

My One and Only

Is the one
that got away
the one?



New York Times Bestselling Author

kristan
higgins

Kristan Higgins

My One and Only

«HarperCollins»

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Just when she thought she had life and love all figured out....Divorce attorney Harper James can't catch a break. Bad enough that she runs into her ex-hubby Nick at her sister's destination wedding, but now, by a cruel twist of fate, she's being forced to make a cross-country road trip with him. And her new fiancé back at home is not likely to be sympathetic. Harper can't help that Nick has come blazing back into her life in all of his frustratingly appealing, gorgeous architect glory. But in Nick's eyes, Harper's always been the one. If they can only get it right this time, forever might be waiting—just around the bend."weet, charming, and tender." — Booklist on *The Next Best Thing*

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Praise for the novels of USA TODAY bestselling author Kristan Higgins

ALL I EVER WANTED

“Kristan Higgins has a gift for creating realistic, relatable heroines.... I wholeheartedly recommend this book. Get it. Read it. Love it.”

—All About Romance

“Higgins has a special talent for creating characters readers love... Fun, charming and heartfelt.”

—RT Book Reviews, 4½ stars

THE NEXT BEST THING

“A heartwarming, multi-generational tale of lost love, broken hearts and second chances.”

—BookPage

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

Winner—2010 Romance Writers of America

RITA® Award

“Cheeky, cute, and satisfying, Higgins’s romance is perfect entertainment for a girl’s night in.”

—Booklist

“Kristan Higgins proves that she is emerging as one of the most creative and honest voices in contemporary romance.”

—Romance Junkies

JUST ONE OF THE GUYS

“Higgins provides an amiable romp that ends with a satisfying lump in the throat.”

—Publishers Weekly

CATCH OF THE DAY

Winner—2008 Romance Writers of America RITA® Award

“A touching story brimming with smart dialogue, sympathetic characters, an engaging narrative and the amusing, often self-deprecating observations of the heroine. It’s a novel with depth and a great deal of heart.”

—RT Book Reviews, top pick, 4½ stars

My One and Only

Kristan Higgins



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dear Reader,

Thanks for choosing *My One and Only*! For me, there's nothing like a book that makes me laugh and cry. I hope you'll find scenes in these pages that make you do both.

This is a story of finding your way back, of learning to let go of the past and have faith in the future, even when you can't predict it. Nick and Harper had great reasons for falling in love, and they had equally good reasons for breaking up. Finding their way back isn't going to be easy...but nothing worthwhile in life is.

In some ways, this book is a little different—there's a road trip, for example, and my heroine doesn't have terribly romantic expectations for love, as some of my other heroines have. Some things are the same, though...a colorful family, gorgeous settings, and of course, a really cute dog in the form of Coco, a Jack Russell/Chihuahua mix. I had a great time with some of the secondary characters in this story—Dennis was a personal favorite, as well as BeverLee and Carol.

I took some liberties with facts in this book. There is no professional Martha's Vineyard Fire Department...the island is ably served by noble volunteers from the eight towns that comprise Martha's Vineyard. I'm also not sure an attorney could make a living handling only divorces with such a small year-round population. And as far as direct flights from South Dakota to New York City...well, if they're out there, I couldn't find them. But hey. This is fiction.

I'd love to hear from you anytime...visit my website at www.kristanhiggins.com.

All the best,

Kristan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks as always to my agent, the brilliant Maria Carvainis, as well as her able and ready staff, who are always in my corner, always available and always absolutely lovely.

Every writer should be so lucky as to work with an editor such as Keyren Gerlach, who is insightful, kind and pushes me to reach higher with every book. The entire team at HQN and Harlequin Enterprises has been overwhelming with their enthusiasm and support for my work. Special thanks to Margaret Marbury O'Neill and Tara Parsons and the wicked awesome art department for my beautiful covers.

My heartfelt thanks to Shaunee Cole, Karen Pinco and Kelly Morse for helping me kick this bad boy off; to Toni Andrews for her ready and brilliant counsel on plotting; to Cassy and Jon Pickard for describing the life of an architect; to Annette Willis for giving me the scoop on the life of a divorce attorney (any mistakes...all mine!); to Paula Kristan Spotanski and Jennifer Iszkiewicz for sharing their memories and photos of Glacier National Park; to Bridget Fehon, animal name consultant extraordinaire; to my dear mom for all her help; Bob and Diane Moore for the loan of their beautiful home on Martha's Vineyard. And to my great friends at CTRWA, thanks for the enthusiasm, support and cheerleading. The Force is strong within you!

And of course, all my love to my honey and our two beautiful kids, the three best things that ever happened to me.

Lastly, thank you, dear reader. Thank you for spending time with this book, for writing to me and in many cases, making me your friend. I just can't tell you how much that means.

My One and Only

When I was five years old,
we kindergartners got to bring our art projects
to show the big-kid second graders. As I walked
past my brother's desk, I made my clay turtle kiss him.
He took it like a man, told me it was cute and ignored
the boys who made fun of him for having a dorky little
sister. For that, and for a million other reasons,
this book is dedicated to you, Mike. Love you, pal.

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CHAPTER ONE

“STOP SMILING. EVERY time you smile, an angel dies.”

“Wow,” I answered. “That’s a good one.”

The man with the negative attitude sat at the bar, looking as if he was living a bad country-and-western song—no woman, broken truck, dead dog. Poor slob. “Listen,” I said. “I know it’s sad, but sometimes, divorce is just the euthanization of a dying relationship.” I patted his shoulder, then adjusted his white collar, which was just a bit off center. “Sometimes our hearts just need time to accept what our heads already know.”

The priest sighed. “Listen to her with that ridiculous line,” he said to Mick, the bartender.

“It’s not ridiculous! It’s great advice.”

“You’re evil.”

“Oh, my,” I said. “You’re taking it harder than I thought.”

“It’s true. After all my hard work, you swoop in and ruin everything.”

“Father Bruce!” I said, feigning hurt. “There was no swooping! How cutting!”

The good father and I were at Offshore Ale, Martha’s Vineyard’s finest bar, a dark and charming little place in Oak Bluffs and a favorite place for locals and tourists alike. Father Bruce, my longtime friend and the immensely popular pastor of the island’s Catholic church, could often be found here.

“Now come on, Father,” I continued, sliding onto a stool next to him and tugging my skirt so as not to flash him. “You and I are actually a lot alike.” He responded with a groan, which I ignored. “We shepherd people through life’s hard times, guiding them through an emotional minefield, the voice of reason when reason is lost.”

“Sad thing is, she believes it, Mick.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop being a sore loser and buy me a drink.”

“Marriage ain’t what it used to be,” the priest grumbled. “Mick, a bourbon for the shark here.”

“Actually, just a Pellegrino, Mick. And Father, I’m going to strike that last moniker from the record.” I smiled generously. Of course I was a shark. All the best divorce attorneys were.

“I take it you lost again, Father?” Mick said, adding a slice of lemon to my sparkling water.

“Let’s not discuss it, Mick. She’s gloating as it is.”

“I’m certainly not gloating,” I objected, reaching over to move another patron’s beer, which was in danger of being knocked into Father B.’s lap. “I have nothing against marriage, as you will soon see. But in the case of *Starling v. Starling*, these two were doomed from the day he got on bended knee. As is one in three couples.”

Father Bruce closed his eyes.

Though on opposite sides of the divorce issue, Father B. and I were old pals. But today, Joe Starling, a lifelong parishioner in Father Bruce’s parish, had come into my office and asked me to begin divorce proceedings. There’d actually been a race to my door, and Joe won. He was...let’s see...the ninth parishioner in the past two years to do so, despite Father B.’s best efforts at weaving together the fraying bonds of matrimony.

“Maybe they’ll have a change of heart,” Father Bruce suggested. He looked so hopeful that I didn’t remind him of one hard fact: not one of my clients had ever backed out of proceedings.

“So how’s everything else, Father?” I asked. “Heard you gave a killer sermon last weekend. And I saw you power walking the other day. Your new heart valve must be working great.”

“Seems to be, Harper, seems to be.” He smiled—he was a priest, after all, and had to forgive me. “Did you perform your random act of kindness today?”

I grimaced. “No. It was a senseless act of beauty.” Father Bruce, viewing my soul as a personal campaign, had challenged me to, in his words, “offset the evil of your profession” by doing at least

one random act of kindness each day. “Yes, yes,” I admitted. “I let a family of six go in front of me at the café. Their baby was crying. Does that pass?”

“It does,” said the priest. “By the way, you look nice today. A date with young Dennis?”

I glanced around. “More than a date, Father.” Wincing as John Caruso accidentally-on-purpose bumped into my back, I pretended not to hear his muttered epithet. One grew used to such slurs when one was as successful as I was. (Mrs. Caruso got the condo in the Back Bay and the house out here, not to mention a very generous monthly alimony payment.) “Today’s the day. I plan to present the facts, make a convincing case and wait for the verdict, which I completely expect to be in my favor.”

Father Bruce raised a bushy white eyebrow. “How romantic.”

“I think my view on romance is well documented, Father B.”

“One would almost pity young Dennis.”

“One would, except the boy has it made, and you know it.”

“Do I?”

“Please.” I clinked my glass against Father Bruce’s and took a drink. “To marriage. And speak of the devil, here he is now, all of four minutes early. Will wonders never cease.”

My boyfriend of the past two and a half years, Dennis Patrick Costello, was...well. Picture every fantasy you’ve ever had about a hot firefighter. Uh-huh. That’s right. Eye candy didn’t even begin to cover it. Thick black hair, blue eyes, the ruddy cheeks of the Irish. Six-two. Shoulders that could carry a family of four. The only fly in the ointment was a rattail...a long, anemic braid to which Dennis was senselessly attached and which I tried very hard to ignore. Be that as it may, his physical beauty and constant affability always gave me a little thrill of pride. There wasn’t a person on the island who didn’t like Dennis, and there wasn’t woman who didn’t break off midsentence when he smiled. And he was mine.

Den was with Chuck, his platoon mate on the Martha’s Vineyard Fire Department, who gave me a sour look as he headed to the far end of the bar. Chuck had cheated on Constance, his very nice wife. Not just once, either. Nope, he’d pulled a Tiger Woods, eventually admitting to four affairs in six years of marriage. As a result, Chuck now rented a single room in a crooked, 600-square-foot “cottage” out on Chappaquiddick and had to take the ferry to work every day. Such are the wages of sin.

“Hi, Chuck! How are you?” I asked. Chuck ignored me, as was his custom. No matter. I turned to Dennis. “Hey, hon! Look at you, four minutes early.”

Dennis bent down and kissed my cheek. “Hey there, gorgeous,” Dennis said. “Hi, Father B.”

“Dennis. Good luck, son. I’ll offer up a Hail Mary.”

“Thanks, Padre.” Apparently not curious as to why a priest would be praying for him, Dennis smiled at me. “I’m starving. You hungry?”

“You bet. See you around, Father Bruce,” I said, sliding off the bar stool. Dennis gave me a smoky once-over—that was, after all, the point of my dress and painfully high heels, which bordered on slutty. I wanted Dennis’s full attention, and, as he was male, showing a little breast wasn’t going to hurt my case.

Tonight, I was popping the question. Two and a half years with Dennis had shown me that he was very solid husband material. Good heart, steady work, decent guy, close family ties, quite attractive. It was now or never...at almost thirty-four, I wasn’t going to hang around and be someone’s girlfriend forever. I was a person who made lists and took action, and Dennis, bless his heart, needed direction.

First element of the plan...feed Dennis, who needed to eat more often than an infant. A couple of beers wouldn’t hurt, either, because Dennis, though he seemed quite happy with our relationship, hadn’t yet brought up the subject of marriage on his own. A little mellowing wouldn’t hurt.

And so, half an hour later, a pint of Offshore Nutbrown Ale already in him and a massive blue-cheese-and-bacon hamburger in front of him, Dennis was telling me about an accident call. “So I’m

trying to get the car door off, right, and all of a sudden, the thing comes flying off, hits Chuck right in the nuts, and he's like, 'Costello, you asshole!' and we all just lose it. And the thing is, the old lady's still in the car. Oh, man, it was priceless."

I smiled patiently. Firehouse humor—for lack of a better word—was crude at best. Nevertheless, I chuckled and murmured, "Poor thing," meaning, of course, the old woman stuck in the car while the brawny men of the MVFD clutched themselves and made testicle jokes. For Chuck, I felt only that justice had been served. "Was the driver badly hurt?"

"Nah. Not a scratch on her. We wouldn't have laughed if she was decapitated or something." He grinned cheekily, and I smiled back.

"Glad to hear it. So listen, Den. We need to talk."

At the dreaded words, Dennis's smile dropped. Blinking rapidly, as if I was about to punch him in the face, he groped for his half-pound, overladen burger as if for protection—defensive body language, something I often saw in the spouses of my clients. Best to move in for the kill. I folded my hands neatly in front of me, tilted my head and smiled.

"Dennis, I think it's time for us to take things to the next level, you know? We've been together awhile, we have a very solid relationship, I'll be thirty-four in a few weeks, next year is advanced maternal age, medically speaking, so let's get married."

Dennis jerked back in alarm. Drat. I hadn't sounded terribly romantic, had I? Maybe I should've gone for a more sentimental note, rather than a recitation of the facts. This is what I got for practicing in front of a dog, rather than a human. Then again, there was nothing wrong with being straightforward...closing arguments, if you will.

My boyfriend answered by shoving a good quarter of the giant sandwich into his mouth. "Mmm-hrmph," he said, pointing to his bulging cheeks.

Well, resistance was expected, of course. Dennis was a guy, and most guys, with only a few notable exceptions, didn't pop the question without a nudge. And I had been nudging...I'd admired an engagement ring of one of Dennis's cousins three months ago, commented on Dennis's love of children, telling him he'd be a good dad, mentioned my own desire to procreate...but so far, nada. I assumed Dennis needed something a little more, er, blatant. A kick, for example. Didn't most men need a good swift kick?

"Now don't panic, hon," I said as he chewed desperately. "We get along great. We spend most nights together, we've been together for more than two years, you're thirty now, you know you want kids... It's time. Don't you think so? I know I do." I smiled to show him we were both on the same team.

Dennis swallowed, his chiseled, gorgeous face now pale. "Uh, listen, dude," he began. I grimaced—dude? Really? He noticed. "Sorry, dude," he said. "I mean, Harper. Sorry." Dennis closed his mouth, opened it, hesitated, then took another massive bite of burger.

Fine. I would speak. It was better that way. "Let me go on, okay, Den? Then you can say something. If you still want to." I smiled and maintained eye contact, which was a little hard, given that Dennis's eyes were darting frantically. Also, the Red Sox game was on, which didn't help, as Dennis was a rabid fan. "Den, as you know, I spend my entire day dealing with crappy relationships. I see the mistakes people make, and I know what to avoid. We don't have a crappy relationship. Our relationship is great. It really is. And we can't be in limbo forever. You're at my place most nights anyway—"

"Your bed is wicked comfortable," he said sincerely, stuffing some fries into his mouth. He offered a few to me, but I shook my head, my own salad more of a prop tonight.

"No thanks. Back to the subject..." I leaned forward a little more, giving Dennis a better glimpse of my cleavage. His eyes dropped the way Pavlov's dog drooled, and I smiled. "Our sex life is certainly good," I continued, reminding him of our finer moments. A woman at the next table, who was trying

to convince her toddler to eat a fried clam, gave me a sharp look. Tourists. “We obviously find each other attractive, don’t we?”

“Most def.” He gave me the wide, even smile that rendered so many women speechless. Perfect. He was now thinking with the little head, which would help my case.

“Exactly, hon. And I make a great living, you have...well, a solid salary. We’ll have a very comfortable lifestyle, we’ll make beautiful babies, et cetera. Let’s make it permanent, shall we?” I reached down for my bag and withdrew the black velvet box. “I even picked out the ring, so we know I love it.”

At the sight of the two-carat rock, Dennis flinched.

I closed my eyes briefly. “I paid for it, too, so don’t worry. See? This isn’t so hard after all, is it?” I gave him my firm court smile, the one that said, Your Honor, please. Can we stop screwing around and get this done?

Father Bruce and Bob Wickham, head of the church council, made their way over to the table next to our booth. The priest shot me a knowing look, which I ignored.

At that moment, Jodi Pickering, Dennis’s high school girlfriend and a waitress here, shoved the prow of her bosom into Den’s jaw. “Are you all set here, Denny?” she asked, ignoring me and giving my soon-to-be fiancé a docile, cowlike gaze.

“Hey, Jodi, what’s up?” Dennis said, grinning past her 36-Ds to her face. “How’s the little guy?”

“Oh, he’s great, Denny. It was so nice that you stopped by the game the other night. He just loves you! And you know, without a father in the picture, I think T.J. really needs—”

“Okay, we get it, Jodi-with-an-i,” I said, smiling pleasantly up at her. “You have an adorable son and are still quite available. Dennis, however, is with me. If you would just take your boobs out of my boyfriend’s face, I would deeply appreciate it.”

She narrowed her eyes at me and sashayed away. Dennis watched her departure as one would watch the lifeboats paddling away from the Titanic. Then he swallowed and looked at me. “Listen, Harp,” he began. “You’re...you know...great and all, but, uh...well, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, right? I mean, why change a good thing? Can’t we just keep hanging out together?”

Again, totally expected. I straightened up and tilted my head a few degrees. “Dennis,” I said firmly, well aware that this kind of circular conversation could go on forever. “This isn’t high school. We’re not kids. We’ve been together for the past two and a half years. I’m thirty-four next month. I don’t want to hang out indefinitely. If we’re not going to get married, we need to break up. So... shit or get off the pot, honey.”

“That was beautiful,” murmured Father Bruce as he opened a menu.

I favored him with a withering glance, then turned back to Firefighter Costello. “Dennis? Let’s do this.”

Dennis was granted a brief reprieve by a roar from the bar. We both looked over. On the television, various and sundry members of the Sox were spitting and scratching their groins. Did they have no PR department, for heaven’s sake? And a game was just what Dennis didn’t need...more distraction.

Clearly, choosing a public place for this discussion was a tactical error. I’d originally thought it would work in my favor...even had a little vision of Dennis shouting, “Hey, everyone, we’re getting married!” and people (even the people who kind of hated me) cheering and clapping.

Didn’t seem like that was about to happen. “Dennis?” I said, my chest tightening just a little. “Can I have an answer?”

Dennis picked up his napkin and started ripping off little pieces.

A small, sharp blade of uncertainty sliced into my consciousness. Dennis was usually so... agreeable when I made plans. Yes, I was the one who took control of our relationship, but wasn’t that typical? Men didn’t plan things on their own. They didn’t suggest picnics or trips to the city or what have you. And even if his words tonight indicated reluctance, Den’s actions bespoke permanence. Two

and a half years—years!—in an exclusive and mutually satisfying relationship without one significant fight. Of course we were headed for marriage. He had all the necessary qualities of a husband...he just needed a little shove into full adulthood.

Actually, I had right here next to my plate a honey-do list to help Den on that front. Get a second job, as he had too much free time as a firefighter and really shouldn't be playing Xbox as much as I knew he did (or downloading porn, which I suspected he did). Get rid of the 1988 El Camino he now drove—one door green, all other parts rust—and drive something that didn't make him look like an impoverished pimp. Cut off the rattail, because please! It was a rattail! And lastly... Move in with me. Despite our four or five nights a week together, Dennis still lived in a garage apartment he rented from his brother. I had a two-bedroom house on the water.

My plan had been to wait till he accepted my offer, then pass over the list and discuss.

But he wasn't accepting.

I confess that I was a little confused. I asked Dennis for very little and accepted him the way he was—a good guy. Sure, he was still something of a kid, but that was fine. Though I wasn't one to get all sticky with proclamations, I loved Dennis. Who didn't? A native Islander like myself, Dennis was mobbed by friends wherever we went, from the guys who worked on the ferry to the road crew to the summer people who occasionally dropped in at the firehouse.

Granted, maybe he wasn't the, uh, most intellectual man on earth, but Dennis was kindhearted and quite brave. In fact, he'd saved three children from a house fire his second week on the job a few years ago and was something of a local legend. And speaking of kids, Dennis was very good with them, natural and at ease in a way I'd never been, despite my hope to have kids of my own one day. Dennis, though—he'd get on the floor and roll around with his seven nieces and nephews, and they adored him.

And—one couldn't rule this out—Dennis liked me. Honestly, I couldn't tell you how many men got that retracting-testicles look when they learned what I did for a living. Women too, as if I was a pox on our gender just because I facilitated the end of crappy marriages. There was a fair number of people who'd cheerfully slash my tires after I'd signed on to represent their spouses. I'd been called a bitch (and worse), had coffee thrown in my face, been spit on, cursed, threatened and condemned.

I took it as a compliment. Yes, I was a very good divorce attorney. If that meant a larger-than-normal percentage of the population owned voodoo dolls with red hair and a tight gray suit, so be it. In fact, I'd met Dennis when my car was rammed by an angry wife and the MVFD had to cut me out (no injuries, and a nice damages award from Judge Burgess, who had a soft spot for me). "Wanna grab a beer? I get off in half an hour," Dennis had said, and more shaken than I'd let on, I agreed.

He didn't seem scared by my reputation as a ballbuster. Wasn't intimidated by my healthy paycheck, funded by the dissolution of happily-ever-after dreams. So yes. Dennis liked me. Though I didn't sigh with rapture when I looked in the mirror, I knew I was attractive (very, some might say), well dressed, hardworking, successful, smart, loyal. Fun, too. Well...sometimes I was fun. Okay, sure, there were those who'd disagree with that, but I was fun enough.

All in all, I thought we could be very content. And content was vastly underrated.

As I well knew, marriages were fragile birds of hope, and one in three ended up as a pile of dirty feathers. In my experience, the vast majority of those were the oh-my-darling-you-make-my-very-heart-beat variety...the type that so often ended in a pyre of hate and bitterness. Comfort, companionship and realistic expectations...they didn't sound nearly as glam as undying passion, but they were worth a lot more than most people believed.

There was one more reason I wanted to get a commitment from Dennis. Soon, I'd turn thirty-four, and when that happened, I'd be the same age as my mother the last time I saw her. For whatever reason, the thought of being (alone, adrift) single...at that age...it felt like a failure of monumental proportion. In the past few months, that thought had been pulsing in a dark rhythm. Same age as she was. Same age as she was.

Dennis was silent, his napkin now confetti. “Dude, listen,” he finally said. “Harp. Er. Harper, I mean. Uh, hon...well, the thing is...”

At that moment, Audrey Hepburn’s whispery voice floated from my purse—“Moon River,” the song indicating a call from my sister. Like Audrey, my sister was lovely, sweet and ever in need of protection. She’d moved to New York recently, and I hadn’t heard from her much these past few weeks.

“You wanna take that?” Dennis asked hastily.

“Um...do you mind?” I said. “It’s my sister.”

“Go right ahead,” he answered, practically melting in relief. “Take your time.” He drained the remaining half of his beer and turned again to the Boston Red Sox.

Oh, dream maker, you heartbreaker... “Hi, Willa!”

“Harper? It’s me, Willa!” Though my stepsister was twenty-seven, her voice retained a childlike chime, and the sound never failed to bring a smile to my face.

“Hi, sweetie! How’s the Big Apple? Do you love it?”

“It’s so great, but Harper, I have news! Big news!”

“Really? Did you find a job?”

“Yes, I’m, um, an office assistant. But that’s not my news. Are you ready? Are you sitting down?”

A chilly sense of dread laced through my knees. I glanced at Dennis, who was focused on the ball game. “Okay...what is it?”

“I’m getting married!”

My hand flew to my mouth. “Willa!”

“I know, I know, you’re gonna have kittens, and yes, we just met a couple weeks ago. But it’s like kismet, is that the right word? Totally real. I mean, Harper, I’ve never felt like this before! Ever.”

Crotch. I took a breath, held it for a few seconds, then released it slowly. “I hate to be a buzzkill, Willa, but that’s what you said the first time you were married, honey. Second time, too.”

“Oh, stop!” she said, laughing. “You’re a total buzzkill. I knew you’d freak, but don’t. I’m twenty-seven, I know what I’m doing! I just called you because...oh, Harper, I’m so happy! I really am! I love him so much! And he thinks I walk on, like, water!”

I closed my eyes. Willa had married her first husband when she was twenty-two, three weeks after Raoul had been released from prison; the divorce followed a month later when strike three came after he robbed a bead store. (I know. A bead store?) Husband #2, acquired when my sister was twenty-five, had come out of the closet seven weeks after the wedding. Only Willa had been surprised.

“That’s great, honey. He sounds, um, wonderful. It’s just... Marriage? Already?”

“I know, I know. But Harper, listen. I’m totally in love!”

So much for live and learn. “Going slow never hurt anyone, Wills. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Can’t you say you’re happy for me, Harper? Come on! Mama’s totally psyched!”

This was not a surprise. My stepmother, BeverLee of the Big Blond Hair, lived for weddings, whether in the family, the tabloids or on one of the three soap operas she watched religiously.

“It’s just fast, that’s all, Willa.”

Willa sighed. “I know. But this isn’t like those other times. This is the real deal.”

“You just moved two months ago, honey. Don’t you want to enjoy the city, figure out what you really want to do for a living?”

“I can still do that. I’m getting married, not dying.”

There was an edge in my sister’s voice now, and I figured I’d dangle a carrot. “True enough. Well, this is exciting. Congratulations, honey! Hey! I’d love to throw you guys a big wedding out here on the Vineyard. All the good places are booked for this fall, no doubt, but next summer—”

“No need, but thank you, Harper! You’re so nice, but we already found a spot, and you’ll never guess where.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Glacier National Park, that’s where! In Montana!”

“Wow.” I glanced at Dennis, but his attention was still fixed to the screen above the bar. “So, um...when were you thinking?” Please let it be a long time from now.

“No time like the present,” she chirped. “September eleventh! You’ll be my maid of honor, right? It has to be you!”

“September eleventh, Wills?”

“Oh, come on! That day could use a little happiness, don’t you think?”

“That’s two weeks away.”

“So? When it’s right, it’s right. Will you be my maid of honor or not?”

I opened my mouth, closed it and bit my tongue. Two weeks. Holy testicle Tuesday. Two weeks to talk Willa out of another disastrous marriage, or at least to slow down and really get to know her potential groom. I could do it. Just had to play along. “Well, sure. Of course I’ll be your maid of honor.”

“Hooray! Thank you, Harper! It’ll be so beautiful out there. But listen, I haven’t told you the best part yet,” Willa said.

My heart stuttered. “Are you pregnant?” I asked calmly. That would be fine. I would support the baby, of course. Pay for college. Make sure the kid stayed in school.

“No, I’m not pregnant. Listen to you! It’s just that you know the groom.”

“I do?”

“Yup! It’s a totally small world. Want to guess?”

“No. Just tell me who it is.”

“His first name starts with a C.”

Men whose names began with C in Manhattan? “I—I don’t know. I give up.”

“Christopher.” Willa’s voice was smug with affection.

“Christopher who?”

“Christopher Lowery!”

I jerked back in my chair, my pinot noir sloshing dangerously. “Lowery?” I choked out.

“I know! Isn’t that amazing? I’m marrying your ex-husband’s brother!”

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN I CLOSED MY PHONE a moment later, I saw that my hands were shaking. “Dennis?” I said. My voice sounded odd, and Father Bruce glanced over, frowning. I gave him a little smile—well, I tried. “Den?”

My boyfriend jerked to attention. “You okay, hon? You look...weird.”

“Dennis, something came up. Willa...um...can we just...table our conversation for a little while? A few weeks?”

A tidal wave of relief flooded his face. “Uh...sure! You bet! Is your sister okay?”

“Well, she’s...yeah. She’s getting married.”

“Cool.” He frowned. “Or not?”

“It’s...it’s uncool. I have to run, Dennis. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, that’s fine,” he said. “Want me to drive you home? Or stay over?”

“Not tonight, Dennis. Thanks, though.”

I must’ve sounded off, because Dennis’s eyebrows drew together. “You sure you’re okay, hon?” He reached across the table and took my hand, and I squeezed back gratefully. Once you cut through Dennis’s thick outer layers, there really was a sweet man inside.

“I’m fine. Thanks. Just...well, the wedding’s in a couple weeks. A bit of a shock.”

“Definitely.” He smiled and kissed my hand. “I’ll call you later.”

I drove home, not really seeing the streets or cars, though presumably I avoided hitting any pedestrians and trees en route. Since the tourism season was still in full swing, I took the back roads, driving west toward the almost violent sunset, great swashes of purple and red, taking comfort from the endless rock walls of the Vineyard, the pine trees and oaks, the gray-shingled houses. The time I’d spent away from here—college, a brief stint in New York and then law school in Boston—had secured my belief that the island was the most beautiful place on earth.

Martha’s Vineyard consists of eight towns. I worked in Edgartown, land of white sea captains’ homes and impeccable gardens and, of course, the beautiful brick courthouse. Dennis lived in charming Oak Bluffs, famed for the Victorian gingerbread houses that made up the old Methodist enclave called the Campground. But I lived in a tiny area of Chilmark called Menemsha.

I waited patiently for a slew of tourists, who came down here to admire the scenic working class, to cross in front of me, then pulled into the crushed-shell driveway of my home. It was a small, unremarkable house, not much to look at from the outside but rather perfect inside. And the view...the view was priceless. If Martha’s Vineyard had a blue-collar neighborhood, it was here, at Menemsha’s Dutcher’s Dock, where lobstermen still brought in their catches, where swordfishing boats still ran. My father’s father had been such a fisherman, and it was in his old house, set on a hill overlooking the aging fleet, where I now lived.

Through the living room window, I could see Coco’s brown-and-white head appearing then disappearing as she jumped up and down to ascertain that yes, I really had come home. In her mouth was her favorite cuddle friend, a stuffed bunny rabbit that was slightly bigger than she was. A Jack Russell-Chihuahua mix, Coco was somewhat schizophrenic, alternating as it served her purposes between the two sides of her parentage—exuberant, affectionate Jack or timid, vulnerable Chihuahua. At the moment, she was in her happy place, though when it came time for bed, she’d revert to a wee, trembling beastie who clearly needed to sleep with her head on my pillow.

I unlocked the door and went in. “Hi, Coco,” I said. With a single bound, she leaped into my arms, all eight pounds of her, and licked my chin. “Hello, baby! How’s my girl? Hmm? Did you have a good day? Finish that novel you’re writing? You did! Oh, you’re so clever.” Then I kissed her little brown-and-white triangle head and held her close for a minute or two.

When Pops had been alive, this house had been a standard, somewhat crowded and typical ranch. Three small bedrooms, one and a half baths, living room, kitchen. He died when I was in law school and left the house to me, his only grandchild (biological, that was...he'd liked Willa, but I was his special girl). No matter how much I made as a divorce attorney, I would never have been able to afford this view on my own. But thanks to Pops, it was mine. I could've sold it for several million dollars to a real estate developer, who would've torn it down and slapped up a vacation house faster than you could say McMansion. But I didn't. Instead, I paid my father, who was a general contractor, to renovate the place.

So we knocked down a few walls, relocated the kitchen, turned three bedrooms into two, installed sliding glass doors wherever possible, and the end result was a tiny, airy jewel of a home, founded on the hard work of my salty, seafaring grandfather, renovated by my father's hands and funded by my lawyer's salary. Someday, I imagined, I'd put on a second story to house my well-behaved and attractive future children, but for now, it was just Coco and me, with Dennis as our frequent guest. Sand-colored walls, white trim, spare white furniture, the occasional splash of color—a green oar from a barn sale in Tisbury leaning tastefully in one corner, a soft blue chair in front of the bay window. Over the sliders that led to the deck hung an orange lifesaving ring, the chipped letters naming Pops's boat and port of origin—Pegasus, Chilmark.

With a sigh, I turned my attention back to my sister's bombshell.

I'm marrying your ex-husband's brother!

Holy testicle Tuesday.

Time for some vinotherapy. Setting Coco back down, I went to the fridge, uncorked a bottle and poured a healthy portion, oh yes. Chugged half of it, grabbed a bag of Cape Cod sea salt and vinegar potato chips and the bottle of wine and headed for my deck, Coco trotting next to me on her tiny and adorable feet.

So my sister was marrying Christopher Lowery, a man I'd last seen on my own wedding day thirteen years ago. How old was he then? Sixteen? Eighteen?

I took a sip of wine, not a gulp, and forced myself to take a deep breath of the salty, moist air, savoring the tang of baitfish (hey, I was a local). I listened to the sound of the endless island wind, which buffeted my house from two directions this night, bringing me strands of music and laughter from other places, other homes. Calm down, Harper, I told myself sternly. Nothing to panic about. Not yet, anyway.

"I'm getting a glass," a voice said. Kim, my neighbor and closest friend. "Then I want to hear everything."

"Sure," I answered. "Who's with the kids?"

"Their idiot father," she answered.

As if summoned, Lou's voice shattered the relative quiet as he yelled across the small side yard that separated our homes. "Honey? Where's the box of Pull-Ups?"

"Find them your damn self! They're your kids, too!" Kim bellowed back.

This was followed by a shriek and a howl from one of Kim's four sons. I suppressed a shudder. Our houses were only a few yards apart, though happily, mine jutted out past hers, preventing me from having to witness their particular brand of domestic bliss.

"This house is a pigsty!" Lou yelled.

"So clean it!" his bride returned.

"How do you keep the magic?" I asked, taking another sip. Kim smiled and flopped down in the chair next to me.

"You'd never know we were screwing like monkeys last night," she said, helping herself to the wine.

"And how do monkeys screw?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Fast and furious," she laughed, clinking her glass against mine.

Kim and Lou were happily (if sloppily) married. Not exactly my role models, but reassuring nonetheless. They'd moved in a couple of years ago; Kim appeared on my doorstep with a box of Freihofer's doughnuts and a bottle of wine and offered friendship. My kind of woman.

"Mommy!" came the voice of one of the twins.

"I'm busy!" she called. "Ask your father! Honest to God, Harper, it's a wonder I haven't sold them into slavery." Kim often claimed to envy my single, working woman's life, but the truth was, I envied hers. Well, in some ways. She and Lou were solid and affectionate, completely secure in the happy way they bickered and bossed each other around. (See? I had nothing against marriage when it was done right.) Their kids ranged in age from seven to two. Griffin was the oldest and had the soul of a sixty-year-old man. Once in a while, he'd come over to play Scrabble and admire Coco. I liked him; definitely preferred him over the four-year-old twins, Gus and Harry, who left a path of chaos, blood and rubble wherever they went. The two-year-old, Desmond, had bitten me last week, but seconds later put his sticky little face against my knee, an oddly lovely sensation, so the jury was still a bit torn over him.

"So are you engaged?" Kim asked, settling in the chair next to me. "Tell me now so I can start my diet. No way am I going to be a bridesmaid weighing this much."

"I am not engaged," I answered calmly.

"Holy shitake!" Kim, who tried not to curse in front of her kids, had invented her own brand of swearing, which I'd latched on to myself. "He turned you down?"

"Well, not exactly. My sister called during negotiations, and guess what? She's getting married."

"Again?"

"Exactly. But it gets better. She just met him a month ago, and guess what else? He's..." I paused, took another slug of liquid courage. "He's my ex-husband's brother. Half brother, actually."

She sputtered on her wine. "You have an ex-husband, Harper? How did I not know this?"

I glanced at her. "I guess it never came up. Long ago, youthful mistake, yadda yadda ad infinitum." I wondered if she bought it. Both of us ignored the screeches that came from her house, though Coco jumped on my lap, channeling Chihuahua, and trembled, cured from her terror only by a potato chip.

"Well, well, well," Kim said when I offered no further information.

"Yes."

"So Willa just...ran into your ex-brother-in-law?" Kim asked. "Sure, it's a small world, but come on. In New York City?"

I hadn't asked about that, a bit too slammed by the mention of...him...to properly process the information. After all these years of not thinking about him, his name now pulsed and burned in my brain. I shrugged and took another sip of wine, then leaned my head against the back of the chair. The sky was lavender now, only a thin stripe of fading red at the horizon marking the sun's descent. The tourists who'd come to watch the sunset clambered back into their cars to head for Oak Bluffs or Edgartown for dinner and alcohol—Chilmark, like five of Martha's Vineyard's other towns, was dry. Ah, New England.

"So will you be seeing him again? The ex? What's his name?"

"I guess so, if they actually go through with it. The wedding's supposed to be in two weeks. In Montana." Another sip. "His name is Nick." The word felt big and awkward as it left my mouth. "Nick Lowery."

"Yoo-hoo! Harper, darlin'! Where you at? Did you talk to your sister? Isn't it just so exciting! And romantic? My stars, I almost peed my pants when she told me!"

My stepmother charged into the house—she never knocked. "We're out here, BeverLee," I called, getting up to greet her—bouffanted, butter-yellow hair sprayed five inches off her scalp ("The bigger the hair, the closer to God," she often said), more makeup than a Provincetown drag queen, shirt cut down to reveal her massive cleavage. My dad's trophy wife of the past twenty years...

fifteen years younger than he was, blond and Texan. Behind her, my tall and skinny father was almost invisible.

“Hi, Dad.” My father, not one to talk unless a gun was aimed at his heart, nodded, then knelt to pet Coco, who wagged so hard it was a wonder her spine didn’t crack. “Hi, Bev. Yes, I talked to her.” I paused. “Very surprising.”

“Well, hello, there, Kimmy! How you doin’? Did Harper here tell you the happy news?”

“She shore did,” Kim said, immediately sliding into a Texas accent, something she swore was unconscious. “So excitin’!” She caught my eye and winked.

“I know it!” BeverLee chortled. “And oh, my, Montana! That’s just so romantic! I guess Chris worked out there one summer or some such...whatever, I can’t wait! Hoo-whee! What color’s your dress gonna be, honey? Jimmy, what do you think?”

I glanced at my father. He rose, put his hands in his pockets and nodded. This, I knew from experience, would be his contribution to the conversation...Dad was silent to the point of comatose. But BeverLee didn’t need other people to have a conversation, and sure enough, she continued.

“I’m thinking lavender, what do y’all think? For you, Harper, not me. I’m fixin’ on getting this little orange number I saw online. Cantaloupe-mango, they called the color, you know? And y’all know how I love orange.”

“I’d better go,” Kim said. “I hear glass breaking over at my house. Talk to you soon, Harper. Bye, Mr. James, Mrs. James.”

“Honey, y’all don’t need to call me Miz James! I told you that a million times!”

“Bye, BeverLee,” Kim said amiably. She tossed back the rest of her wine and gave me a wave.

“See you,” I said to her, then turned to my father and stepmother. “So. Before we pick out the dress, maybe we should talk about the, uh, wisdom of this event?”

“Wisdom? Listen to you, darlin’!” BeverLee exclaimed. “Jimmy, get your butt in that-there chair. Your daughter wants to talk!” She came over to me and pulled my hair out of its ponytail and started fluffing, ignoring my squirm. “Honestly, Harper, the man just doesn’t know what to make of this! His little girl getting married to his other little girl’s ex-husband! It’s just crazy.” With that, she took the travel-size can of Jhirmack Extra Hold that was attached to her keychain and sprayed my head.

“Okay, BeverLee, that’s great,” I said, trying not to inhale. “That’s enough. Thanks.” She put down her weapon, and I cleared my throat. “Now, first of all, Willa’s not marrying my ex-husband,” I said in my courtroom voice. “Just to clarify. She’s marrying Christopher. Christopher is Nick’s half brother. I was married to Nick.”

“Honey, I know that.” BeverLee fumbled in her purse and withdrew a pack of Virginia Slims. “I was there at your wedding, wasn’t I? I misspoke, okay? So try not to take my head off, won’t you, sugar? Just because your panties are in a twist since you’ll be seeing Nick again doesn’t mean you should—”

“My panties are not twisted,” I muttered.

“—bite the hand that feeds you. This is a happy day, all right?” The queen of mixed metaphors took a deep drag and exhaled through one corner of her mouth.

“You don’t feed me.”

“Well, I would if you let me. You’re right skinny. Anyway, Willard just loves purple, so lavender would be the way to go, sugar. You wanna make Willard happy, don’t you?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. If I had a soft spot, its name was Willa. Specifically, Willard Krystal Lupinski James.

The summer after my mother had left us, my father went to Vegas for a two-week conference on green building materials...or so he said. I spent the fortnight with my friend Heather, calling her mother “Mom” and pretending it was a joke and not a wish. Dad returned with BeverLee Roberta Dupres McKnight Lupinski and her daughter, Willard.

I was stunned, horrified and absolutely furious at what my father had done. When he'd told me he was going out West, a little fantasy had played out in my brain—Dad would find Mom and beg her to forgive him (for whatever I imagined he'd done) and she'd return and we'd all be happy again. The rational part of my brain knew that wouldn't really happen...but this? This I had never foreseen. Dad got married? To this...this Trailer Park Barbie? Were those boobs real? Did we have to see so much of them? And I was supposed to share my room with her kid? Was he out of his mind? But in typical Dad fashion, my father's answer was brief. "It's done, Harper. Don't make it harder than it has to be."

"Willard, go and give your new big sister a kiss, sugar pop. Go on now!" Willard only tightened her grip on her mother's hand and refused to raise her eyes. She was pale and skinny, tangled hair and scabby knees. Please. I was still bleeding over my mother's desertion, and now these two were living with me? I had a stepmother? A stepsister? My father was an idiot, and there was no way in hell I was about to make his life easier. I would hate them both. Especially the kid. The (dare I say it?) stupid kid.

My resolve lasted about eight hours. I went to my room to choke on the hot and bitter tears that even then I couldn't seem to shed. I cursed my silent father and railed against the unfairness of life, my life in particular. Of course I skipped dinner. I would starve in my room before going downstairs and eating with them. Made plans to run away/find my mother/become famous/be killed in a horrible accident/all of the above, which would make everyone see just how awful they'd been to me, and man, they'd feel like absolute dog crap, but it would be too late, so there. My father was an ass. My mother...my mother had abandoned me, my father barely spoke, I had no siblings. This BeverLee caricature was ridiculous. Her kid... Jesus. She was so not my new sister just because some blowsy stranger had married my father, who, come on, could have maybe called and given me a little warning?

At some point, I fell asleep, curled into fetal position, facing the wall, my jaw aching from being clenched so hard, my heart stony.

I woke up around eleven that night, hoping my new situation was a dream. Nope. From down the hall, I could hear...sounds...from my father's bedroom. Fantastic. Not only did he have to marry the disgusting white trash Barbie-on-steroids, he was having sex. Beyond revolting. I rolled over to grab my ancient Raggedy Anne doll so I could clamp it over my ears.

Willard—stupid name—was stuffing something under the other twin bed in my room.

"What are you doing?" I asked, the adolescent contempt flowing forth without effort.

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

"Did you wet the bed?"

She just kept stuffing. Perfect. This was just great. Now my room would smell like pee, just in case everything else wasn't enough.

"Don't hide them," I muttered, kicking off my own sheets. "We have to put them in the wash or they'll stink to high heaven. Change your pajamas."

She obeyed silently. I went downstairs with the dirty laundry, ignoring the nasty sounds from the master bedroom. Willard trailed after me like a pale, skinny ghost. I put the sheets in the washing machine and poured in detergent and some bleach—I'd become bitterly adept at housework in the past year. Then I turned around and opened my mouth to say something mean and authoritative, to make sure she'd know her place, recognize her status as an interloper and stay out of my way.

She was crying.

"Want some ice cream?" I asked and, without waiting for an answer, I picked her up—she was tiny and scrawny, like a malnourished baby chick, her short, straight blond hair sticking up all over the place. Carried her into the kitchen, set her down at the table and pulled two pints of Ben & Jerry's from the freezer. "I think I'll call you Willa," I said, handing her a spoon and the Triple Caramel Chunk. "Since you're so pretty, you should have a girl's name, don't you think?"

She didn't answer. Wasn't eating any ice cream.

"Willa? Is that okay?"

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her eyes on the table, and a hot wave of shame and regret washed over me, and longing and sadness and hell, everything else, too.

I swallowed hard, shoved those knife-sharp feelings aside and took a bite of ice cream. “Sounds good, don’t you think? Willa and Harper. Willa Cather and Harper Lee are both great American writers, did you know that?”

Of course she didn’t know that. I myself had just learned that this past summer, practically living at the tiny library, trying to fill the panicky void my mother had left, avoiding the terrible kindness of the staff. All summer, I’d hid in the stacks and prayed for invisibility, losing myself as best I could in books. And even though I’d exchanged fewer than four sentences with BeverLee, I guessed (correctly, it turned out) that the most intellectually stimulating literature she read was *Us Weekly*.

“I think it sounds good. Willa and Harper, Harper and Willa.” I paused. “I guess we’re sisters now.”

She met my eyes for the first time, and there was a tiny flicker of hope. And just like that, I loved her. And I had been taking care of her ever since.

I shook off the memory. BeverLee was talking about when they’d fly out to Montana, what kind of trousseau she could put together for her babykins on such short notice, and Dad was staring out at the boats.

I cleared my throat. “Is anyone else concerned that Willa’s getting married for the third time?”

“Well now, your daddy’s my third husband, isn’t that right, sweet knees? So I guess I don’t see nothin’ wrong with it, sugar. Third time’s the charm!”

“She just met this guy,” I reminded them.

“Well, they met at your wedding, darlin’.”

“For six hours,” I pointed out.

“And Christopher must be good people if he’s Nick’s brother.” I suppressed the flash of hurt that comment inspired—the immature part of me wanted her to say If he’s related to that stupid ex-husband of yours, Harper, he must be a real ass.

But no, BeverLee was off and running. “Christopher seemed real nice when we spoke on the telephone! Such good manners, and I think that says something about a man, don’t you, Jimmy, honeypot?”

My father didn’t answer.

“Dad? You got anything here?” I asked.

My father glanced at me. “Willa’s an adult, Harper. She’s almost thirty.”

“She married an ex-con and a gay man. Perhaps one might suggest that she’s not the best judge of character when it comes to men?” I said, trying to stay pleasant.

“Oh, listen to you, Harper, sugar! Don’t you believe in true love?”

“Actually, no, not in the sense you mean, BeverLee.”

“Bless your heart, Harper, you don’t fool me. I bet your big ol’ Dennis has something to say on the matter of true love! You’re just fussing. I think you’re a secret romantic, that’s what I think. You just fake bein’ all cynical ’cause of that job of yours. So lavender’s fine, then? I’ll do your hair, of course. You know how I love to do hair.”

There was really no point in talking to BeverLee. Or Dad, whose failure to have an opinion was a well-documented trait. “Lavender’s fine.” I sighed. Hopefully, Willa would see sense before then.

“Should we all fly out together? Willard and her young man are getting out there a week from Wednesday, and your daddy and I, we want to get out there ay-sap! He’s just dyin’ to see his little Willard, aren’t you, Jimmy?”

“Sure am.” That was probably true. Dad had always gotten on better with Willa than with me.

“So we’ll make a reservation for you and Dennis, how’s that? We can all sit together, God willin’!”

While technically I did love both my father and BeverLee, the idea of being trapped on a plane with them for five or six hours was as appealing as, oh, gosh...being locked in a sweatbox by al Qaeda. Plus, if things went well, I wouldn't have to fly anywhere. "The wedding's on a Saturday?" I asked. BeverLee nodded. "I think Dennis and I will probably fly out Thursday or Friday, then."

"Come on, Harper, honeybunch, it's your baby sister!"

"And I've been to two of her weddings already!" I said, smiling to soften the words. "I'll come as soon as I can, how's that? Now, I hate to be rude, but I have work to do," I said, standing up.

"Sure now, you are a grade-A workaholic! We get the hint! We don't have to be told twice!" BeverLee hugged me against her breasts, which were the size and consistency of bowling balls, kissed me twice on the cheek, leaving a smear of frosty pink, fluffed my hair and managed to sneak in one last blast of Jhirmack. "Let's grab us some lunch this week, okay? We can talk about all the details. Should we get a stripper for her bachelorette party? Do they have Chippendales out there in...where is it again?"

"Glacier National Park, she said."

"I wonder if they have male strippers out there." Bev pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"I'm guessing not in the park itself," I said. "Teddy Roosevelt would've frowned on that."

"Then I better get on it," she said, and left, my father in tow, a miasmatic cloud of Cinnabar in her wake.

Three seconds later, she was back. "Honey, now may not be the time to discuss, but sweetie, I need a favor." She glanced furtively behind her. "Um... Okay."

"I need to unburden myself, shall we say, on someone."

"Sure." I took a deep breath, assumed good listening posture and braced for the worst.

The worst came. BeverLee wrung her hands, her acrylic, orange-painted nails flashing in the dimming light. "Your daddy and me...we haven't had sex for quite some time. For seven weeks, in fact."

"Oh, God," I said, flinching.

"I'm just wonderin', do y'all have any idea why?"

I choked. "BeverLee, you know...well, Dad and I don't really talk about...that. Or anything, really. And maybe you should tell—"

"What should I do? I mean, usually, he can't get enough—"

"Okay! Well. I think you should talk to one of your girlfriends. Or Dad. Or, um, your minister. Maybe Father Bruce?" Sorry, Father. "Not me. You two are my...you know. My family."

Bev mulled that over, then sighed. "Well, sure, you're right, honeybun. Okay. But if he does say anything—"

"I'm positive he won't."

"—you just give me a heads-up, all right? Bye now!"

The quiet took a few minutes to creep back to my little slice of paradise, as if fearful that BeverLee would return. A thrush trilled from a bush, and the eastern breeze carried the sound of a faraway radio. A wisp of laughter came from down the hill, and for some reason, it made me feel...lonely. Coco came over and flopped at my feet, then rested her little head on my bare foot. "Thanks, sweetie," I said.

I stared out at the harbor for a long minute. Late summer is a particularly beautiful and bittersweet time on the Vineyard. Autumn was tiptoeing closer, the island would quiet, the kids would return to school. Nights spent on decks or sailboats were numbered now. Darkness fell earlier, and the leaves had already lost their summer richness. But tonight I didn't really see the view that so often soothed me after a long day's work.

Snap out of it, Harper, I told myself. I did indeed have work to do. Going inside, I saw the light blinking on the answering machine.

Message one, today at 6:04 p.m. “Harper? It’s Tommy.” There was a gusty sigh. “Listen, I’m having second thoughts. See, the thing is, I love her, you know, and maybe FedEx was just a mistake and we can get some counseling? More counseling, I mean? I don’t know. Sorry to call you at home. See you tomorrow.”

“You poor thing,” I murmured automatically. My paralegal’s wife had been unfaithful with the FedEx man, and Tommy was considering divorce. While I wouldn’t represent him—it was never wise to represent a friend in a divorce, I’d learned—Tommy had decided mine was the shoulder on which he should cry, though I hadn’t been much comfort, despite my best intentions.

Message two, today at 6:27 p.m. “Harper? It’s me, Willa! I’ll try you on your cell. Wait, did I just dial your cell? Or is this your house? Hang on...okay, it’s your house. Well, talk to you later! Love you!” Despite my trepidation over her news, I couldn’t help a smile. Sweet, sweet kid. Misguided, sure, but such a happy person.

Message three, today at 7:01 p.m. Right when I’d been proposing to Dennis, which seemed as though it happened last year, frankly.

Message three was just...silence. No one spoke...but the person hadn’t hung up right away, either. For a second, my heart shivered, and I stood there, frozen.

Would Nick call me, with our siblings getting married?

No. He didn’t have my number—it was unlisted. Even if he had it, he would never call me. Then the machine beeped, releasing me from my paralysis. You have no more messages.

I checked caller ID on my handset. Private number.

Telemarketer, most likely.

Almost without thinking, I padded barefoot into my bedroom. I dragged the chair from my dressing table to the closet and stood on it, groping along the highest shelf, and took down an old hat box. I sat on the bed and slowly...very slowly...opened the box. There was the silk scarf Willa gave me three birthdays ago, in shades of green that made me look like an ad for the Irish Tourism Board with my curly red hair and green eyes. The black wool cap my grandmother had knit when I went off to Amherst, shortly before she died. My tattered copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I’d always assumed I’d been named after Harper Lee...how many Harpers are out there?...and in the year after my mother had left, I’d read the book nine times, searching for some clue as to how my mother could’ve loved the story of literature’s most steadfast hero but still abandon her only child.

There, underneath everything else, was what I wanted now.

A photo. I picked it up. My hands seemed to be shaking a little, and my breath stopped as I looked at the picture.

God, we’d been young.

The photo had been taken the morning of my wedding day; Dad had been testing his camera settings for the ceremony that afternoon. Nick and I hadn’t done that can’t see you till the altar thing, not buying into those superstitious rites (though in hindsight...). That morning had been cool and cloudy, and Nick and I had gone outside to sit on the steps of Dad’s house, cups of coffee in our hands, me in a flannel bathrobe, Nick, a *New Yorker*, in a faded blue Yankees shirt and shorts, his dark hair rumpled. He was smiling just a little as he looked at me, his dark eyes, which could be so tragic and vulnerable and hopeful all at once, happy in this moment.

You could see it on our faces...Nick, confident, happy, almost smug. Me, a secret wreck.

Because sure, I had doubts. I’d been twenty-one, for God’s sake. Just graduated college. Marriage? Were we crazy? But Nick had been sure enough for both of us, and on that day—June 21, the first day of summer—for that one day, I believed him. We loved each other, and we’d live happily ever after.

Live and learn.

“You’re not a dumb kid anymore,” I said aloud, still staring at the image of my younger self. Now I was somebody in my own right. Now I had a job, a home, a dog, a man...not necessarily in that order, but you get my meaning.

I put the picture down and took a deep breath. Straightened my spine and pulled my BeverLee-enhanced hair back into its customary, sleek ponytail. So I’d be seeing Nick again. The tremors that thought had induced earlier were gone now. I had nothing to worry about regarding Nick. He was a youthful mistake. We’d been caught up in each other...and yes, we’d been in love. But you needed more than love. Certainly, eight years as a divorce attorney had reinforced the truth of that idea.

But once, Nick could reduce me to pudding with one look. Once, a smile from Nick could fill me with such joy that I’d nearly float. Once, a day without Nick made me feel as if my skin didn’t fit and only when he came home would I feel right again.

No wonder we hadn’t worked. That kind of feeling...it couldn’t last.

I’d spent years getting over Nick, and over him I was. When I saw him—if I saw him, that was—I’d be cool. Dennis and I were solid...maybe not engaged, alas, but solid enough. Whatever Nick had once meant to me, well, that was ashes now.

It almost felt true.

CHAPTER THREE

ELEVEN DAYS LATER, I was about to put the ashes theory to the test. Needless to say, my mood was not in the chipper range.

“Tommy, look. Sometimes our hearts need time to accept what our heads already know.” I suppressed a sigh; Tommy was in my office (the eleventh time this week), once more debating whether his wife’s transgressions were really that bad.

“It’s understandable, isn’t it? She’s young...we’re both young...and I work a lot, right? Maybe she was just lonely.” Tommy looked at me across my desk, his birdlike face hopeful. My paralegal was six-foot-four and skinny as Ichabod Crane. In fact, he looked like a crane...long legs, rather hooked nose, small mouth. Despite that, he was awfully cute somehow, all those misfit features working together. He’d been married for seven months to Meggie; I’d been at their wedding, and alas, had known even then their days were numbered. Call it my sixth sense.

“Tom,” I said. “Buddy. Let’s take a look at the facts. Not what you hope, but just the facts.” His expression was blank with a side of confused. “Tommy, she screwed FedEx.” Personally, I thought Kevin from UPS was much cuter, but that probably wasn’t relevant.

“I know,” Tom said. “But maybe there was a reason. Maybe I should just forgive her?”

“You could,” I said, sneaking in a glance at my watch. “Sure. Anything is possible.” Could a person really forgive and forget a spouse shtupping someone else? Really? Come on. Hell, I hadn’t shtupped anyone, and Nick still thought—

I cut the thought off at the knees. Didn’t want to think about my ex-husband any more than I had to. I’d be seeing him in...crotch...about twenty-four hours.

This evening, Dennis and I would be taking the ferry to Boston so we could catch a flight first thing tomorrow morning. We’d land in Denver, switch to a smaller plane and head for Kalispell, Montana, which sounded suspiciously tiny. Then we were renting a car to go to Lake McDonald Lodge in the park itself. Christopher, my once and apparently future brother-in-law, had worked out in Glacier once upon a time—I even had a vague recollection of Nick talking about wanting to visit him out there.

“So what do you think I should do, Harper? I mean, I can’t help still loving her, and I wonder if I drove her to this...”

“Tom. Stop. You can’t blame yourself. She slept with the FedEx man. This doesn’t bode well for a long and happy marriage. I’m really sorry you’re hurting, I truly am. And you’re welcome to stay with Meggie, just as you are welcome to slam your testicles in the car door for days on end.” He closed his eyes. “In both cases,” I said in a gentler tone, “you’re just going to get more hurt. I wish I could say something more hopeful, but I’m your friend, I’m a divorce attorney, so I’m not gonna blow smoke.”

He sighed, deflating before me. “Right. Thanks, Harper.” With that, he slumped out of my office, listlessly muttering hello to Theo Bainbrook, the senior partner at Bainbrook, Bainbrook and Howe.

“There she is. My star.” Theo, dressed in pink pants printed with blue whales and a pink-and-white-striped polo shirt, leaned in my office doorway. “Harper, if only I had ten lawyers like you.”

“And for what would you like to praise me this time, Theo?” I smiled.

“You were right about Betsy Errol’s account in the Caymans.” Theo did a little shuffling dance, humming “We’re in the Money.” I smiled...not because we were in fact now going to be paid more (which of course we were), but because Kevin Errol was one of those I just want it to be over, I don’t care about the money types. As his attorney, it was my job to make sure he got a fair shake. He deserved his half, especially having been married to a shrew like Betsy. Betsy had hidden funds...I’d found them. Well, I had found them with the help of Dirk Kilpatrick, our firm’s private investigator, bless his heart.

“That’s great, Theo. Unfortunately, though, I have to get going. Sister’s wedding, ferry to Beantown, remember?”

“Ah. The wedding. If you’re going to Boston, you’re welcome to stop in the office there and do a little work before you...”

“Not gonna happen, Theo.” Bainbrook did have offices in Boston, and sadly, Theo was absolutely serious. He himself hadn’t actually practiced law for some time, having found that his minions could do the real work and thus enabling Theo to put in more time on the golf course.

“Would you like to hear who I’m playing golf with, Harper?” he asked, eyes twinkling. “Tiger Woods?”

“No. Sadly, no.”

“Um...gosh. A politician?”

“Yes. Think big, Harper. Backroom deals, war, clogged arteries.”

“Is this person a former vice president with a propensity for friend-shooting?” I asked.

Theo beamed and twinkled. “Bingo.”

“Oooh,” I said. “Very impressive.”

I liked Theo, despite the fact that he was lazy, had four ex-wives and dropped names more often than a seagull poops. He was an amiable boss, especially to me, since I put in oodles more hours than the other three lawyers here in the Martha’s Vineyard office. My divorce was one of the last cases Theo had handled himself. As I’d sat in his office, shaking like a leaf, gnawing on my cuticles, Theo’s gentle voice had given me a lifeline—Sometimes our hearts just need time to accept what our heads already know. He was the one who showed me that divorce attorneys were shepherds, helping the dazed and heartbroken across the jagged landscape of their shattered hope. He hired me the instant I graduated law school—I’d never worked anywhere but here.

“Well, enjoy yourself in Montana, Harper,” Theo sighed. “Great fly-fishing up there. Would you like to borrow my gear?”

“That’s okay. I’ll be back Monday. In and out.”

“Watch out for grizzly bears.” Theo winked and went off to schmooze Carol, the firm’s ill-tempered and all-powerful secretary.

I answered a few emails, checked my calendar for next week, tidied my desk. Then I stared out at the garden my office windows overlooked. Edgartown was the poshest town on the island. Graced with large and tasteful homes, brick sidewalks and our stout white lighthouse, the area was imposing but charming, much like Theo in some ways. In the winter, it was deserted, as most of the homeowners had their primary residences elsewhere. In the summer, it was so crowded that it could take half an hour to drive a mile. Most days above sixty degrees, I rode my bike to and from work; it took me about forty-five minutes of mostly flat pedaling and was a lovely way to get some exercise.

I sighed, unable to distract myself any longer. So. Soon I’d be thirty-four, an age that boiled with significance for me. I had no kids, no husband, no fiancé. Tomorrow I’d be seeing my ex-husband and, no doubt, ripping a few scabs off memories I’d buried long ago and watching my sister marry a man she barely knew. Super fun.

But speaking of scabs and memories...

Very slowly, I opened the top drawer of my desk, took out a little key from where it was taped to the back and unlocked the bottom drawer of the file cabinet to my left.

Last year, on my thirty-third birthday, I’d hired our firm’s private investigator for personal reasons. Half a day later, Dirk had given me this envelope.

Just looking at it made me feel a little sick. But I wasn’t a weenie, either, so I opened it, just a little, and glanced inside. Town, state, place of employment, place of residence. As if I needed to see the words. As if they weren’t already branded on my temporal lobe.

I hesitated, then dropped the envelope back in the drawer. “I have other stuff going on,” I told it. “You’re not a priority. Sorry.” I closed the drawer, locked it, replaced the key.

Then I gathered up my stuff, went into the waiting room, waved to Tommy and told him to keep his chin up—he'd get through this, they all did—and reminded Carol that cell service might well suck out there in Big Sky country and not to panic if she didn't hear from me.

"Have I ever panicked, not hearing from you? Have I, in fact, ever gone twenty minutes without hearing from you?" she said, scowling at me. "Take a damn vacation, Harper. Give us all a break."

"Aw. Does that mean you want some moose antlers as your souvenir?"

"That would be nice."

I tapped the bobblehead figure of Dustin Pedroia on her desk. "Hope the Sox win tonight," I said.

"Did you see Pedey last night? Unbelievable," she said, sighing orgasmically.

"I know," I said, having watched the rerun somewhere around 2:00 a.m. as I battled insomnia. "He's so good now... just wait till he hits puberty."

Carol's dreamy expression turned murderous. "Get out."

"Bye, then," I smiled.

But just before I left, I went back and got that envelope from the bottom drawer, stuck it in my bag and tried not to think of it.

Out on the street, I took a deep breath. School was back in session, and most of the tourists were gone, though they'd be flooding in like the red tide on Friday. Glancing down the street at the Catholic church, I decided to pop in on Father Bruce before herding Dennis into readiness.

The church was quiet. Ah. A sign. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is held Thursday afternoons from 5:00 till 7:00 p.m. The little door of the confessional booth was open. I went in. Sure enough, Father Bruce was seated on the other side, apparently dozing.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," I said. Always envied my Catholic friends for this little rite.

Father Bruce jerked awake. "How long has it been since—oh, Harper, it's you. Very funny."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. But this time is reserved for those seeking the sacrament of reconciliation."

"They're not exactly lining up around the block, Father."

He sighed. "You have a point. Can I do something for you, dear?"

"No, not really. I've just always wondered what you do in here."

"I knit."

"I figured."

We sat there in silence for a minute. One thing about churches—they all smelled nice. All those candles, all that forgiveness.

"Is there something on your mind, my dear?" Father Bruce asked. I didn't answer. "As your confessor, I'm bound by the same confidentiality you give your clients," he added.

I looked at my hands. "Well, sure, in that case, yes, something's on my mind. I'm about to see my ex-husband after twelve years."

As Kim had done when she heard this news, Father Bruce sputtered. "You were married?"

"Briefly."

"Go on."

I shrugged. "It just didn't work out. We were too young and immature, same old story, yawn. Now my sister's marrying his brother. My stepsister, his half brother. Whatever." Suddenly uncomfortable, I sat up. "Well, I should go. I have to pick up Dennis."

"Does Dennis know?"

"Know what? That I was married? Sure. I told him last week."

"And this was the first conversation you had on that topic?"

"It's not really a topic. It's more of a fact. Sort of like, 'I had my tonsils out when I was nine, I got married a month after I graduated college, we were divorced before our first anniversary.'"

“And have you seen your husband since?”

“Ex-husband. Nope.”

“How telling.”

“You priests. Armchair psychologists, the whole lot of you.”

“You’re the one sitting in a confessional booth, seeking my wisdom under the guise of curiosity.”

I smiled. “Okay, you win this round. Sorry I can’t stick around so you can gloat, but I do have to go. Ferry leaves in an hour.” But I didn’t move.

Since my sister had called, there’d been a thrum of electricity running through me. Not a pleasant thrum, either. Sort of a sick feeling, as if I lived too near power lines and was about to be diagnosed with a horrible disease. As if opposing counsel just dropped a little bombshell about a secret bank account and a mistress in Vegas. For twelve years, memories of my marriage had been locked in a safe at the bottom of some murky lake of my soul. Now, through some whim of fate and through no desire or action of my own, I was going to see Nick Lowery once more.

“Here.” Father Bruce pulled something from his back pocket and then opened his side of the booth. I stood as well and opened mine, joining him in the church proper. “It’s my card. My cell number’s on it. Give me a ring, let me know how things are going.”

“I’ll be back on Monday,” I said. “I’ll buy you a drink instead.”

He winked. “Call me. Have fun. Tell your sister hello for me.”

“Will do.” I gave his shoulder a gentle punch and left, my heels tapping on the tile floor.

TWENTY-TWO HOURS LATER, I was ready to strangle Dennis with Coco’s leash and leave his body for the vultures or bald eagles or hyenas or whatever the hell else lived up here.

Yes, yes, I’d originally wanted him to come with me. One doesn’t face an ex-husband alone when one has a brawny firefighter boyfriend who looks like the love child of Gerard Butler and Jake Gyllenhaal. But the “and guest” idea had played out better in my imagination than in reality. Also, the thought kept popping up that this would’ve felt much better if Dennis been my fiancé instead of boyfriend, but that subject had not been broached since the night of the fateful phone call. Plus, I was about to murder him.

Let me explain. We’d been bickering since the moment I found him guzzling a beer and watching a rerun of the 2004 World Series instead of standing at the door with bag packed, as I’d requested. Granted, things had been a little off since my marriage proposal—and by off, I mean we hadn’t done it since then, which was causing all kinds of issues. But just because I was unsettled about Willa getting married didn’t mean I’d forgotten that Dennis had not exactly been thrilled with the thought of marrying me. Which meant, of course, that he wasn’t getting any. But we were still together, and when I asked if he’d come with me to Montana, he said yes. Eventually.

Unfortunately, Dennis, who was prone to back trouble, conveniently suffered a back spasm just before we left his grubby little apartment, which required me to wrangle all our luggage from our respective homes to my car to the ferry to the cab to the hotel, and then again to the cab to Logan, and then from Gate 4 to Gate 37 in Denver, and then from Ye Tiny Airport here in Montana to the rental car. Not just the luggage, but Coco (sulking in her crate with her bunny), my laptop, my purse and Dennis himself, who had a tendency to wander. Add to this that he’d charmed two flight attendants (a straight woman and a gay man) into giving him the last seat of first class due to said back spasms, leaving me to sit wedged between an impressively overweight Floridian and a frat boy who drooled on my shoulder as he slept, oblivious to the sharp elbow I kept jamming into his side. And oh, yes, my sister was marrying a stranger, my father was apparently having marital problems and my ex-husband was at the end of this hellish journey.

I was a little tense.

Which brought us to now, standing in a parking lot outside the Kalispell City Airport, squabbling like third-graders.

“Dude, I’ll drive,” Dennis said. “Give me the keys.” He stretched and twisted so that his lower back cracked, making me wince.

“I’ll drive, Dennis.” Honestly, concentrating on driving would distract me from what (and who) lay ahead.

“Dude, come on!”

“Stop calling me that!” I snapped. “Please, Dennis! Don’t call me dude, okay? I’ll drive. You get lost between your house and mine, Dennis, on the island where you grew up—”

“Maybe I’m not really lost,” he interjected, uncharacteristically prickly.

“—and we have forty miles to go through grizzly-strewn wilderness,” I continued, my voice rising in volume, “so please. Please, Dennis. Can we please get going here?”

Unlike Dennis, Coco obeyed, leaping lightly into the driver’s seat. I’d been forced to bring her, as she’d feigned a hurt paw when she heard the word kennel and limped around until she saw her travel crate. The dog was an evil genius. She sat happily, sniffing the Montana air, which was strangely clear and pure, unlike the salty winds of Martha’s Vineyard, always redolent with the smell of garlic and fish or, in the morning, doughnuts.

Realizing that a spat was not going to advance my case, I took a cleansing breath and tried to unlock my jaw. “Honey? We don’t want to be late for dinner.”

“My back is killing me,” Dennis grumped. “Harp, can’t you give me a massage or something?”

Wondering briefly if Father Bruce had a patron saint of patience, I said, “Dennis, we’re standing in a parking lot. I’m sorry your back hurts, honey, and I will rub it later, but I can’t help you now. Maybe at the hotel, okay? Please, Dennis? Can you please get in the damn car?”

With another sulky (and yes, kind of hot) scowl, he got into the car, grumbling. I followed, and Coco jumped onto my lap. She loved to steer.

I glanced at Dennis, sighed and started the car. “I’m sorry. I’m a little...stressed, Den,” I said, adjusting the rearview mirror.

“I guess I would be if I had to see my ex, too,” he said with an understanding grin. Then he tipped his seat backward and closed his eyes.

It was, admittedly, stunning out here. Mountains rose around us, patchy with snow—or glaciers, I supposed, great expanses of gray rock and swathes of dense green pine. Already, the trees glowed with autumn color. Clouds stretched through the blue sky, which seemed much higher here, much more vast, for some reason. Big Sky country indeed. I’d never been west before...never really taken a proper vacation, to be honest, just a few days here and there, usually tacked onto conferences in big cities. This...this was different.

A sense of solemnity settled over me, and Coco, as well. Wildflowers bloomed on the side of the road as we quickly left the town of Kalispell behind. Dennis, too, seemed to be struck by the drama and size of the natural beauty, so different from our little island—or no, he was sleeping. Just as well.

Unexpectedly, my throat tightened as I saw the sign for Glacier National Park. I’d watched parts of the Ken Burns special on PBS, but I wasn’t quite prepared for the beauty around me...the craggy, sharp mountains, the fields of multicolored flowers, and that air, the sweet, pure air. God bless Teddy Roosevelt. I stopped at the entrance gate, and a park ranger opened her window. “Welcome to Glacier National Park, ma’am,” she said, adding “Hey there, cutie” when she saw Coco. I paid and thanked her, nodded dutifully at her warnings to watch out for wash-outs, as the last rainstorm had been fierce, and drove into the park.

The road wove through the forest, then came out into a more open space. My breath caught. To the left, the earth dropped steeply away into a field of long, golden grass twined with blue, red and pink wildflowers. It was breathtaking. After a while, I turned onto Going to the Sun Road...what a beautiful name! A vast, oblong glacier capped the bare and jagged ridge across the way.

Suddenly, my tires caught the edge of the road, and I jerked the wheel a little, adrenaline spurting. The rented Honda veered back onto the road. Coco’s tiny feet scrabbled on my lap. “Sorry,

baby,” I muttered once we were straightened out. “Got a little caught up in the scenery.” Den slept on, undisturbed. I glanced at the dashboard clock...heck. Four o’clock already. I’d thought we’d be there by now. Stepping on the gas, I almost immediately caught up to a car in front of me.

A slow car, despite the fact that it was a classic red Mustang, built for speed and midlife crises. Or octogenarian females, I guessed, from the dedicated way the car stayed precisely on its own side of the road, never straying above thirty miles an hour. No more, no less. Great. Why buy a ‘Stang if you were going to do the speed limit? Didn’t that defeat the purpose of the pointless effort to recapture one’s youth and laugh at the specter of death? I couldn’t see the driver, as the sun glared off the back window, but judging by the way we were inching along, Eeyore here was one hundred and three years old, blind in both eyes and had already cheated death. Many times.

Glancing at the clock again, I sighed. Everyone else should already be at the hotel...the lodge, I corrected silently. Lake McDonald Lodge, it was called, where Christopher used to work in his youth. Despite the last-minute nature of the nuptials, the happy couple was expecting a fair number of friends. According to BeverLee, Chris was still close to some of the staff at the lodge, strings had been pulled, rates were low as the tourist season was officially over. Willa, who collected people the way a black wool sweater collects lint, expected around thirty guests.

After three phone calls, it had dawned on my sister that perhaps I had some feelings about seeing my ex-husband again. “You’re okay with the Nick situation, right?” she said. “I mean, I know you guys were...intense.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said blithely. “That was eons ago. No, Wills, it’s just...honey, I just wonder why you’re rushing. You know, I see so many unhappy—”

But my sister was prepared. Sure, I knew her well...but she knew me, too. “Harper, I know you think you’re looking out for me. But maybe this time I’m right, did that ever occur to you? Have some faith in me. I’m not an idiot.”

And that was the argument that had me grinding my teeth in frustration. Willa wasn’t an idiot. Except...in a way...she was a dope. A sweet dope, but a dope. If I tried to remind her of the facts of her past marriages or drop statistics, she’d counter that she’d grown up since then. What could I say to that? No, you haven’t, you’re still as naive as a baby bunny?

“So you’re okay with Nick being there? Because he’s Chris’s best man, of course.”

Of course. “I’m fine.” So you’ve seen him? What does he look like? Did he ask about me? Is he still mad? How did he seem? Is he married? Any kids? Does he still live in the city? Still an architect? Is he fat? Bald? Please?

And by the way...how the hell did Willa meet Christopher, anyway? Was Nick involved? Willa said she’d “run into” Christopher in a city of eight million people and recognized him after twelve years.

Please. I wasn’t born yesterday.

Dennis grunted in his sleep, which Coco interpreted as an invitation. She jumped onto his lap, then licked his hand, and he smiled without opening his eyes and petted her. I smiled, too, almost reluctantly. Exhibit A, Your Honor. Not only is Dennis physically appealing, he’s kind to animals. I turned my attention back to the road. Crap!

I slammed on the brakes to avoid rear-ending the red car in front of me. “Jesus!” I blurted, leaning on the horn. The Mustang driver had stopped, right in the middle of the road.

“Everything okay?” Dennis asked blearily.

“Yes. Sorry, hon. Some idiot who shouldn’t be driving.” The woman had just stopped. Yes, the ranger had warned about wildlife on the road, but there was no elk, no moose, nothing to explain the delay.

Dennis sat up, rubbing his eyes. Coco licked him on the chin, then poked her little nose out the window, snuffling. She whined and wagged. “You like it here, honey?” I asked my pet.

“It’s pretty,” Dennis said.

The red Mustang had not moved an inch. We were on a sharp curve, too, so passing would definitely be inadvisable, not that I'd seen many other cars. Should I try it? I tapped the horn again. Nothing. No grizzly bear, no elk, no goat, no response. "Come on," I groaned. The sooner this weekend started, the sooner I could get back to normal. The driver didn't move. Stroke? Heart attack? Flashback to the Civil War? I leaned on the horn again—alas, it was a rather friendly-sounding horn, as the rental was a Honda. Give me a good old-fashioned Detroit-made blare any day.

"Come on, Florence!" I yelled out the window. "Can you please move it?"

The driver of the car extended an arm out the window. And a finger.

It was a male arm...and finger.

And then the car door opened, and the driver got out, and was neither female nor a Civil War veteran. My hands slid off the steering wheel.

It was Nick.

He took off his sunglasses and looked at me and though I was fairly sure my expression hadn't changed—I was rather paralyzed at the moment—my heart lurched, my mouth went dry, my legs turned to water.

Nick. He folded his arms and tilted his head, his eyes narrowed, and my heart flinched as if it had been punched. A roaring sound filled my ears.

Coco yipped.

"Problem?" Dennis asked.

"Um...no." Without further explanation, I put the car in Park and got out.

"Harper?" Dennis asked. "Dude, don't make a scene."

Funny, to be so outwardly calm as I approached my ex-husband. You're not a dumb kid anymore, I reminded myself distantly, but the words didn't mean much, not when my entire being burned with electricity.

"Oh, Nick, it's you," I said mildly, pleased to find my voice sounded mostly normal. "I assumed you were an old woman riddled with cataracts."

"And I assumed you were a Massachusetts driver with anger-management issues." His tone was as pleasant as mine. "I see one of us was right."

He was older. Abruptly, there was a lump in my throat. Of course he's older, I told myself. So are you. It's been a long time. His dark hair was shot with silver, and crow's feet radiated from his eyes, those tragic dark brown gypsy eyes a little cool, a little suspicious. He was thinner now, his face bordering on careworn. His clothes immediately identified him as a cool New Yorker...dark jeans, white button-down with a quality and cut that made him look sophisticated and polished...all the things he'd wanted to be way back when.

Twelve years. What a horribly long time, and yet not even close to being long enough.

Then he smiled the way I remembered—that instant smile that flashed like lightning and had about the same results. Heat, electricity, light and possible injury and/or death, and I was glad I still had my sunglasses on. The last thing I wanted was for Nick to know he could still...affect me. One crack in the armor, and Nick would be in there with a hammer and a chisel, and he wouldn't stop till there was nothing left but a pile of rust. That's how it had been back then, and judging by my staggering heart, that's how it was still.

"You look good," he said, sounding almost surprised.

"You, too." Then, hoping to get him to look away from me, I nodded at the Mustang. "I see you're having a midlife crisis," I said.

"Same to you," he returned, jerking his chin. Ah. Dennis was approaching. Thank God. My boyfriend's overall manly appearance was somewhat diminished by the fact that he was holding my rather tiny dog and stroking her head, and she wore her pink patent-leather collar, but still.

"Is that a rattail?" Nick murmured.

"He's a firefighter," I said, appropos of nothing.

“Of course he is. It was that or pool boy.” Nick smiled as Dennis drew near.

I looped my arm through my boyfriend’s. “Dennis, meet Nick Lowery. Nick, Dennis Costello.”

“Nice to meet you, Dennis.”

“Same here.” They shook hands. “Are you going to the wedding, too?” Dennis asked.

“Yes, I am.” Nick raised an eyebrow at me.

“Cool,” Dennis said. “So how do you guys know each other?”

“Biblically,” Nick answered.

“Nick’s my ex-husband, Dennis,” I said a bit sharply. “I’m sure I mentioned it once. Possibly twice.”

“Oh, right!” He glanced at me, then back at Nick. “So why’d you stop?”

“Taking in the sights.” Nick pointed. About three hundred yards off the road, down the steep meadow, a black bear shuffled slowly along the bank of a clear, broad river. It stopped to sniff the wind, stood up on its hind legs, then dropped back down and continued. Coco whined, certain she could take the beast.

“Dude, is that a dog?” Dennis asked. I closed my eyes. If only Dennis were the strong and silent type...

“Black bear,” Nick said.

“Awesome.” To Den’s credit, the bear did sort of resemble a big, black Newfie. After another minute or two, it disappeared into the long grass.

The two men looked at each other once more. “So you’re the ex,” Dennis said.

“Yet I lived to tell the tale,” Nick confirmed.

Dennis gave a snort of laughter, aborted by my murderous look. He petted Coco, looking a bit like Dr. Evil stroking the hairless cat. Nick just stared at me, his eyes mocking, and my face grew hot. Dragging my eyes off him, I looked at Dennis. “Honey?” I asked brightly. “Want to drive?” I asked.

“I thought you didn’t want me to,” Dennis answered. Nick’s eyebrow rose knowingly.

“Would you like to drive now?” I asked, keeping a smile on my face.

“Uh...sure. Come on, Coco-Buns.” The pet name failed to reinforce Dennis’s heterosexuality, and I stifled a sigh as my boyfriend obediently walked back to the car and got into the driver’s side, letting Coco stand on his lap, her paws on the wheel.

I didn’t move. “I hear you approve,” I said to Nick.

“I hear you don’t.” He looked at me a beat or two, steadily. “Take off those damn sunglasses, Harper.”

With an exaggerated sigh, I obeyed. “Better?”

He didn’t answer, just stared at me with those gypsy eyes, and I looked right back. Twelve years’ distance, a career spent in court, staring down idiot lying spouses... Don’t mess with me, Nick. He seemed to sense it, because he looked away abruptly, back in the direction of the shambling bear. “Drinks later? For the sake of the kids?”

Do not be alone with him.

It was a line I often said to my clients. Seeing him alone would muddy the waters, stir up emotions best left untouched, possibly make you agree to things you shouldn’t.

I replaced my sunglasses. “Sure. Are you staying at the lodge?”

“Yes.” He had a way of saying yes, Nick did. Fast and sure and disproportionately hot, like he knew exactly what you were going to say and couldn’t wait to give you an affirmative. I’d forgotten about that. Crotch.

“Okay, then,” I said, and my voice sounded nice and normal. “I’m sure we can find a bar or something.”

It wasn’t until about a mile or two later, when I was sitting in the car next to Dennis, clutching his hand, that I was able to take a normal breath. That electric hum was downright painful now.

This was a horrible idea. Every aspect of this whole situation was wrong, wrong, wrong.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOOKING BACK AT MY LIFE thus far, I can't say I exactly regret marrying Nicholas Sebastian Lowery. That being said, I knew he was trouble the very first day I met him. The very first second, even.

I didn't regret it because I learned a lot. Well, my time with Nick confirmed a lot that I'd already believed. But when a man comes up to you in a bar and tells you you're the woman he'll marry, it's a little...overwhelming. Plus, it's not the usual come-on line often employed by college students. Even grad students.

I was a junior at Amherst, it was my twentieth birthday, my roomies had gotten me a fake ID, and we were breaking it in. The pub was crowded, hot and noisy. Music thumped, people shouted to be heard...and then I turned and saw a guy staring at me.

Just staring. Steady, unabashed, completely focused. Time seemed to stop for a second, and all those other people, they just faded away, as the dark-haired man...boy...just looked at me.

"You okay?" asked Tina, my closest college chum.

"Sure," I said, and the spell was broken.

But the guy came over and sat at the table next to us and just kept looking at me, and—forgive the nauseating cliché—it felt as if he really saw me, because his concentration was so singular.

"What are you looking at, idiot?" I asked, giving him the sneer that had served me so well.

"My future wife. The mother of my children." One corner of his mouth pulled up, and every female part I had squeezed warm and hard.

"Bite me," I said, just about to turn away.

"Anything you want," he answered, and then he grinned, that lightning-flash smile that said, Sure, I'm a jerk, but we both know I can get away with murder...and it was hard not to smile back. So I didn't turn away. And I did smile.

"So when should we get married?" he asked, pulling his chair closer.

I checked him out discreetly. Nice hands. Beautiful eyes. Shiny dark hair—I was a sucker for dark-haired men. "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth, bub."

"Yet you're ogling me," he answered. "What are you drinking, wife?"

I laughed and said, "Crikey, the nerve. Sam Adams Octoberfest."

I didn't love my birthday, given my history with the date, but Tina had dragged me out with two other friends. All of us were in our junior year at Amherst, all of us receiving a stellar education at an extremely feminist-slanted college, all of us absolutely confident that the world held no boundaries, all of us planning to Do Important Things. And yet, those three friends took a respectful and almost envious step back. Look at Harper! Some guy is hitting on her! And he even used the M-word! Give her some space! Don't blow it!

And though I now cringe to admit, I was swept off my feet, which came as quite a surprise to me. I guess that's sort of the point of being swept.

Nick Lowery was unlike any of the pale, vague boyfriends I'd had up to this point (and I'd had many and loved none). He was, despite being only twenty-three, a grown-up. In school at UMass, getting his master's in architecture. He already had a job lined up in June—a real job, not an internship, but as a practicing architect in New York City at a place that made huge buildings all over the world. He knew what he wanted, he had a plan to get it, and the plan was working. In a world of vaguely ambitious, overeducated, not-very-employable college students, he was rather thrilling.

We talked for hours that night. He drank without getting drunk and didn't try to get me drunk, either. He listened when I spoke, his eyes intent. And such eyes! Too beautiful and tragic somehow, with a secret pain (cough), a gentle torment only an old soul could feel...well, it was clear I had a little too much to drink. Nick had grown up in Brooklyn, couldn't wait to move back to the city, loved

the New York Yankees, which resulted in some very fun trash talk (I won, somehow making the Sox sound noble and superior, despite the sorry season they were having). He asked me questions about what I wanted to do, what I loved learning, where I was from. He didn't seem to grow bored, even when I waxed rhapsodic about environmental law, and he didn't stare at my boobs. He just seemed to really...like me.

We were both a little shocked when the busboy asked us to leave, as it was now 2:30 a.m. Nick offered to walk me home, and as we crossed the lovely, still campus, he held my hand. That was a first for me—a boy who took my hand. That was a public statement of romantic intentions, and the boys I'd dated (and they were definitely all boys) tended more toward the shoulder bump. Hand-holding, I discovered, was quite the turn-on, though I pretended not to notice.

"Can I take you out sometime?" he asked in front of my dorm.

"Is that code for 'Can I come in and have sex with you?'" I returned.

The answer came almost before I'd finished the question. "No."

Another first.

I blinked. "Seriously? Because I probably would sleep with you." Actually, at that moment, I wouldn't have. At least I didn't think so. But those eyes...that rather beautiful hand holding mine so firmly..."Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Yes." That fast, certain yes. "Yes, I want to take you on a date. No, I don't want to have sex with you. Not tonight, anyway."

"Why? Are you a Mormon? Suffer from ED? Are you gay?"

He grinned, his gypsy eyes transformed. "No, no and no. Because, Harper Elizabeth James"—crap, I'd told him my entire name (and he remembered, oh sigh!)—"that would be...disrespectful."

I blinked. "Well, now you have indeed rendered me speechless. I can state with absolute certainty that I have never before heard that particular line." Prelaw. What can I say? We all sounded like pompous idiots. Plus, I'd had three whole beers, which made me sound even more idiotic and pompous.

But Nick seemed to think I was cute. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Now that one I've heard before. Full of sound and bullshit, signifying nothing."

He called me nine hours later, having hacked into the college website to find my cell number. "It's Nick."

"Nick who?" I asked, blushing for perhaps the first time in my life.

"The father of your children."

"Right, right." I paused, unable to suppress a smile. "Do I at least get dinner before I have to start breeding?"

He took me to a real restaurant in Northampton...not just a college-kid hangout with four-dollar falafels, but one with tables and waiters and everything, and thus began my first real relationship. He called when he said he would. He sent me little jokes via email, met me for lunch, sometimes showed up outside my classroom to walk across campus with me. We often went to the movies, where we both talked incessantly, much to the annoyance of the other patrons. We dated, as in old-fashioned, 1950s dating, and I couldn't believe how fun it was.

But for an entire month, he didn't kiss me or touch me (aside from holding my hand, for crying out loud), and by then, I was dying of lust. Which, I want you to know, I hid very well. Never mentioned it once. I just waited, more obsessed than I wanted to be, wondering if he was playing some little game. But I found myself waiting for those phone calls, and my heart did this weird leaping thing when I saw his face.

Four weeks and two days after we first met, Nick had me over to his apartment for the first time, a typical grotty little place which was atypically clean. He made me dinner—lasagna and salad and warm bread. Poured me red wine without trying to liquor me up. He'd made a pie for dessert, which had me once again wondering out loud if he was indeed gay. He wouldn't let me do the dishes.

As we sat on his couch (holding hands but otherwise chaste), he told me why he thought the Brooklyn Bridge was the most beautiful man-made structure on earth and how he would take me there on my virgin trip to New York and we'd walk across it and get an ice cream in Brooklyn and then walk across again, taking plenty of time to worship the world's first steel-wire suspension bridge.

"I've always favored the architecture of Denny's myself," I said.

"I may have to divorce you."

"I call the yacht and the apartment in Paris. It's in the prenup, of course."

Nick laughed. "I don't believe in prenups."

"All the better. I will take you to the cleaners, boy. Paris apartment, you're mine, all mine."

"Why did I marry such a heartless woman?" he grinned.

I smiled back. "You haven't even kissed me yet, Nick. I won't marry you and bear our five healthy sons if you fail to thrill me."

He looked at me, a little smile playing around his mouth, two days of knee-weakening razor stubble, dark hair tousled, and those gypsy eyes. He reached out and touched my lips with one finger. He didn't have to kiss me. I was thrilled anyway. And, quite out of the blue, suddenly terrified. My breath stuttered in my chest, and my heart seemed to contract, and even as he leaned forward, I thought Don't let him be too good. Don't fall in love.

But he was, and I did. It was...stunning, really, to be kissed like this, and I felt that I'd never really understood what kissing was before. It was as if our mouths had been made to kiss only each other, and the shock and thrill, the urgent, hot feeling, the little sounds of kissing, the—dang it—the rightness. I never thought I'd be desperate for someone—I'd had seven years and four weeks and two days to teach myself not to love anyone desperately. But when Nick kissed me for the first time, my whole body came alive. It was terrifying how good it was.

We kissed and groped on the couch for eons, until finally, Nick stood up, took me by the hand and led me to his bedroom, kissing me, touching me, his skin hot on mine, his cheeks flushed, eyes nearly black. It was as if we had all the time in the world for this, for this sweet, melting ache that made me shake. I pulled his shirt over his head, and my hands explored his smooth chest, his addictive skin, the lovely space above his collarbone. There was a ragged little scar over his heart, which I traced with my fingers as I kissed his beautiful neck, felt his thudding pulse under my lips, tasted the salt of his sweat. His hands were hot, his mouth was gentle, a small smile playing on his lips whenever he opened his eyes to look at me.

I didn't object when his clever fingers unbuttoned the back of my dress, but when his hand slid up my thigh, I jumped and grabbed his wrist. Time to stop. Time to leave. But I didn't move.

"Far enough?" he asked, his voice husky, his face against my neck.

I swallowed. "Nick?"

He raised his head. Oh, you're in trouble, Harper, my brain said. I couldn't manage to speak, as the words were stuck in my throat. Feelings of awkwardness, dorkiness, embarrassment roiled around with the heat and lust and wanting.

"What is it, honey?" he asked, his voice so gentle it hurt my heart.

If he hadn't said honey, my guess is that I would've pulled my usual routine and fled, feeling somewhat guilty and completely safe. Get out, get out, get out, my brain yammered. I swallowed and looked away.

"I've never done this before," I whispered. God! Being a virgin at twenty and change...in a blue state, nonetheless...at a liberal college...et cetera...!

Nick blinked. Because sure, I was a toughie, very blasé and ubercool. And pretty, let's not forget that, though I didn't spend a lot of time gazing into a mirror. I'd had quite a few guys chase after me, and I'd gone out with many. Guys loved me. My *modus operandi* was to insult and condescend while at the same time flirt, then allow a guy to walk me back to my dorm, where we'd engage in some groping and snogging for a horny hour or so. Then I'd stand up, adjust my clothes, kick the guy out

and never speak to him again. This made me extraordinarily popular, for some mysterious reason. Was I a tease? Absolutely. I wasn't sure there was another way to be.

Until now. I couldn't seem to look at Nick, suddenly fascinated with the window shade, the radiator, the crack in the plaster wall. He turned my face back toward him.

"We don't have to do anything," he said. "It's fine." He smiled, and I could see that he meant it, and damn it all to hell, I fell a little deeper.

"I'd like to," I whispered, and my eyes stung a little.

He looked at me seriously. "You sure?" he asked. I nodded.

"Very sure?" he asked, touching my lower lip.

I nodded again.

He kissed me, sweetly, gently, then smiled against my mouth. "Sure enough to marry me?"

"Nick," I said, unable to suppress a laugh, "can you please shut up and do me?"

And so he did, and it was gentle and slow and sweet, and oh, God...it felt as if we were meant to be together, and suddenly, I could see why all those sonnets had been written, all those Hallmark cards printed, all those movies. Because it was...real. For the first time in a very long time, I trusted someone to take care of me, and he did. Cherished me. Made love to me. All those clichés...true.

When it was over, when we lay twined together, sweaty and breathing hard, my eyes open a little too wide, as the glow faded and my heart rate slowed, a chilly terror crept into bed with me. The fear of being left, or exposed, or judged...or whatever, I was only twenty, not the type who examined emotions, the same way I didn't plunge my hand into a bag full of broken glass. I just knew that I was freaking terrified.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I should...I need to...I have to run," I said, babbling slightly. "That was wicked pissah, as we say here in the Bay State. And, um...I'll see you soon. Thanks, Nick. Bye." I got up, grabbed my dress and panties and pulled them on as I fled. Made it to the living room, opened the door, only to have Nick come up right behind me and push it closed again.

"No, no. No, you don't," he said, sliding around to put himself between the door and me. "Harper, come on."

"I'm absolutely positive you wouldn't keep me here against my will, Nick," I said lightly, not looking at him.

He stared at me a long moment, then stepped aside. "What happened?"

"I'm just going back to my dorm, okay? I have a, um, a history paper due."

"Don't go."

"I just have to. It's not a big deal." I faked a smile and tried to tie the shoulder strap of my dress, but my hands were shaking. Still couldn't look at him. It felt as if something big and dark was pulling in my chest, something that wanted to do me harm, and damn if I wasn't close to tears. "Harper."

"Nick."

"Look at me."

What could I say? No? I obeyed, glancing at him briefly.

"Harper, I love you." His gypsy eyes were solemn, completely sincere, and that thing in my chest gave a fast, hard, painful twist.

"Nick, for God's sake," I said unevenly. "You barely know me."

"Okay, fine, I take it back. You're a shrew and a pain in the ass, but man, that thing you did with your tongue..."

I gave a surprised laugh, and Nick raised an eyebrow. "Can I see you again? Can I shag you again? Please, Harper?" And he grinned, and whatever had been in his eyes a second ago was replaced with an impish light.

I smiled back, and that dark thing subsided, leaving me almost limp with relief. "I'm extremely busy, but you never know."

"Stay a little longer? Even though I can barely tolerate you?"

I hesitated. We should probably go now, said my brain. “Sure,” said the rest of me.

I know I was supposed to want what normal people wanted. That being loved was supposed to make me feel safe and cherished and happy. And Nick did make me feel those things, sort of. But I never seemed to be able to keep the dark, pulling thing completely at bay. I kept wondering when the other shoe would drop, when this would all end. How much damage would occur when it did.

I was twenty years old, raised by a father who didn’t like to talk about messy human emotions, abandoned by a mother who had once adored me. I tried not to think about it, but in the back of my heart, on the tip of my brain, the thought lurked that Nick could ditch me at any time. My own mother had...why not some guy? Best not to fall all the way in love. Best to protect myself as much as I could.

If Nick sensed something was off, he didn’t ask, and even if he had, I wouldn’t have had the words to tell him the truth. When your own mother deserts you without a backward glance, it’s hard to believe you can be truly and unconditionally loved. Love gets used up, you see.

So...Nick and I had fun together. Kept things light, and if he looked at me too...seriously or whatever, I’d tell him to wipe that look off his face, and he would. But the sex, it must be acknowledged, was flipping unbelievable. Not that I had anything to compare it with, but I knew. I pretended it didn’t mean anything, and we didn’t talk about it, but I knew just the same.

And Nick gave me enough rope to hang myself, never pushed, never again told me he loved me, stopped joking about marriage. When he moved down to the city at the end of the school year, eight months after we’d met, I honestly felt as if I might die. “Drive safely!” I called briskly as he got into his battered car, as the dark thing swelled dangerously. I kept smiling as he started the engine. Took out my phone and pretended to check for messages, which I couldn’t actually see, as my eyes were blinking furiously.

Then Nick cut the engine, jumped out of the car and hugged me, and I hugged him back so hard it hurt, and he kissed me fiercely. “I’ll miss you,” he whispered, and I couldn’t speak, it hurt so much to think about even a day without him, let alone forever, because of course I didn’t expect things to actually work out.

But they did. He called me every day, and we talked for hours. He emailed me at least once a day, sent me tacky New York City T-shirts and Yankees dolls (I’d stick safety pins through their heads and send them back) and really good coffee from a little place on Bleeker Street. I interned at a law firm in Hartford that summer, and a couple of times a month, Nick would take the train to Connecticut to see me, since I felt a little gun-shy about going down to see him.

His mom died suddenly in October—an aneurysm—and I drove down to Pelham, New York, for the wake. When I walked in, the look on his face—love, and surprise and gratitude—went straight to my heart. He introduced me to his sparse family, an aunt, a couple of cousins. Nick’s parents had divorced long ago, and his mom never remarried. When I went back to school, I sent him quirky cartoons cut from the English department’s copies of the New Yorker. Baked oatmeal raisin cookies when he came to visit.

He was snarky and smart and thoughtful and irreverent—and a little sad—and the combination was unbreachable. The amount of feeling I had at the sight of him, the rush the sound of his voice could cause, the heat, the everything...it was terrifying. We were, forgive me, soul mates, though I’d have stuck a fork in my jugular before saying that out loud.

So I tried to keep things light, dodged the more serious and intense moments, never said those three little words. Not until one night at Amherst and Nick was up for a rare weekend. I’d been applying to law schools, and applications were scattered all over my room. Not one of the schools I was aiming for was in New York. Even though Columbia and NYU both had great environmental law programs, I wasn’t about to apply there. Not when Nick lived in Manhattan, uh-uh. It would be too obvious. Mean too much. Absolutely would not build my life around a man, as my mother had, and look where that got everyone.

Nick looked through the brochures and checklists... Duke, Stanford, Tufts. He gave me a long, silent look. I ignored him and chattered on with some inane story about my roomie and her inability to load the dishwasher. We went to a movie on campus. I pretended not to notice that Nick was bothered.

That night, he jerked awake. "You okay?" I muttered sleepily.

He looked at me, his eyes a little wild in the light from the streetlamp.

I sat up. "Nick?"

"Do you love me, Harper?"

I started a little. Maybe it was the darkness, or the hour, or the slightly lost look in his beautiful eyes, but I couldn't lie. I took his hand and looked at it, traced his fingers, the sweet underside of his wrist. "Yes," I whispered.

He gave a half nod. Didn't say he loved me back. He didn't have to. I knew. We lay back down, and he put his arms around me, and I felt like crying, as if my heart might break if he said anything at all. But he didn't, and the next day, things were normal. We didn't mention law school or love again.

On Valentine's Day of my senior year, I finally went down to New York for the first time, and we did indeed walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. It was frigid and wet and icy, perhaps not quite as fabulous as the experience Nick had envisioned, as I was dying of hypothermia, but he insisted we stand in the middle of the bridge, ostensibly to see if we could spot Mob victims in the East River.

"There's one," Nick said. "Sal 'Six Fingers' Pietro. He never should've boffed Carmella Soprano during the christening."

"Oh, I think I see one, too," I said, pointing and hoping we could go to Nick's soon and have some fabulous sex and then get a quesadilla grande from Benny's. "Right there. Vito 'The Pie' Deluca swims with the fishes, or whatever passes for life in the East River. Can we go now?"

Nick didn't answer. I looked around for him, but he wasn't where he should be. No. He was on one knee, looking up at me with such dopey happiness that my heart nearly stopped. He had on fingerless gloves that day, like some Dickensian orphan, his hair blew in the wind and he held up a diamond ring.

"Marry me, Harper. God knows you're not the girl of my dreams, but you'll have to do."

His eyes, though...they told the truth.

If I had been able to find a way to say no without breaking his heart, I would have. If he didn't love me so damn much, I would've cuffed him and laughed it off. If I said no, that would be the end of it, I knew. And so I shrugged and said, "Okay. But I want a huge dress and eleven bridesmaids."

I knew we were too young. I knew I wasn't ready. I wanted to wait. Years, preferably. But once we were engaged, Nick put on a full-court press to marry quickly, and I lost the battle on that one.

Eleven months after his marriage proposal, and six months after our wedding, we both lost the war.

CHAPTER FIVE

“NICK! OH, MY WORD, you are a sight for sore eyes! Give me a hug this minute!”

Seconds after Dennis and I arrived at the lodge, Nick had pulled in behind me. I was still unfolding myself from the car as my stepmother descended in a blur of blond frizz and spandex. Descended on Nick, that is. Not me.

“BeverLee, you’re still as beautiful as ever,” Nick said, hugging my stepmother.

“Listen to you, you wide-eyed liar! Let me see you! Oh! Look at you! Handsome as the devil, bless your heart!” She clutched him again, then looked at me. “Harper, did you see Nick?”

“Yes, I did,” I answered, turning away as Nick shook my father’s hand.

“We met on the road in,” Nick said.

“That’s wonderful! Oh, you bring back such happy memories, Nick!”

“Or night sweats, depending on your point of view,” I muttered. Did my family not remember the pathetic puddle I’d been? Did everyone have to love Nick quite so much? “Dad. Can you give me a hand here? Dennis’s back is bothering him.” I turned to Nick. “Dennis ruptured a disc while rescuing three children from a house fire. Isn’t that right, hon?” Your Honor, if it please the court, my boyfriend is a genuine hero.

“All true,” Dennis said amiably.

“Way to go,” Nick said. He and Dennis bumped fists.

“It was a good day, dude.” Dennis grinned as happily as a black Lab.

“How was your trip?” Dad asked, taking a suitcase from the back of the car.

“Hellish. How was—”

“Harper! Harper! Oh, my God, Harper!”

My sister’s arms were around me before I even saw her. “Hey, there,” I said, smiling my first genuine smile in a week. I kissed her cheek twice, then pulled back. This may have been the longest time I’d gone without seeing my sister, and I had to say, she looked beautiful. “How’s the bride?”

“Oh, my God, I’m so happy! Oh, Nick! Hi!” She leaped on him, then on Dennis, hopfrogging around our little circle. “And Harper, you remember Christopher, right?”

I looked up the steps. “Hey, Harper,” said the groom.

Wow. Chris Lowery had been cute twelve years ago, but now he was gorgeous—Nick, Take Two, sort of. Both men resembled their father...Chris had the same dark eyes, though lacking that tragic element that made Nick so unfairly vulnerable. Chris had his mother’s reddish-brown hair, and he was a couple of inches taller than his older brother. He may have lacked Nick’s electric appeal—well, to me he did—but he was pretty damn attractive.

“My boy, you’ve become a man,” I said, then gave a little oof as he hugged me, lifting me off my feet.

“You’re still crazy beautiful, I see.”

“Everything you say can and will be held against you,” I said. “You will, of course, be explaining to me exactly how you plan to take care of my sister, because if you hurt or disappoint her in any way, I will, of course, kill you. Slowly, and with great pleasure.”

“Of course.” Christopher grinned and set me down.

“I’m completely serious.”

“And I’m genuinely terrified.” He winked and took my sister’s hand.

“Ain’t he just gorgeous?” BeverLee asked, fluffing her hair so it was a bit puffier. “Look at all these handsome men! Honest to goodness, no wonder we’re all such happy gals! It’s enough to make me all swoony! Come on, y’all, it’s past five, which means cocktail hour’s waitin’ on us.”

“Dennis and I need a little time to freshen up,” I said. “We’ve been traveling all day.”

“Sure enough,” BeverLee said. “We’ll meet y’all inside.” I started up the steps, but BeverLee jerked my arm back. She glanced at the rest of the mob, who was heading in, and then her smile dropped like an anvil. “Harper, darlin’, your daddy and me, we still aren’t acting as, you know, man and wife. If you know what I’m sayin’?”

“Um,” I managed queasily.

“What do you think I should do? I’m gettin’ desperate! I just don’t know what all has gotten into him. We sure have never—and when I say never, I mean it!—we have never in all our days together gone through a patch like this! The other night, I wore a see-through teddy, and still, nothin’! You think he needs the little blue pill?”

“Bev,” I blurted, “I really just don’t think I’m the best person to talk about this.” Plus, I needed to go wash the image of my stepmother in a teddy out of my squealing brain.

“Why not, honey?”

“Um, because I’m the daughter? And speculating on...you know...it’s a little uncomfortable, BeverLee.”

Her face fell.

“But you know, BeverLee, people go through...these times, of course. And uh...well, maybe if you look back on past experience, you could...” Okay. Clearly I had nothing to offer. And I wanted to keep it that way.

“No, it’s fine, you’re right.” She slapped on a smile, then checked her teeth in my sunglasses. “See you inside, sugar baby.”

The lodge was beautiful. Some kind of post-and-beam construction, but the posts were all rough-hewn trees. A stone fireplace was surrounded by rocking chairs and game tables, and the entire western wall overlooked Lake McDonald and the mountains past it. It was romantic, all right. I practically expected to see John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt smoking their cigars out on the patio.

“Dude, we’re on the third floor,” Dennis said, handing me a room key.

“Same floor as mine,” Nick added. “Dude.”

Super.

OUR ROOM CONTAINED two double beds. “It’s probably better for your back if you sleep by yourself,” I said hesitantly. Better for his back, and better for me. I didn’t want the temptation of Dennis right next to me, not when we still weren’t engaged. And, for whatever reason, not when Nick was sleeping down the hall. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Two days, and this would be over, if Willa really went through with it at all.

“Roger-dodger,” Dennis said, flopping on the bed closest to the window. Coco jumped on his chest, then pressed her tiny nose to the window as if admiring the stunning view.

“Dennis, listen,” I said as I hefted a bag onto my bed. “I know things are a bit...undetermined with us in the case of our future and all that, but it’s a little weird seeing Nick again.”

“Sure,” he said amiably, setting my dog aside to check his phone.

“Would you mind sticking close?”

“No prob,” he said. He was quiet for a minute, then said, “So why’d you guys break up, anyway?”

I took my maid of honor dress out of the suitcase and hung it up. “Oh, you know. Young and impulsive, that kind of thing.”

Dennis said nothing. I glanced back at him, and he gave me a quick smile and a nod. “Sure. That makes sense.”

“Impulsive marriages...not usually a great idea,” I said.

“Right.”

“Which is why I’d have a lot of faith in ours, since we’ve been so slow and steady.”

This was met with another long stretch of silence from Dennis Patrick Costello. Silence, of course, spoke volumes.

I sighed. “Okay. Well, do you want to shower before we go down to dinner?”

“Nah. I’m good.” He sat up and smiled.

“Okay, I need a little while.”

A long hot shower helped ease some of the tension in my neck. I towed off my hair, then dashed on some makeup, my movements brisk and efficient. Changed into a dress, spritzed on a little perfume and brushed my hair, then secured it into a French twist.

“You look gorgeous,” Dennis said when I came out, and with that, we went down to join the others.

“So in case you’re unclear on who’s who,” I said as we walked down the stairs, “Christopher is Nick’s half brother, his father’s other son. His parents, Nick’s that is, got a divorce when—”

“Hi there,” came a voice. It was a pretty young mother who was checking in with her two kids and totally scoping out Dennis. The needle on my irritation level, already in the red zone, jumped.

“How you doing?” Dennis said, smiling agreeably. He knew he had an effect on women, and he liked it. “Cute kids,” he added, tousling the hair of the male child. The mother’s face practically burst into flame.

“I’m Laurie,” she said. “Divorced.”

“Hello, I’m Harper. He’s with me,” I said pointedly, grabbing Dennis’s arm. “The nerve,” I muttered as we continued across the lobby.

“Oh, relax,” he said. “I know who I’m with.” Then, rather suddenly, he leaned down and kissed me on the mouth, a quick, sweet kiss which I appreciated all the more because there was Nick, standing outside the dining room as if waiting for us. He looked at me steadily as we approached, a mocking light in his eyes. In my heels, I was almost as tall as he was.

“Nick,” I said coolly.

“Harper. You look lovely,” he said, eyes mocking. “Dennis, my man.”

“Dude, how’s it hanging?” They shook hands, doing that automatic grip-shifting male handshake that they must teach in the locker room. Must my boyfriend be BFFs with my ex-husband? Huh? I pinched Dennis’s arm, but he only gave me a confused look.

We had a private dining room, one big table that seated about twenty, antlers decorating the wall, the windows showcasing the deep blue sky and purple mountains’ majesty and all that good stuff. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. Most of the seats were already taken—BeverLee, Dad, Willa and Chris, a few other people I didn’t recognize who were, I assumed, friends of the bride and groom.

Tonight was Thursday—the wedding was scheduled for Saturday afternoon, unless common sense decided to put in an appearance. If not, well, crotch. Life was going to be very different with Nick popping in and out again. Really should work on getting Dennis to marry me.

Willa once again jumped up and hugged me. “Guys,” she said to the four or five strangers, “this is my big sister, Harper! Harper, this is Emily—” She indicated a dark-haired, pretty woman. “We work together in New York. And that’s Colin, he’s Christopher’s friend from here, same with Noreen there, and this is Gabe, he and Chris went to college together. Guys, this tall drink of water is Dennis, Harper’s significant other.”

“Hello,” I said, smiling.

“Hey, guys,” Dennis said.

“And of course, Harper,” Willa continued, “you already know Jason.”

My head snapped around. Willa was pointing at a rather large man about my own age...tall and beefy with curly, angelic blond hair that made him look like a cherub. A nasty, stupid cherub, that was—Nick’s stepbrother, Jason Cruise.

“Great to see you again,” he said, giving me a quick once-over.

“Wish I could say the same, Jason,” I answered, icicles dripping from my words.

“You married?” he asked.

I ignored him, then risked a glance at Nick, who was taking a seat down near BeverLee and Dad, next to Willa’s friend from New York. He didn’t look at me. Willa was already chatting with

the friends from the lodge, so I took the last seat, which put me between Jason and Dennis and far from Nick.

I hated Jason Cruise for many reasons. Back when I was with Nick, Jason had been obsessed with Tom Cruise, something that had been true for years, according to Nick. Though he was no relation to the famous actor, Jason liked to hint that he was. “Went out to California,” he’d say. “Hung out with my Cruise cousins, you know. Saw you-know-who and the kids.” Then he’d wait to see if I’d squeal and pump him for star gossip, which he gleaned from the tabloids at the supermarket. When such a reaction failed to ensue, he’d just keep it up. “What’s your favorite movie of his? Call me nostalgic, but I still love *Top Gun*.” Indeed, I once saw Jason wearing a flight suit. Navy flight suits tended to look great on Navy pilots...on a giant Hobbit of a man, not so much.

But it wasn’t just his idiotic fascination with the film star. Oh, no. That was nothing.

Like me, Nick was a child of divorce. His folks had split up when he was eight. Nick’s father, Ted, had a honey on the side, apparently, and even before the divorce was final, he’d been living with Lila Cruise and her son, who was the same age as Nick. The same day Ted married Lila, he’d also adopted Jason, which might’ve been nice if it hadn’t meant Ted Lowery then forgot about his other son. Christopher, the child of Ted and Lila, was born a few years later.

I remembered Nick telling me about his childhood one winter’s night as we sat on a bench on campus, the stars brilliant, the air still and cold. To sum it up, Ted basically dropped the child of his first marriage. Jason (and later, Chris) replaced Nick in his father’s affections. Jason was the son whose picture Ted carried in his wallet, the one whose Little League team he coached, the one who was given a car for his sixteenth birthday.

The divorce between Nick’s parents had been ugly; his mother never forgave Ted, and her hatred burned for the rest of her life. Ted retaliated by sticking to the letter of the law on the custody and child support agreements. He was never late with a child support payment, but he never gave a penny extra, either. He never denied Nick a visit, but he never took him any more than what the court ordered—one weekend a month, dinner every other Wednesday. Dinner was always with the entire second family...Nick never saw his father alone.

Early on, Nick had learned to ask his father for nothing, because the answer was always the same. If Nick needed a new baseball glove, if he wanted to go to Boy Scout camp in the Adirondacks, if there was a field trip that cost a hundred bucks, his father would say only, “Your mother got a fair settlement. Ask her.” His mother, in fact, got a crap settlement and had to work two jobs to support her boy. If only she’d had a divorce attorney like my bad-ass self.

On the appointed weekend, Nick would take two subways and the train from his home in the working-class neighborhood of Flatbush, Brooklyn, over to the wealthy burg of Croton-on-Hudson. Here, Jason would instantly begin to torture Nick. Jason would gloat over all that he and “Dad” had done. He’d show Nick pictures of their fly-fishing jaunt in Idaho, their vacation to Disney World, their weekend in San Francisco. He’d make sure Nick knew the cost of his soccer cleats, the remote-control airplane, the swimming pool they’d just put in. If Nick was innocent enough to bring some far more humble toy or book of his own, Jason would see to it that the object was broken, or worse, stolen.

Christopher, born when Nick was ten, was in a different class. Nick loved the little guy, and Chris idolized his long-distance half brother. Christopher was, Nick had once said, the only good thing about those awkward, sad weekends spent as the perpetual outsider, watching his father with his new-and-improved family.

“So how is it, seeing Nick again?” Jason asked now, leaning a little closer. He was awash in Polo, a scent I always associated with irritating tourists.

“Lovely,” I answered.

“I’m so sure.” He raised an anemic eyebrow and leered, sort of a chummy, conspiratorial look. Poor thing, I understand completely, he’s a total shit, isn’t he? “So it’s kinda cool we’re related again, don’tcha think?”

“We’re not related, Jason. We’ve never been related. You are my ex-husband’s stepbrother. No relation, biologically or legally.”

“But you’re sort of family. Because of Chris and what’s-her-name.”

“Negative. Willa will be your half sister-in-law, if such a term even exists. As far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing.” I met his piggy blue eyes with my asshole-lawyer stare, and as ever, it worked.

He sank back into his chair. “Bitch,” he muttered.

“And don’t you forget it,” I returned.

Nick was watching me, and there it was, that quivering hum of electricity. I hoped he had heard me smack down his stepbrother, knew that, in my own way, I’d stuck up for him, but before the thought was even formulated, Nick had turned to the dark-haired Emily, who was laughing at something he said.

“Want some bread, Harp?” Dennis asked.

“Sure. Thanks,” I muttered.

“So, Harper, what do you do for work?” asked one of the Glacier friends.

“I’m a divorce attorney,” I answered. Everyone quieted.

Nick choked. “Are you kidding?” he asked.

“No,” I said coolly. Did Willa tell him nothing? “But I’m available for advice, should the need arise.”

“Never,” Christopher said, gazing sappily at my sister.

“That’s kind of perfect,” Nick said. “You found your calling, Harper.”

I willed myself not to clench. He really didn’t know? He’d never looked me up on Google? Never? In the past twelve years, yes, I’d had a moment of weakness or two (five, actually) in which I’d typed in his name, but before the Internet could torment me with information, I’d had the sense to slap another key and stop my impulse. Apparently, the urge to look me up had never struck Nick.

Whatever. Time to be sociable. “So, Emily, you work with Willa?” I said, favoring the pretty brunette with a smile and taking another bite of bread. “Mmm-hmm.”

“And what do you do?”

“I’m a drafter.” At my look of confusion, she added, “I draft the architectural plans at Nick’s.” She sent a look of bovine adoration his way.

I stopped chewing. “Nick’s?”

She glanced at Willa. “Um, yeah. We both work for Camden & Lowery. Nick’s firm.”

I looked at my sister. “Really. How nice.”

I sat there for a minute or two, long enough to say, “I’ll have the same thing” when the waitress was done with Dennis, though I had no idea what he’d ordered. Then I excused myself, smiling, kissed Den on the cheek and hightailed it to the ladies’ room. Leaned against the sink and pressed my cold hands to my hot cheeks. The door opened a second or two later, and Willa gave me a cute little grimace.

“You’re working for Nick?” I blurted.

“Okay, calm down,” she said.

“Willa! I—You should’ve—” I took a quick breath. “Why didn’t you tell me? Is that how you ran into Christopher? Why didn’t you say something?”

“Harper, chill,” she said calmly, scootching up to sit on the counter. “Look. I’d been in the city about a month, not finding any work, okay? Money was running out—”

“Right! Which is why I told you not to leave that stonemasonry program until you had a job! And I also offered to loan you—”

“You already did loan me,” she said. “That’s the thing. I wanted to make it on my own.”

“So you went to him? To Nick? To my ex-husband, Wills?” My mouth wobbled, but luckily, the door opened, revealing a middle-aged woman in a sweatshirt that showed a moose dancing over the word Montana.

“Occupied!” I barked, and she jerked back. But it gave me a much-needed second to get myself under control. I hadn’t cried in years. Wasn’t about to now.

“It was literally an accident,” Willa said. “I had an interview down in SoHo, which just sucked, by the way, they were so mean and it was for, like, a barista at a coffeehouse, you know, and they were grilling me on the growing conditions necessary for organic arabica and whatever. So I didn’t even get that job, I had eight dollars left in the bank, and I’m walking down this little bumpy street, the cobblestones are everywhere in SoHo, you know?”

“Yes, I’ve been there,” I said tightly.

“And I look up and see a sign. Camden & Lowery Architecture. I figured, what are the odds of that being Nick? I remembered him as so nice, you know?”

I gave her a lethal look, which she ignored. “So I went in and there he was, and he was so surprised and happy to see me, and I told him I was looking for work, and guess what?”

“What?”

“His secretary was going on maternity leave. So he hired me.”

My stomach was in a knot. “Willa—”

Once again, the door opened, and Dancing Moose Woman was back. “Still occupied,” I said. “My sister’s sick, okay?”

“Projectile vomiting,” Willa agreed. “Splat. Very disgusting.”

“Well, how long do you think you’ll be?” the woman asked with a frown.

“Long time,” Willa said sweetly. “But there’s another bathroom on the other side of the lobby. Oops, here it comes, more barf. You better go.”

“Feel better, honey,” the lady said, jerking back.

That did the trick. It also reminded me of why Willa got away with what she did. She...well, she was lovable. Good with people, sweet, funny. I could see why Nick would hire her...not just to mess with my head (though one couldn’t rule that out), but simply because Willa was awfully nice.

I cleared my throat. “Willa, did it ever occur to you that I’d like to know something like that?”

She sighed. “Sorry. It’s just...you and he were so long ago. And I really needed the job.”

“So how’d you meet Chris?” I asked.

“He came in on my first day. That’s why it was so...you know. Meant to be.” She reached out and took my hand. “I’m sorry. I was just a little desperate.”

“I would’ve helped you,” I said.

“I didn’t want to be helped.”

“Well, Nick helped you. Why was it okay to ask Nick and not me?”

“Because he actually needed something I could do,” she said gently. “And you never have.”

“What utter crap.” I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror and turned away abruptly.

“It’s not crap. It’s true, Harper. You never need anything from anyone.”

We didn’t say anything for a minute.

“Willard! You still in there? We’re doing a game, honey! Weddin’ night Mad Libs! Come on, sluggo! Is your sister in there with you?”

“We’re here, BeverLee,” I called. “We’ll be out in a sec.”

“Are we okay?” Willa asked me.

I nodded. “Sure.”

“I didn’t mean to keep it a secret...I just wasn’t sure how to handle it.”

“Well, letting me find out at dinner...uncool.”

“Sorry.” She gave me a repentant little grin.

“Willa,” I said, “you know I want you to be happy.”

“I know,” she said, her smile growing.

“We haven’t been able to have a real conversation since you told me the big news. I just want to state for the record that I’m...I’m really worried that rushing into marriage is going to result in another disappointment for you.”

“And I appreciate your concern,” she said calmly.

“When you marry someone you barely know, it doesn’t usually end well. And divorce...sucks.”

“I know, Harper. I’ve been divorced twice as many times as you.”

“So why are you in such a hurry?”

“Why waste time? If you love someone, I think you should go for it. And I’m not getting divorced this time. I really love Christopher.” Her eyes took on a flinty look.

I tried to make my voice gentle. “You loved Raoul and Calvin, too.”

“Christopher doesn’t have a prison record, and he’s definitely not gay. I’m older and wiser now. Okay? Can’t you just be happy for us? I know it’s hard for you to have faith in the world, but I do. And you’re my maid of honor, so you have to stop being so doom and gloom, okay?”

“Willa...”

“And by the way, do you think you could be nice to Nick?”

I sighed. “I’ve been very civilized. We’re even having a drink later on.”

“Oh, that’s great! Thank you, Harper!” She clapped her hands and then hopped down from the counter, adjusted her cleavage so it was higher and more pronounced—she was BeverLee’s daughter, after all. “You’ll see, Sissy. It’ll all work out.” Then she was gone, her face bright and happy despite our conversation.

What would it be like to be so relentlessly optimistic? I couldn’t remember ever having the same lighthearted faith that Willa felt. Not since I was about five, anyway.

I took a hard look at myself in the mirror, almost expecting to see some middle-aged harbinger of doom, Ebenezer Scrooge in drag. Instead, it was just me, the face deemed striking by just about everyone. I stuck my tongue out at my reflection. A few wisps of hair had escaped my clip and were curling, not unattractively, around my face.

My hair was probably my best feature, certainly the one that garnered the most attention. Rich auburn hair shot with coppery highlights from the sun, curling without frizzing, one-in-a-million, pre-Raphaelite hair of an angel which I straightened every day for work. I subdued it once more, secured the clip more tightly and made sure that not one curl escaped.

“Harper, baby doll? You comin’?” BeverLee opened the door. “Oh, sweetie, here. You need a little spray?” She fumbled in her huge vinyl purse for her industrial-sized can of Jhirmack. “Want me to puff you up?”

“I’m good, Bev. Thanks anyway.” With my stepmother chattering away, we went back to join the others.

An eternity later, dinner was over. Dad and BeverLee headed upstairs where, please God, they would have sex and thus relieve me of hearing about their marital woes. The rest of the gang drifted toward the bar. Dennis approached me. “Hey, I’m kinda whipped,” he said. “I’m gonna go upstairs and ice my back, take a few Motrin. We’re going horseback riding tomorrow, I don’t want to miss that.”

“Horseback riding?”

“That’s what they said.”

My stony heart sank a bit more. I was actually a little scared of horses. So dang big, you know? “Well. Do you need anything, Den? Want me to come up, get you settled?”

“Nah, I’m fine. Oh, hey, how you doing?”

I turned to look at the party he was addressing. Great. Some pretty woman giving him the eye.

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