it. She didn't need much space.

Emmie crossed the street, flinching when she stepped onto the sidewalk where she had last seen Juliet and Graham together. Entering the shop was worse. She hadn't been inside since the night of the winter festival, when Juliet had hauled her in there, and she had been so miserable ... until her chat with Graham. Well, more specifically, until his breath first brushed her ear when he said, "I would still choose you." Those words of his still gave her shivers.

The inside of the store, which was empty, didn't look any different, despite the fact that Juliet had said, weeks ago, that Graham was going to draw up plans to rework the space. If the big construction hadn't started yet, why did Juliet need Emmie *right now*? Probably to rub her nose in the whole Graham thing, she speculated, which sparked her irritation.

Emmie heard noises coming from the back room, so she called out tentatively, "Juliet? It's Emmie."

Juliet appeared almost instantly in the short hallway between the front and back rooms, clad in super-tight lavender velour track bottoms that belled out over her tiny feet, bright pink rubber gloves that extended to her elbows, and a white spaghetti-strap cami that showed off those toned arms that Emmie had been so jealous of when she saw her photo on Circle-O. Damned Web site. Emmie blamed it for all her trouble. She knew it wasn't fair to blame an inanimate object—and a virtual one at that—but she couldn't help it. Her mother had never trusted the Internet—she'd often said it was the root of all modern evils. Emmie used to laugh about it; now she had half a mind to agree with her.

Juliet beamed at her as though they were lifelong besties. “Emmie! I’m so glad you’re here. I’m just doing some cleaning. Come on back.”

Dammit.

She couldn’t bear to be in there with Juliet; she wanted the memory of her moment in that room with Graham to stay pure and Juliet-free. But Emmie had no choice, so she followed Juliet’s “Juicy”-labeled butt exactly where she didn’t want to go.

The early-afternoon sun streaming through the newly cleaned window on the back wall made the room almost unbearably bright—so different from the cold, shadowy place she remembered. Juliet started chatting as she leaned a mop against the wall, but Emmie was miles away, staring at the open door of the utility closet, where Graham had laughed at her for pretending that Avery was her boyfriend. Emmie shook herself, turned away from the memory, tried to focus on Juliet.

Whatever she had been rambling about, Juliet stopped when she saw Emmie’s face. “I *know*,” she said, which put Emmie on high alert. What? What did she know? Juliet looked around with a shudder. “I hate this back room, too. It has a weird vibe to it, don’t you think?”

If Emmie weren’t so despondent, she would have laughed. She hoped Juliet was picking up on some emotions she and Graham had generated and it was making her uncomfortable. But she just shrugged. “Nothing a little bit of paint and a new floor can’t fix.”

“Well, that’s why I’ve been working away here, trying to get a few layers of grime off of everything!” Juliet stripped off her rubber gloves with a *snap! snap!* that echoed in the empty room. “But now I want to talk about making it pretty!” she said eagerly. “What have you got for me?”

“Well ... I’ve been pretty busy ...”

“Oh, I heard, you poor thing,” Juliet commiserated, her blue eyes wide. “Graham told me the two of you have been working *so* hard on that house he bought!”

Oh, he did, did he? Emmie thought. *What else did he tell you we've been working on, hmm?*

Juliet carefully smoothed out her gloves and said, "Silly man, with such a crazy house that needs so much work. I don't know why he bought that thing."

Emmie gaped. Juliet's dismissive tone made her blood boil. She wanted to shout, *He bought it for you!*

"Do you know," the other woman said, turning back to Emmie and propping the heels of her hands on the edge of the sink, "he won't even let me see the place? It's true! I've never been there."

Emmie swallowed hard. "Why?"

Juliet let out one of her overly cheerful laughs. "I don't know. Maybe it's so awful that he's embarrassed or something."

"It's coming together really well," Emmie said in an even tone, trying to keep a lid on her fury. She had to change the subject before she took a swing at this tittering blond pixie. "So," she said, "if you want to talk about this shop, let's talk about it."

"Oh," Juliet said, more seriously, "right. Actually ..." She fluffed her hair as she glanced around the room. "I do want to ask you for some advice ... but not about interior design ... exactly."

Emmie, confused and suspicious, waited.

Juliet paused, then smiled warmly. "Emmie, I admire you so much."

What was that, now?

"So, *so* much," she repeated. "You have no idea."

That was true. Emmie really had *no* idea. "Okay ..." she prompted, dreading what was coming next. She was sure it couldn't be anything good.

"Emmie, do you ever miss high school?"

Whoa—first a zig, now a zag. Emmie was getting dizzy. “Um, no, can’t say that I do. Juliet, what’s this all about?”

Juliet shook her head and smiled ruefully. “Oh, God, I don’t know what I’m saying. I mean ... well, everything seemed so much simpler, and clearer, in high school. I always knew where I was going and what I needed to do next. You know?”

Did Juliet just admit she had peaked in high school, as Emmie always hoped? She certainly wasn’t following Juliet’s train of thought, whatever point she was trying to make. Now the woman fell silent and picked at a dried blob of paint on the rim of the sink.

“Juliet?” Emmie prompted.

Still picking at the paint, she went on hesitantly, “Remember the talk we had after your party? When you drove me home?”

How could Emmie forget? That unfortunate conversation was filed away in her brain for all eternity, under the category “TMI: Juliet Edition.” She had hoped Juliet had been so drunk she’d forgotten it, but no such luck. She nodded.

“You gave me some really good advice. You’re so smart, Emmie—that’s another reason I admire you—and so sensible.”

Hah! If she only knew.

“You’re a good friend. And you know what my ... situation is. So I want to ask you about ... about Graham.” She rushed on, “We’ve had a rough month or so, and I really, *really* want us back on track. I just don’t know how to get us there. You work with him almost every day—you must know him pretty well by now. Has he said anything? Does he mention me? What’s his mood like? God, what should I do?”

Emmie could have sworn her jaw hit the floor and a tooth or two fell out, even though all of her anatomy was still where it belonged. What, Juliet was starting to tweak to the fact that her suicide-threat plan wasn’t working (imagine that)? And now she was asking *her* how to get Graham back? Was this some sort of joke?

Apparently not. Juliet, obviously extremely nervous, started to pace. When Emmie didn't respond right away, she filled the silence with more prattle. "It's not too late. I don't think it is, anyway. Even if he did finally tell me he was seeing somebody else." Emmie didn't move a muscle. "It was right out there, on that sidewalk, in fact." She gestured toward the street. "He stood there and told me he was in love with someone else—that this was 'it' for him. *In love*. Thinking marriage and everything. Can you believe it? I mean, come on!"

She turned to Emmie expectantly, and Emmie realized Juliet was waiting for her to laugh along with her. However, all she could croak out was, "Who?"

Juliet shrugged. "He wouldn't tell me." She laughed again. "He probably thought I'd go claw her eyes out or something. And I probably would have! But the point is ..." Here Juliet's mood changed again, and her eyes welled up with tears. Emmie couldn't tell if they were real or manufactured. "The point is, he *broke up* with me. For *real* this time. And ... and I don't know what I'm going to do without him. I *need* him. I don't expect you to understand, of course. You don't know what it's like ... you have so much in your life, and I ... well ..." Juliet flapped her hand in front of her face as she sniffled delicately. "Oh, gracious. I'm just going on and on. Just tell me to shut up anytime!" And she let go another tinkly laugh.

Then Emmie heard herself speaking—very quietly, very calmly. She said, in what would be a conversational tone under any other circumstances, "Juliet? Shut up."

Juliet started and put a dainty hand to her cleavage. "Excuse me?"

Emmie's voice remained controlled and quiet. "I said, shut up."

"Emmie!" Juliet gasped, an incredulous half smile on her face that showed she hoped Emmie was joking.

But Emmie wasn't. She spoke a little louder, to cut her off. "You ... you need to stop talking now. You talk too much, and you don't listen." Juliet was indeed shocked into silence, so Emmie continued, before she lost her nerve, "I have never—"

and I mean *never*—met anyone as selfish as you are. You really think you have nothing in your life? What about your husband? Two kids, a nice house, your own business? Are you blind? Or just stupid? Tell me, because I *really* want to know.”

Juliet’s cheeks flushed a brilliant pink. She started to respond, but Emmie cut her off again. “No, wait. I’m not done yet. I also want to know why you think you deserve another man in your life, when you don’t treat the first one anywhere near as nicely as he deserves.” Juliet’s lips parted and she took a breath, but Emmie cut her off a third time. “No, wait. I’ll answer that for you. You *don’t* deserve another man in your life. Nobody, least of all Graham, should have to deal with what you’ve been dishing out lately. You are ruining his life, you know that? He’s a kind, compassionate guy, and you’re taking advantage of that, getting him to come running to you every time you threaten to kill yourself. But I know, even if he doesn’t, that you’re never *really* going to commit suicide. Because then you’d only have everyone’s undivided attention for the two hours it takes to hold your funeral. And that’s nowhere *near* long enough for you! So lay off Graham. Leave him the hell alone. And, if you have any sense at all, pay attention to your husband instead, before he wises up and kicks you to the curb!”

Emmie took a breath, then said, more calmly, “We’re done here. And I’m done with you for everything else. Don’t contact me anymore, for anything—your shop, your life, your marital problems. Grow up, and figure it out for yourself.”

She turned on her heel and headed out, but stopped in the doorway and spun back around. “Oh, yeah. One more thing.” Her voice was quivering suddenly. She swallowed. “It’s me.”

Juliet, one hand to her bright cheek, shook her head, uncomprehending. “What?” she whispered.

“That woman Graham’s in love with? It’s me. Want to claw my eyes out? Go for it.”

Juliet went from pink to pale in an instant. She shook her head hastily.

“Smart choice.”

Her knees wobbling violently, Emmie stalked down the short hallway to the front of the shop, making a beeline for the door and marveling that she had just unloaded on Juliet like that. Apparently there was still life in New Emmie yet. In fact, it seemed that New Emmie had just stomped on Old Emmie till she was nothing but dust.

Interesting.

Her fury still blinding her, she didn't see the person in the doorway until she practically mowed him down. Emmie stopped short and even tripped back a step or two.

"Kevin," she breathed.

How long had he been standing there? Well, the look on his face, and the pain in his eyes, told Emmie how long: too long. Or long enough. Depending on how you looked at it. His eyes glassy, he chewed on his lower lip. Then he looked down at the white bags that dangled from his fingers. Square foam takeout containers strained the plastic.

"I ... uh," he started hoarsely, then cleared his throat and went on, "I thought I'd bring Juliet some lunch. She ... she likes the wraps from the deli up the street."

Silence. Emmie didn't know what to say.

"Maybe I'll just go."

"No!" Emmie grabbed his arm as he turned away. "Kevin, listen. I'm not going to wedge myself in the middle of whatever is going on between the two of you. All I'm going to say is get in there. Do something. Help her, dump her, commit her, I don't care. Just do *something*." When he didn't respond, she tried, "Kevin. How long have you been married?"

The man's pale blue eyes focused on her, and he blinked his sandy lashes. "Thirteen years."

"Thirteen years. That's a long time. I don't know what you feel for her now, but with that amount of history, you're the only person who can help her through this."

Kevin blinked again, his eyes filling with tears. "I still love her, you know. Despite everything."

“Well, then.”

Emmie heard a sound behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see a stricken Juliet in the doorway. Emmie decided to leave before Juliet could locate anything breakable and show off her vase-throwing skills, using Emmie’s head as a target. She gave Kevin’s arm a quick squeeze before she slipped past him, out into the freezing but welcome fresh air.

Emmie fell, rather than climbed, into her car. The adrenaline drained from her just as quickly as it had filled her moments earlier, and she became nothing more than a fragile, trembling husk. *Oh, God.* What had she just done? She’d told Kevin she wasn’t going to get into the middle of their problems, but she had just broadcast all of Juliet’s secrets loud and clear for her husband to hear. Meaning she had likely just driven a stake through their marriage. Yep, that was pretty much the definition of getting involved. This couldn’t be good for her karma.

When Emmie drove past the storefront, she slowed her car to a crawl to see what was going on. She wasn’t sure if she was expecting a shattered front window, blood, or what. Instead, she saw Juliet standing in the middle of the room, her hands covering her face, Kevin urgently speaking with what appeared to be concern. He fidgeted nervously, then he reached out and gently pulled Juliet’s hands away from her face. He held her hands between his, still talking with what was obviously intense desperation. Finally something in Juliet seemed to break open. She nodded to her husband, and he put one arm around her shoulders. She buried her face in his neck.

An impatient driver behind Emmie beeped his horn. She pulled away. She wanted to head home, but she had one more stop to make. Well, not a stop, exactly. Just a drive by. And it wasn’t stalking, either, she told herself. No matter what it looked like.

A few minutes later she turned onto West Street. Her stomach knotted tighter the closer she got to Graham’s house, but she forced herself to keep going. She stopped at the corner and checked the cars parked on the street. His Subaru was near the house—as was Wilma’s unmistakable Lincoln Navigator.

Oh, that figured. Wilma certainly didn't waste any time taking over.

That was all she needed to know—that Graham was still at work. Instead of driving past the house, she turned around, drove to the parking lot of a nearby convenience store, and called Graham—not his cell phone, but his apartment. She couldn't bear to talk with him right now.

When the machine beeped, she composed herself and said as casually as she could, "Hey. I got your messages. Thanks for checking on me—it was really nice of you. I, uh, no, I don't work for John anymore. And that's, you know, all right. So that's about it. I sort of want to be by myself for a little while, so if you could ... just ... leave me to it for now, I'd appreciate it. I'll check in with you later, okay? Just ... I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Thanks again for calling. Bye." The last part came out as a whisper. She took a shaky breath as she ended the call.

Chapter 23

Emmie was so exhausted she practically crawled into her house. She flopped onto the sofa without even taking off her coat. Her legs hanging over its wooden arm and her eyes closed, she focused on the silence. It was what she needed right now. She had made the right decision, asking Graham for some space. Telling off Juliet? Well ...

She ran through their confrontation again, in a mental play-by-play. Had she really said—? *Oh my God, the look on her face*, Emmie thought. And that one ... and that one ... Despite the harshness of the entire event, she started to giggle ... until she thought of Kevin. Poor guy. She wondered what he was going to do about his marriage. Whatever he chose, she wished him well. He was a good person. She hoped Juliet would see that as well.

Emmie started drifting off. She felt she could sleep through the rest of the month after everything she'd been through today. And hey, she could make that happen—it wasn't like she had a job to go to or anything.

But it was only an hour later when her phone rang, dragging Emmie out of her sudden deep sleep. It was Annette, wailing for Emmie to “fix it!” Emmie eventually figured out that her friend was holding her to her promise to repair what Wilma had done to her son's bedroom.

Emmie's task was pretty straightforward. She had to rip out everything that Wilma had installed: pink polka-dotted white fur throw pillows, brilliant blue storage cubes, a giant red shade on a pendant ceiling light. Bright colors against white—yep, that was Wilma's signature move of late, that “hearkening back to the mod '60s” that had already been done to death. It made Emmie wonder why she had ever held him in such high esteem, considered him the unimpeachable authority when it came to interior design. With a little perspective, a little distance, she was able to see that his concepts were tired and outdated. It made her a little more glad to be shut of him.

While Emmie spent the next couple of weeks bringing the bedroom around to her initial vision of the airplane theme,

with muted blues, grays, and greens, Annette lectured her about her future.

“You’re going into business for yourself, of course,” her friend declared with finality.

Emmie stopped wallpapering to gape at her. “Why does everybody keep *saying* that?”

“Because you are. You’re a darn sight better than your idiot boss—well, former boss, thank goodness—smarter, more clever, better taste. And damn nicer, too.”

“You are way too kind. Honestly, I’m not sure I could scare up enough clients before I starved to death.”

“You do have a lot to learn about being a ruthless businessperson, I’ll give you that. First you poach John’s other unhappy customers, of course! Heck, they’ll probably be as relieved as I am to have somebody competent take over.”

Emmie thought of the Hudsons and shuddered. “Not really my style.”

Annette studied her. “I have a feeling you’re going to do better than you think.”

Sure enough, work found her, whether she was ready or not, and she had to keep up or be run over. People actually started calling for consultations and estimates. Messages jumping around on Circle-O were from former classmates who wanted to talk with her about remodeling ideas.

It wasn’t hard for Emmie to trace the cause of her career’s sudden momentum back to Annette, and she wasn’t surprised when she discovered her message on Circle-O to all of Jemison High’s alumni, from every graduation year, not just their own. In all capitals. Saying how thrilled she was to have “EMMIE BREWSTER, CLASS OF ’95,” working as her “INTERIOR DESIGNER.” With a link to Emmie’s profile for good measure. No, she wasn’t surprised, but she was grateful.

One person she didn’t communicate with was Graham. She couldn’t bring herself to contact him again, despite the fact

that she had promised to. She wasn't ready, she kept telling herself, even though she missed him, and Sophie, something fierce.

Instead, she decided to focus on work, her friends, and especially her father. They had let their relationship slide for decades, and her mother's death had nearly been its killing blow. Emmie knew that if she didn't make an effort to salvage it, they were just going to grow further and further apart until she lost her connection with him altogether. And, as infuriating as he could be sometimes, she didn't want that.

It helped that Bob Brewster had patched things up with Concetta, so the older woman was often in the mix when Emmie visited her dad. Concetta was a very sweet lady, and Emmie got annoyed only when she occasionally tried to set her up on a date with her nephew, or with "that nice young man who helps out at the senior center"—the one who had very shifty eyes, never spoke, and, at fifty years old, still lived with his parents; Emmie was pretty sure he was a serial killer. But as long as Emmie kept Concetta's matchmaking efforts at bay, the women got along very well.

Emmie also made a point to be grateful for the little things in life, like being plonked in a middle-school gym to watch Justin Campo play basketball. This was the good stuff, she reminded herself—being with friends, supporting Trish's family. She tried to get in the spirit of things, but she couldn't help but think that she'd have a better time at stuff like this if Graham and Sophie were by her side. She tried to push those thoughts out of her head before she got maudlin. Oops. Too late.

Justin stepped in front of a member of the opposing team and deftly stole the ball, and Trish leaped to her feet, clapping. "Yeah, Justin! Good going!" Rick also stood, clapping and whistling through his teeth. When Trish sat back down again, she elbowed Emmie in the ribs. "Try to be enthusiastic about your godchild's athletic prowess. If he goes pro, his endorsement deals could pay for your nursing home."

Emmie blinked and murmured, "Yeah, okay. Sure."

Trish gave her a whap on the arm. “What is the matter with you, woman! You’ve been out to lunch this entire game.” She eyed Emmie suspiciously. “You’re working too hard, aren’t you? Well, all I can say is I told you so.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” her friend said, a smirk on her face, as she returned her attention to the game. The other team had the ball. “Come *on*—defense! Darn that Simmons kid—I swear he lives his life in slo-mo.”

“What do you mean, you told me so?”

“Seems to me somebody, who shall remain nameless, but whose name rhymes with Dish Lampo, kept telling you that you really could start your own business and be decent competition for Wilma. Guess Dish was right. You should thank Dish. And give her presents.”

Emmie smiled and leaned against her best friend. “You are vastly smarter than I am in every way. But I still say this is only temporary—just friends tossing me bones, tiding me over till I find another job.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re wrong. Anyway, so that’s what’s bothering you? You overworked, stressed?”

She sighed. “No. Yes. Sure. Whatever. Watch your kid play.”

Trish started to reply, but Logan leaned across Rick to talk to his mother, because, after all, she was the one who made the decisions ... and carried the family cash. “I’m hungry.”

“Don’t tell me you want some of that crap PTA popcorn,” Trish said. Logan nodded. “Unbelievable. Tell you what—I’ve got a purse full of foam packing peanuts. Same experience, doesn’t cost a cent. How about that?”

“Mom!”

Trish sighed, exasperated, because her boys already ate her out of house and home every chance they got. She’d often told Emmie she was afraid that when the kids became teenagers and really started chowing down, she and Rick would have to

take out a third mortgage just to be able to keep the fridge stocked.

Emmie spoke up. “I’ll buy, Logan. Come on.”

So the little boy scrambled over his parents and eagerly followed Emmie along the bench.

“Bring me back an orange soda!” Trish called, and Rick chorused, “Two!”

Emmie carefully avoided stepping on the feet of the people between the Campo crew and the freedom of the steps. Before she could stand up straight and push her hair out of her eyes, she found she had backed smack into someone else.

She started to apologize while she extricated Logan, when the person grabbed her elbow. “Emmie?”

Oh crap. “Hey ... Juliet,” she said weakly. “Er ... how’s it going?” She glanced one step down to Kevin. He looked at her placidly, his expression revealing nothing.

“It’s going great!” Juliet was her usual bubbly self. Emmie thought of the last time she had seen her, through her shop window—a distraught, broken rag doll, leaning on Kevin, crying, and Emmie wanted to applaud her performance. The woman deserved an Oscar for Best Faker, and a Lifetime Achievement Award for Hiding Emotions.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Just enjoying the game! That’s our son down there—on the bench. He hardly ever gets played, but that’s all right.”

“I’m sure he’ll get a chance soon.”

“Yes, well ...” Juliet murmured, trailing off, obviously unable to sustain a conversation about the nuances of middle-school team sports.

Emmie didn’t realize she was going to apologize to Juliet before she heard herself talking. But there it was, all her fears forcing her to try to make things right with her, no matter what Juliet had done in the past. “Juliet, listen. I have to ... I mean ... what I said at the shop ... I shouldn’t have. It’s none of my ___”

“No,” Juliet cut Emmie off softly, but decisively. She was as quiet, as reserved as Emmie had ever seen her, her blue doll’s eyes revealing a depth Emmie didn’t know they could display. “No, Emmie, you were absolutely right. About everything. I just wish ...” She stopped and looked away. Emmie wasn’t sure if it was because she couldn’t bring herself to finish her sentence, or if she didn’t know *how* to finish it. Then, suddenly, the mask was back in place. Juliet rallied and exclaimed, in her usual bouncy voice, “Anyway, I am *so* glad I ran into you!”

“Oh?” Emmie risked another glance at Kevin. He stood in profile, his mask intact, and although he looked at her out of the corner of his eye, his gaze quickly returned to the game.

“Yes! I was afraid I wouldn’t see you before ... well ...”

Oh, God, before what? Now Juliet had her full attention, even though Logan was tugging on her sleeve.

“Well,” she said again, “exciting news! I’m—we’re”—and here she lightly touched Kevin’s arm, and he glanced up and gave her a small, patient smile—“moving. Back to Williamsport.”

Emmie blinked. “Oh! Wow ... really,” she stammered.

“Yes,” Juliet said, her mouth pursed in her sorry-to-report pout, “it just ... wasn’t working out here.”

“It” eh? Give the woman yet another prize, this time for Best Euphemism. But all she said was, “I—I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh, don’t be. It’s for the best. We need to focus on our *family*. We just can’t do that here in Jemison. Kevin’s business is in Williamsport, and really, it’s our home. And we all need to be together, back home, with no *distractions*, you know?”

However Juliet wanted to allude to it, Emmie understood. And she truly was impressed that they’d decided to try to save their marriage—not to mention relieved that she wasn’t going to be charged with its murder. At the moment, Emmie realized, this had nothing to do with Graham, but everything to do with Juliet and Kevin.

Juliet went on, “Anyway! At least it’s going to be easy to pack up and move back—we never did manage to sell our old house.”

“Oh ... that’s good ...”

“And if you know of anyone who wants to buy a really nice house in a great neighborhood here—”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I am *so* sorry we never got a chance to work together on the flower shop. I had been looking forward to it.”

“Right ... me, too?” Emmie winced as it came out more like a question.

“That’s up for sale, too! Hey, maybe I should go into real estate!” Juliet laughed merrily, and Emmie couldn’t tell if she was truly happy about the changes in her life, or just covering up, as usual. Emmie studied her, and she was surprised to see what seemed to be real happiness—or at least relief—in the woman’s face.

So she said, sincerely, “Juliet, I’m really glad things are working out for you. I wish you the best of luck with everything.”

“Thank you. Ooohhhh!” she squealed and held out her arms for a hug. Emmie awkwardly complied. In her ear, Juliet whispered, “And take good care of Graham, okay?”

Emmie stiffened, but when Juliet released her, she wasn’t looking daggers at Emmie. She had meant it.

“Well! We’d better not block these steps all night!” Juliet said. “I’ll let you go. I’m so glad we got to know one another again, Emmie.”

Emmie gave her a smile as weak as her knees felt, and she and Logan navigated down the steps as Juliet and Kevin went up. When she and Kevin passed, he touched her shoulder and murmured, “Thank you.”

She wanted to respond, but he turned away and hurried up the steps after his wife.

Chapter 24

“Call him.”

“Yeah, call him.”

“Call him.”

“Do it now.”

Emmie dropped her pencil and clapped her hands over her ears, her tense fingers gripping the hair at her temples. “Quit it! Both of you!”

“Sheesh,” Trish muttered as she sorted through Emmie’s most recent contracts, notes, and invoices and put them in different colored folders. “Cran-ky!”

“That’s why she should call him,” Avery said, his legs draped over a corner of Emmie’s dining room table. “She’s obviously, you know, frustrated. It’s time she got her man back.”

“I’ll ‘get my man back’ when you get yours back, howzat?” Emmie sniped. “Called Adam lately?”

Avery raised an eyebrow. “I’ll have you know that I saw Adam just the other day.”

Now he had both women’s attention. “So what happened?” Emmie asked, leaning forward.

Avery toyed with some upholstery fabric samples. “It was ... very good.”

“‘Very good,’ as in you’re back together very good?” Trish asked eagerly.

“‘Very good,’ as in very good for a little while. And then it was bad.”

Emmie slumped. “Like how?”

“Like even though we had a great time together, he told me he still wants his ‘freedom.’ And then the next night he went out without me. With ‘friends,’ he said. Yeah, I know all about those ‘friends’—at least two of them have been after him for ages. And I’m not sure he’s exactly fighting them off.”

“Yikes,” Trish murmured.

“Men suck,” Emmie grumbled, returning to her sketch.

“They do indeed,” Avery agreed.

Emmie looked up again. “You need to get your mind off things.”

“No, I am not taking you to a gay bar. You know I don’t do clichés.”

“Who said anything about a gay bar?”

“A straight bar? Boring.”

“No, I meant that I could use some help around here—”

“Ohhh, no. No way. No, *thank* you.”

“What the hell! Am I that awful to work with?”

Avery sighed. “You do need help, I’ll give you that.”

“That’s for sure,” Trish chimed in. “The state of these invoices is shameful. She needs a minder in a bad way.”

“My strength is being creative, I’ll have you know,” Emmie said, sniffing indignantly. “The other stuff is ... secondary. But it needs taking care of. And so do I.”

“N-O.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“I’m in.”

“I can’t pay much, though.”

“*Now* it comes out.”

“But I can offer you full partnership in my multimillion-dollar firm sometime in the next ... fifteen years or so.”

“I’ll make you a deal. How about if you pay me *and* we go out drinking? That’ll cover all the bases.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Trish said. “Let’s all go. A Men Suck night.”

Emmie eyed her suspiciously. “You want in on a Men Suck night? Something you’re not sharing about Rick?”

Trish smirked. “You know that half the time I’m more than ready to trade Rick for a bag of magic beans.”

“All right,” Emmie agreed. “A Men Suck night. When? Saturday?”

“Fine,” Avery said, then made a face. “Wait. Can’t. I got a temp job working at the home improvement expo this weekend. I need my beauty sleep.”

“*You* got a *job* at the home improvement expo?” Emmie repeated.

“Yes! You’re not the only game in town, you know. And they’re paying me more than you ever will.” Then he added, more seriously, “You should get in there—it’d be good for you to start getting your name out to people other than your high school cronies.”

Emmie shrugged. “I know, but you had to sign up months ago. That was back when I was still slaving for Wilma.”

“Does Wilma have a booth there?” Trish asked.

“Are you kidding? Wilma, hawk his wares like a common street vendor? *Tres* low rent.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Avery reassured Emmie. “I can get you in.”

“Really?” She thought for a moment. “It *would* be good exposure ... Okay,” she agreed eagerly, “let’s do it. Are you sure you can get me in?”

“Positive.”

“Great. Wine to celebrate!” she declared, heading for the kitchen.

“Can I just have some water?” Trish called after her.

Emmie stuck her head through the opening between the kitchen and dining room like she had been yanked by a rope. “What!”

“Water, I said.”

“But ... but ...”

“I’ve been known to drink water on occasion.” Trish rolled her eyes at Emmie’s incredulous look. “I think I’m coming down with something, okay?”

“Have you forgotten Dr. Trish’s first rule of health care? ‘Alcohol on the outside cleans wounds; alcohol on the inside cures everything else?’”

“Humor me. Unless you want me to rechristen your bathroom, à la Caitlynn.”

Emmie gave her one last hairy eyeball, then turned away to root around in the kitchen for drinks and glasses. After a second or two she called, “Oh, no ... Avery, I can’t do the expo. I couldn’t possibly get all the stuff I’d need in, what, three days? A booth, a big banner, mounted photos of the work I’ve done, flyers ...”

“You won’t need all that stuff.”

“What would I do instead? Dance on a tabletop to get attention?”

“That might work, depending on what you wear—or don’t wear,” Trish said.

Avery laughed. “I’ll make you a flyer—artist here, remember? All you have to do is show up.”

“Avery darling, I love you!”

“I know.”

“I hate you. Oh, yeah—and you’re fired, too.”

“I was going to quit anyway. Your benefits package blows.”

“There is no benefits package.”

“My point exactly.” Avery glanced over at Emmie, who was looking pretty irritated in her Day-Glo green XXL T-shirt that she had knotted at the waist, trying to contain its bulk, and clutching a handful of matching colored flyers. Both shirt and flyers advertised Dan’s Discount Lumber & Stuff. “I don’t

know what you're complaining about." Avery, also decked out in neon green, handed a flyer to a passerby, reciting, "Don't get nailed by high prices. Shop Dan's Discount Lumber and Stuff. Stop by booth thirty-seven and get a coupon for ten percent off anything in the store." To Emmie, he went on, "At least I took the worst headgear."

While Emmie sported a hammer-and-nail set of deely boppers—when she moved her head, the hammer seemed to be hitting the nail (sort of)—Avery's set was a screwdriver and screw, so the screwdriver looked like it was hitting the screw, which just looked strange.

"It does spare me some dirty comments," Emmie admitted.

Avery gestured at a tall man with a bristly mustache who was passing near her. She thrust a flyer at him, with one of her own strategically placed underneath. "Don't get nailed by high prices, blah, blah, blah. And call By Design for all your interior design needs."

The man stopped, looked her up and down, studied her deely boppers, and grinned. "I sure would—"

"*Don't* say it," she warned.

"—like to nail *you*."

"Aaand he says it anyway. Besides, that doesn't make any sense. *I* have the hammer—oh, never mind. Move along." When the man lingered for a moment, clearly amused at his own joke, she snapped, "Move it!"

"What's all this about being nailed?"

Emmie whirled around. Her hands and feet went ice cold as she stared in shock at the smiling man before her, the twinkle in his eyes hitting her with a vengeance. "Graham! What ... what are you doing here?"

"I like to support the local vendors."

She tried desperately to calm her thundering heart, failed. But she wasn't so far gone that she couldn't suspect. "Trish told you where to find me, didn't she?"

Graham licked his lower lip as his smile broadened. “That’s classified—”

Then they were descended upon by Dan himself, who charged up to them, huffing and puffing.

“Hey,” the man said sharply to Emmie, “what’s this I hear, you’re handing out your own flyers? I didn’t hire to you to advertise your own business!”

Emmie shook her head, and Graham grabbed the stack from her, leaving her with just Dan’s flyers. “Oh, these? They’re mine. I just asked her to hold them for me.” He glanced down at the papers, then held out a few to people walking past. “Call By Design for all your interior design needs!”

Dan watched him suspiciously for a couple of minutes, then stomped off again. When he was gone, Graham turned to Emmie. “By Design? I like it.”

She moved to take the flyers back. “Thanks,” she said softly.

Graham moved them out of her reach. “Hold on. I would like to hire By Design for all my interior design needs.”

She blushed under his steady gaze. “Quit teasing me.”

“I’m not teasing you.” And it was true—he was serious. “Come on, I think it’s time for your break. I’ll buy you a soda.”

Emmie dropped into a chair at a sticky table in the snack bar and pulled off her deely boppers with a sigh. “Graham, it’s a bad idea.”

“I don’t see anything bad about it.” He popped a soft pretzel nugget into his mouth, offered the paper boat to Emmie. She declined. He said simply, “I need a new designer. I fired John. Well, bought my way out of the contract, to be more precise. But it was worth it. The stuff he wanted to do to the house ...” He shook his head in amazement.

“I thought you, of all people, would be able to keep a tight rein on him.”

“That would have been a full-time job all on its own. Emmie, I want you back. Please.”

Emmie hesitated. *What a loaded request.*

Graham let out a breath. “Professionally, okay? You do great work, you had all the plans finalized. You ... you love the house. And we want the same things. For the house,” he added, then paused. “I know what you’re thinking, but I’m a big boy. I can keep myself under control.”

Not exactly what I was worried about, Emmie said to herself. *Now, my control, on the other hand ...*

“Look, I’ve got to get going—I have to pick Sophie up from a play date. Can we talk about this another time? We can meet at the house, and you can see the progress so far.”

Augh. He was wearing her down, all right. Of course, it didn’t take much. “I ... I don’t want to be there with all the guys and everything.” She knew if she were welcomed by the workers assuming she’d come back to the job, she’d definitely cave.

“Okay, then, after hours. Today, even. The sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned.” At her dubious look, he added, “I promise to keep my hands behind my back and stay at least three paces from you at all times.” Emmie couldn’t help but smile. “That’s better,” he said softly. “How late are you working here? Or”—he laughed—“don’t you care?”

“I’ve gotta stay—Big Dan’s paying me fifty bucks. A self-employed woman like me can’t skip out on that kind of payday.”

“Okay. This thing goes till, what, nine o’clock? Come to the house anytime after that. I’ll be there.”

The door opened before Emmie could raise her hand to knock. Graham stood before her, backlit by the garish high-watt glare of a utility lamp, tipped upward in its triangular bracket on the floor.

“Hi,” Graham said.

“Hey.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” He ushered her in and closed the door behind her. “Take your coat?”

As she surrendered her jacket, Emmie took a close look at him. He seemed uncharacteristically fidgety. Well, so was she.

“Let’s, uh, start with the upstairs.” He picked up a flashlight from the steps and unplugged the utility light. “These can get pretty hot. And we don’t want anything catching fire, do we?” he said, with a bit of a smile. He led Emmie to the top of the stairs. “Let’s start in here.”

He opened the door to the master bedroom and gestured for her to go in first. She glanced at him as she went past him. *Definitely acting strange*, she thought. *What does he have up his*—Then she stopped short, stunned at the sight before her.

Graham had finished the master bedroom. Everything was complete—everything—from the sumptuous paint color on the walls to the restored cupboards to the refinished broad plank floor to the ornate light fixtures. Several Oriental rugs crisscrossed one another, gracing the space with rich colors and patterns. A fire roared in the repaired fireplace. And Emmie was most shocked to see the antique bedroom pieces—the ones she’d originally chosen—filling the room. The tall-post bed rose up high on her right, covered in luxurious linens. The dresser, the chest of drawers, the washbasin, the beaded lamps, even the rocking chair sitting by the fireplace. It was all there, and looking even better than she’d imagined it.

She made her way into the room, thawing in the warmth of the fire and marveling at the sight of her favorite room finally completed. Then she noticed what was lighting the room: several candelabras ... filled not with candles, but with a dozen upturned mini Maglites, red, blue, silver, black, the beams of light reflecting in the bank of windows. She crossed to the bureau, lightly touched one of the flashlights, and smiled a little.

“Considering your history with candles,” Graham said from behind her, still in the doorway, “I thought you’d be more comfortable with those.”

She turned to him, aware that her mouth was open, but unable to close it. “How ... ?”

“The furniture? Well, I got the invoice, and it was ... suspiciously inexpensive. So I called Rod to ask about it, and he sort of ... sold you out. He, uh, expressed concern about your mental state, to be honest. What did you end up with, anyway?”

“You don’t want to know.” She looked around the room again. “Graham—”

“Are you hungry?” It was unlike him to interrupt; Emmie could tell he was still edgy. He moved to a small table in front of the fire that held a tray of crackers, cheese, and fruit. “It’s not much, but—”

“Graham, what’s all this about?”

He stopped fidgeting and took a breath. “This is my ham-fisted way of apologizing.” He crossed the room to join her at the windows. “And to tell you that I was an idiot. You were right. About all of it.”

“What—”

“Everything you said ... you were right. About how I wanted Juliet to need me, and that I liked being able to ‘save’ her. I got so angry because it hit so close to home. I thought I had gotten my head straight after Kat’s death, but I hadn’t. I ... I’ve got no excuse. I was wrong, and I lost you because of my need to play the hero. So I’m sorry.”

Emmie stood frozen, barely breathing, her heart thudding. She licked her lips and said slowly, “Are you only saying this now because Juliet’s gone?”

“You heard, huh?”

“We had a little chat. It was ... enlightening.”

“Wow, aren’t you special. She only sent me a text saying she was leaving.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe it.”

Emmie studied him. “You kept telling me that the two of you were over.”

“And I meant it.”

“But I saw you with her. Outside her shop.”

“You did?”

Emmie nodded.

“That was the day I told her, in no uncertain terms, that we were done. She said she was okay with it.”

“That’s not what she told me.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She asked me for advice. On how to get you back.”

Graham winced. “Good Lord. Well, I never told her it was you—”

“Trying to protect me again,” Emmie pointed out.

“Was that so wrong?”

“No,” she said with a reluctant sigh. “It was kind of you. But she knows now that it’s me you’re—uh, you *had been* seeing ...” Emmie drifted to a stop.

“Ah.”

“But ... when she said she was okay with your ending it ... you believed her? You actually thought she wouldn’t pull her suicidal act ever again? That could have gone on forever.”

“I know. You’re right.” He paused, looking her in the eye, his expression desperate. “Emmie, I’d understand if you don’t believe me, but after ... that ... last night I was with you ... I cut Juliet off completely. I spent all that time alone, to think. And the entire time, I wasn’t missing Juliet. Just you. I don’t want anyone but you. It was always you.”

Emmie thought back to that moment in the shadowy back room of Juliet’s shop, when Graham had murmured in her ear, “I would still choose you.” He had wanted her then, and he wanted her now. She desperately wanted to believe him. Desperately.

She remained silent. And the more she said nothing, the more crestfallen Graham looked.

“You know the reason I finished this room and asked you to meet me here? Because of the day I first showed you the house. When you walked into this room, even as horrible a state it was in back then, you just ... lit up. And then you”—he gestured toward the windows—“you turned your face up to the sun, and you closed your eyes, just drinking it in, so happy. And all of a sudden ... it’s going to sound crazy, but it was like this whole scene just ... unfolded in front of me. I could *see* this ... future ... you living here with me and Sophie. I wanted to be here with you, to see you wake up in this bedroom and turn your face up to the sun, to see you that happy ...” Emmie swallowed. Hard. Graham shook his head. “I know; it’s nuts. And I know I’ve blown it with you, through sheer stupidity. Or ego. Both, I guess. So I figured I had nothing to lose, trying to win you back, with this.” He faltered. “And ... I figured if I *didn’t* win you back, at least I’d be able to give you the room. Your room, as you envisioned it. And, if you liked it, maybe I’d get to see you happy one last time.”

Tears were sneaking up on Emmie. She could feel them, constricting her throat, pricking at her eyes. Her breathing became shallow as she tried to maintain control, but she knew in the end she was going to lose it. It wasn’t a matter of if, but when.

“Emmie?” Graham ventured. “Please ... say something. I’m dying here.”

She bit her lip, turned to gaze out the window, down at the snow-covered lawn, a waning gibbous moon hanging low in the sky, just as she had pictured it. “You did all this for me?” she whispered.

He took a step closer. “Nobody else.”

“You really want”—her voice was raspy—“me?”

“Nobody else.”

She slid into his arms then, resting her cheek on his chest, squeezing him around his waist for all she was worth.

Tentatively, Graham encircled her with his arms, then, after a moment's hesitation, more strongly.

"You more than half lo' me?" she asked huskily, her eyes closed.

"Emmaline Brewster, I love you so much more than half. I love you completely." He kissed the top of her head. "And I just want to see you happy again."

She met his gaze; her eyes were teary, but she was smiling. "There's no sun to look up at."

"No, but you're breathtaking in the moonlight. And ... if you stay tonight, I'll make sure there's sunshine tomorrow morning."

"Now, how are you going to guarantee that?"

"I can call in a few favors. I owe you that much." She was at a loss for words once again. He flinched. "I'm sorry. That was too ... If you'd rather go home—"

Emmie stopped his train of thought, and his words, with as passionate a kiss as she could possibly muster. All the love she felt for him went into her embrace, and she savored the feeling of their bodies melding together again, finally. "I *am* home," she whispered.

There was sun in the morning. Emmie opened one eye to a brilliant shaft of sunlight ... and immediately closed it again. It probably had something to do with getting very, *very* little sleep the night before, but she wasn't ready to face the daylight just yet. Instead, she stretched, loving the feel of the soft mattress cradling her, the rich bed linens enveloping her bare skin.

"Good morning." Graham was propped up on one elbow, smiling down at her. She beamed back.

"Window treatments," she murmured, closing her eyes again. "Need window treatments."

He laughed—a pure, joyous sound that thrilled her to her toes. "I'll leave that to you." He kissed her deeply, and she ran

her hand along his bare chest. “Hey,” he said softly, “I’ve got something for you.”

“I *know*.”

But he bounded out of bed, and Emmie watched him, puzzled, but enjoying the view nonetheless. He picked something up from the mantel and crawled back under the covers. It was an envelope. When he handed it to her, she peeked in it, then looked at him.

“Uh, last night was perfect and all ...” *Boy was it*. “But ... paying me puts it in kind of a sordid light, don’t you think?”

Graham put his head in his hands. “That’s not what I meant!”

“I mean, do I *look* like Julia Roberts to you?”

He looked her up and down hungrily. “Better. Much, *much* better.”

“Focus!” she ordered. “Now. Can we please stop throwing this stupid insurance money back and forth?”

“It’s not your insurance money.”

“Okay, now I really don’t get it.”

“It’s not a gift, either. It’s an investment. I want to be an investor in By Design.” He smoothed her hair back from her forehead with a loving hand. “Consider it seed money to back the most promising new business in town.”

She shook her head, disbelieving, but felt loved, and grateful, all the same. “When are you going to stop giving me things?”

“Never, I hope.”

“Then can I put in a request?”

“Name it.”

“How about if I show you instead?”

Chapter 25

The weather was astonishingly mild for mid-May, and Graham, Emmie, and their friends were taking advantage of it. While Sophie, Justin, and Logan chased each other among the blossoming apple and pear trees at the far end of the West Street yard, the adults lounged on the grassy slope nearer the house.

“I dunno,” Emmie was saying, her face turned up to the late afternoon sun as she rested her head on Graham’s chest, “I’ve gotta blame Trish. And Rick, of course. You don’t get a pass, dude.”

Rick took a swig of beer and sighed. “I know.”

“Well,” Trish ventured, “I’d say it’s your fault, Emmaline.”

“How do you get there?”

“It was all that lingerie talk. One thing just led to another ...”

“Oh, then we can blame Avery,” Emmie said.

“Hey!” the lad in question burst out. “I was only trying to help you. It’s not my fault that the baby machine over there got ideas of her own.”

Trish grinned at her best friend. “Nope, still blaming you. So if it’s a girl, I’m naming her Emmie.”

“You might as well name her Victoria; it’d be more accurate,” Emmie said, sniggering. “When did you know?”

“Oh, way back. I just didn’t want to say anything till I was sure. That’s why I stuck with water that afternoon at your house.”

“Sneaky.”

“You bet. And come September, you’ll be getting a beached whale of honor, like it or not,” Trish said.

“Don’t worry—you won’t have to wear black and white.” She lifted her head and shouted, “Sophie! C’mere a second!”

The little girl scampered over. “What color should we have for the wedding?”

Sophie looked puzzled. “White,” she said.

“Well, yeah, but we have to pick another color. Like for, you know, the dress *you’ll* wear. So what’ll it be?”

“Yellow!” Sophie shouted immediately.

“Right! High five,” she ordered, and Sophie obliged, then ran back to her game with the boys.

“Yellow? Seriously?” Trish said. “I’m going to look like an enormous grapefruit with feet?”

“We’ll figure something out for you, matronosaurus,” Emmie said. “The only thing that matters is that little flower girl over there gets to wear a poufy yellow princess dress.”

Graham gazed down at Emmie. She tipped her head back to study him. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” he said, although he sounded a little choked up. “Not a thing.”

He kissed his bride-to-be, eliciting “ews” and groans and comments of “Cripes, get a room” from everyone else.

“So,” Emmie said to the group, “September sixth ... too close to the date mom passed? Rude? Morbid?”

Trish smiled. “Your mom would approve.”

Graham said to Avery, “You’re going to be a groomsman, right?”

“Me?”

“Oh, yeah,” Emmie said. “And we’re inviting Adam. Once he gets a load of you in a tux—whoo. You’re in.”

“Wait a minute. Who says I want Adam back? Maybe there are going to be a bunch of available men at the wedding. It could be a smorgasbord for ol’ Avery.”

“Well, it’ll be overloaded with construction workers, if you like that kind of thing,” Graham said.

“That has potential.”

Emmie laughed. “Oh, stop. You want Adam back. Just admit it.”

“Ugh, you are becoming such a matchmaker. Quit it.”

“Sure your dad’s going to be in town to give you away?” Trish teased.

“I made him *swear*.”

Rick asked, “And where will this grand event take place?”

“Right here.” Graham gestured to the lawn. “Couldn’t think of a more perfect place.”

“Just promise me that at least one of the bathrooms in this place will be done by then,” Trish pleaded.

“Honey,” Emmie said, “I will paint a Porta-Potty yellow and put it right near the reception tent in your honor.” She explained to Graham, “Both times she was pregnant before, she was in the bathroom so much I forgot what she looked like. She couldn’t complete a sentence without having to take a potty break in the middle.”

“The house will be completely finished by then,” Graham reassured Trish. “What with the best interior designer in town on the case.”

“Who’s that, now?”

Emmie made a face. “Oh, very nice. It just so happens that By Design is a pretty hot property lately.”

“I’ve heard. Annette sure talked you up to the alums. Are you redoing something in *every* house owned by a member of the Class of ’95?”

“No,” Emmie scoffed. “Classes of ’94 and ’96, too.”

“Ooh, pardon me.”

“*And* I found out it wasn’t all Annette’s doing. She knew some people, but then one of the Popular Girls made a passing comment ...”

“Who, then?” Rick asked.

Emmie and Graham exchanged glances. “A certain penitent blonde who wants to make amends.”

“No,” Avery gasped.

“Yep. But Annette did talk me up to her current friends and clients. I’m getting to see the inside of lots of mansions that would knock your socks off. I can’t wait to get my hands on some of those. But most important is this house right here.”

“We’ll be able to move in by August,” Graham said.

“Great!” Trish enthused, and then hesitated. “Aw. Then you’ll sell Casa de Emmie. How sad.”

Emmie smiled wanly. “It’s funny how you outgrow one home but grow into another. I’m okay with it.”

“Actually,” Graham cut in, “I was thinking ... you might not have to sell it.”

“You want to maintain separate residences?”

He rolled his eyes.

More seriously, she said, “I don’t want to rent it out.”

“No, not that. We could make application to switch it over to a commercial building instead of a residence. It could be the perfect location for Cooper Architecture *and* By Design. You’d be in a 3-D example of your work. What do you think?”

Emmie beamed. “I love it. And I love you,” she added, eliciting more nauseated noises from her friends.

“Well, then, welcome home.”

eKENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

Copyright © 2013 by Jayne Denker

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

eKensington is a trademark of Kensington Publishing Corp.

Kensington and the K logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

ISBN: 978-1-6018-3083-8

ISBN-10: 1-60183-083-1

First Electronic Edition: May 2013

Attributor
PROTECTED

JAYNE DENKER



*Some projects are
meant for two...*

By Design