

She never intended to go home again.

Only the news that her father is on his deathbed could bring Los Angeles physical trainer Erica Carmichael back to the town she'd wanted to forget and the parent who'd made her childhood a nightmare with his drunken rages. Her plans for a brief trip home to bid him a wary farewell are quickly complicated, however, by her discovery she's now guardian of her teenage brother. She's well and truly stuck. It might be some consolation that the man next door is handsome and attractive, but Erica doesn't trust her growing feelings for the fellow. He's too good to be true.

Sporting goods store owner Brennan Swift is saddened by the passing of his neighbor, a mentor to him in more ways than one. Now Brennan feels responsible for the disposition of his friend's orphaned youngest son. Unfortunately, this involves dealing with the prickly Erica. Brennan is dismayed by his instant attraction to her. He can't afford an involvement. He particularly can't get involved with a woman who doesn't believe in the possibility of a man's redemption - for Brennan has his own dark history.

GOOD NEIGHBORS
(Book 1 of the Home Again Series)
by Alyssa Kress

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Note to self: next time you return unannounced after ten years, make sure someone's going to be home.

Erica stood before the new paneled wood door with the stained glass insert—stained glass!—and decried her own lack of foresight. She'd told her brother Clint she'd drive to Palmwood from Los Angeles after he'd warned her their father probably didn't have much longer to live, but she hadn't been very specific about her arrival time.

Now she stood on the front porch with no way to get inside a house she barely recognized. For God's sake, there were roses growing by the steps, and the lawn was actually green. When she'd lived here, the front yard had been predominantly dirt. There certainly hadn't been any flowers.

"Damn," she breathed. The sun had just set, and a chill was creeping into the air. The cotton jacket she wore over her T-shirt wasn't designed for high-desert evenings when the temperature could plummet thirty degrees.

Probably everyone was at the hospital. Probably she ought to get this over with and go there, too. She'd come this far, might as well go all the way. Emotional insurance. That's what she'd told herself she was taking out by rescheduling her physical training clients for a week and driving back to a town and a person she'd never cared to see again. She was making sure it wouldn't haunt her for the rest of her life that she hadn't said

goodbye to her father, though even he would have to admit he hadn't earned this much devotion.

"Erica? Hello, are you Erica?" The voice came from the house next door. It was a deep, masculine voice.

Erica turned to see a tall man waving to her from the edge of a wide, railed porch. Light from his open door put him in silhouette so she couldn't see his face.

"Are you Erica?" he asked again.

"Um..." The house that used to be next door was gone. A two-story, crafted-wood deal now sat in its place. She was pretty sure the man who'd just hailed her was nobody she'd ever met. He had broad shoulders and was wearing a button-down shirt and jeans.

"Liam's over here with me," the man told her, apparently assuming she was Erica, after all, since he mentioned the name of her youngest brother. "Why don't you come on in?"

She *really* should have nailed Clint down on specifics. Why was her teenage brother in the house of this stranger? Surely Liam should have been with Clint. "Um...okay." Erica turned and descended the steps of the renovated porch and walked her tooled cowboy boots across the two driveways toward the silhouetted man.

"I'm Brennan Swift," he explained as she approached the bottom of his porch steps.

"Uh, Erica Carmichael, but I guess you figured as much."

Erica could now see him better. He wore a warm smile on a face of regular, if not downright handsome, features. His dark hair looked a week or so behind on a haircut. When she got close enough, he held out his hand and shook hers. He had a firm grip.

"Please come in. I'll tell Liam you're here."

The man did nothing to indicate a negative opinion of Erica: no wince, no squint, no subtle lowering of eyelids. Quite the contrary, he seemed perfectly amiable.

It didn't matter. Her imagination supplied the fellow with all the judgments her father's neighbor might make, should he know the bare facts. She was the daughter who'd left at age eighteen and never looked back. She was the one who never called, emailed, or visited her last remaining parent. True, she'd stayed in touch with her two younger brothers, but she'd certainly not done so with her father.

She felt her shoulders lift slightly as she followed Brennan Swift into the house.

The ceiling rose two stories, soaring over an open-plan living area. Erica got the impression of a lot of hand-crafted wood details elegantly executed. Had Clint done the work? Whoever had, some serious money had been involved. A stair wound around the side of the room and up to a railed walkway, presumably leading to some bedrooms.

The place gave the same impression as the man who'd led her in: unself-conscious confidence. She felt a familiar, and she knew completely unreasonable, resentment. While growing up with an alcoholic father, confidence had been hard to come by. Still was.

The neighbor now went over to the foot of the scrolled staircase. "Liam!" he shouted, looking upward. "Your sister's here!"

"What?" came a muffled voice from above. It wasn't a voice Erica recognized. Except for one visit to her apartment in Los Angeles from Clint and Liam about four years ago, she hadn't seen either of her brothers, in the flesh, since leaving home. She was a little taken aback, truth be told, to hear the tones of a man rather than a boy.

"Your sister. Erica. She's here!"

"Oh." A pause. "Wow."

Wow? Erica blinked a few times, surprised by the indication of enthusiasm. She tried to keep in touch, but it wasn't as though she'd ever been a real sister to Liam. He'd only been five when she'd left.

"Erica." A lanky youth appeared at the upstairs railing, his brown hair overgrown and scruffy. He had earbuds in but pulled them out. He was smiling. Dimly, he looked like the most recent photo Erica had seen of him from Clint's Facebook page. "You came," Liam breathed.

In that moment Erica felt like the most self-absorbed creature in the universe for having ever considered *not* coming. Her fifteen-year-old brother seemed to want her here.

"I'm so glad," Liam said and rushed down the stairs. Once he reached her, he embraced her.

Astonished, she did her best to hug him back.

"Thank you," Liam murmured. "Thank you for coming."

The lingering guilt was beginning to grow like a cloud. She'd been the most absent sibling she could possibly get away with.

Meanwhile, she was aware of Brennan Swift, the neighbor, watching.

"Are you planning to stay in town?" Swift asked, once Liam had released Erica. "Liam's been bedding here. You're more than welcome to do so as well."

Really? Erica's brows dipped. They'd met, like, five seconds ago.

Brennan lowered his eyes. "Your father's a good friend of mine." He looked up again. "I consider his family my own."

Erica's frown only deepened. Her father had friends? Close ones? It was hard to imagine. "I'm sure that's very, uh, nice of you, but I don't know. I really hadn't planned..." Anything. She'd left in such emotional disarray that she'd neglected to determine a number of critical details. In the back of her mind, she'd probably assumed she'd stay in her father's house. She'd thought Liam would be there, too, with— "Where's Clint?"

Brennan glanced toward Liam. A silent communication passed between the two of them.

"Clint is...having some issues," Brennan carefully explained. "He didn't think it would be a good idea for Liam to be around until he can, uh, resolve them."

Issues. A powerful shaft of fear struck Erica. Not— Surely Clint would know better than to go *that* route. Hoarsely, she asked, "What's the problem?"

"Uh..." Brennan was clearly hesitant to blab, but a look of horror came into his expression when he caught Erica's eye. "Oh, no. Not drugs or alcohol— It's marital issues. He's having some problems with his wife."

"Soon to be ex-wife," Liam muttered. "We hope."

"Oh." At least it wasn't alcohol. But Erica'd had no idea Clint's marriage was in trouble. She'd actually never met Clint's wife, Judy. They'd married in a big hurry two years ago, and Clint rarely mentioned her when he called or emailed. But if the two of them were having difficulties, then it made sense Liam would be staying with a neighbor instead of with his older brother in an unsettled household.

But what was *Erica* supposed to do?

The Brennan fellow again seemed to sense what she was thinking. He spoke slowly. "I suppose...you and Liam can move back into your father's house." He glanced toward

Liam. "Now that your sister's here, you can go back home, to your own room and everything."

Liam brightened. "You're right. Not that I can't take care of myself perfectly well," the teen assured Erica. "I make my own meals and do laundry and everything. But people would freak out if I were living without an adult."

Hold the phone. What was going on here? They were moving her in, setting her up as some sort of parent. She'd only thought of staying a week at the very most. In fact, she had a client scheduled for next Wednesday.

But it was impossible to miss the relief in Liam's eyes. He was no longer alone, depending on the kindness of strangers. Besides, what could she say? *Oh, no, perfect stranger, supposed friend of my father, you take responsibility for my little brother, not me?*

She met the neighbor's gaze. Once again, her imagination had him judging her as if he were somehow in possession of the facts: she was the absent sister, left home and Liam—a very young child—with an uncertainly sober father, had since then barely laid eyes on the kid, who was now about to lose his only parent. And even at this moment she was hesitating about being the responsible adult in the house when clearly nobody else was currently available.

Irritation crept through her like an ant army. What about Alex? Shouldn't the Brennan Swift of her imagination also condemn the oldest brother, Alex? He'd left home, too, never looking back. Worse than that, though, he'd never contacted anybody, ever, but had completely disappeared. Yep, after setting himself up as the one toward whom they all looked up, the hero, the chief. Heck, Erica didn't even know if Alex was still alive.

But Alex was not here, and she was.

The irritation crawling through her might have originated around Brennan and inched over toward Alex, but it was quickly circling around herself. *Man up, sister. You are here.*

"Good idea," Erica said, looking the officious Brennan Swift straight in the eye. "Liam, why don't you go get your things? We'll go home together."

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Brennan didn't like to make snap judgments about people, but as he watched Erica turn toward his front door as though to lead Liam out—without actually giving the kid time to fetch his things—he didn't think it was any longer a *snap* judgment to dislike the woman.

Her whole attitude was stiff and standoffish. She appeared to want to make a point that Brennan was an outsider and unneeded. True, Brennan was a stranger to her, but why was that? Because she'd deliberately absented herself from her father and the rest of her family for the last ten years. Otherwise, she'd know how close Brennan was to Richard Carmichael and to his two sons, Liam and Clint.

Brennan was so close that he'd promised Richard he'd see to Liam's welfare. Brennan intended to do just that. Even if he'd suggested Erica take Liam home, that didn't mean Brennan was bowing out of the situation, not until he could make sure this would work out to Liam's advantage.

"All right, then, Liam. Let's go get your things from upstairs," Brennan declared.

Erica stopped her compact, athletic body and whirled, her mouth open.

Brennan turned away from her before she could think of some reason she needed to whisk Liam away without his clothes and his school supplies.

"Ah, I didn't have time to clean up or anything," Liam blurted, hurrying up the stairs first.

"Don't worry about it," Brennan gently told him, following up the wine-colored stair runner. "Nobody's grading you on neatness this week."

"Yeah, but—" After he reached the top of the stairs, Liam rushed down the hall toward the guest bedroom where he'd been staying for the past week. "There's neatness and then there's really-big-mess," he called back on his way.

Chuckling, Brennan slowed down to give Liam time to do whatever he thought he had to before they saw the bedroom. He could hear Erica deciding to follow. Without looking, he could sense her wariness and resentment.

She was not what Brennan had imagined based on the small amount of information Richard had given him regarding his second-born, the daughter. She was small for the track star her father claimed she'd been, though she wasn't tiny. She was slender and pretty, with a boyish cut to her light brown hair. Brennan had not imagined pretty.

Once in the spare bedroom, Brennan found Liam standing in the middle of the space and looking around at what was not, in fact, that big of a mess. As was the case so often recently, he appeared completely lost.

"Where's that duffel bag we used before?" Brennan asked. "Oh, here." He bent to snag the old canvas bag from under the bed. "I'll throw your clothes in while you get your computer stuff together."

Liam's gaze went to the laptop and assorted electronic boxes of indeterminate employment that were sitting on the desk. "Okay." Once given direction, he was able to get moving, closing the laptop and unplugging wires.

If Erica hadn't shown up, Brennan would have let the kid simply keep everything where it was...forever. Over the four years he'd known the family, Brennan had come to consider Liam a younger brother of his own. Richard was like a second father.

"Is the stuff in the drawers yours, too?" Erica asked, moving toward the bureau.

"What? Oh, yeah." Liam was under the desk, unplugging equipment from the wall socket.

"Here." Erica lifted a pile of shirts and brought it to the duffel bag Brennan held.

Her nearness gave him a hit of her feminine presence and the wealth of physical energy lying just under her surface. She did have a certain animal appeal. A lot of it. Brennan leaned away from her in order to grab a sweater from the bed.

It probably wasn't fair that her physical appeal increased his negative opinion of her.

Once Liam's clothes had been thrown into the duffel bag, and between Liam and Erica, they'd collected all his electronics and his school backpack, the three of them tramped down the stairs, out the door, and across the two driveways over to the Carmichael residence.

A few lights were on in the house, set on a timer by Brennan to make it look like the place wasn't deserted. But to Brennan it looked that way anyhow. This time Richard was not coming back.

"My keys," Liam muttered, swinging his backpack onto the porch. "Where'd I put my keys?" He opened four zippers before he found them.

Despite the emotional chaos of his father's illness, Liam had gotten straight A's on his fall report card two months ago. The simple things in life, however, seemed to overwhelm him.

After a certain amount of fumbling, Liam got the key in the lock and opened the door. "There," he breathed in obvious relief. Grabbing his backpack, he went in eagerly.

Brennan was set to follow Erica, who was holding the miscellaneous electronic boxes, but she abruptly stopped on the other side of the threshold. Brennan saw her look around her, her body language showing shock.

He didn't think there was anything particularly shocking about the checkerboard wallpaper, the polished brass wall sconce, or the Indian rug over the parquet wood floor—but he had a sudden insight regarding the source of her astonishment. During the time Brennan had known Richard, the older man had taken pride in his house and yard, spending hours trimming the lawn, fixing the handcrafted fence, or putting up new light fixtures.

He'd probably not been much of a handyman during the years he'd spent drunker than a skunk, when Erica had lived here.

"Let's put all this stuff in my room upstairs," Liam told Erica. "Then you can choose whichever of the other rooms you want. They're all clean—the maid was here a week ago."

"Okay." Erica was staring at the fancy chandelier that hung over the front stair.

A dollop of sympathy dropped into Brennan's negative judgment. From what Richard had admitted to him, Brennan knew Erica's childhood had not been easy. Far from it. She no doubt had good reason to own a prickly personality. She probably had some cause to behave with ill nature under the current circumstances.

Perhaps some of his irritation with her was actually directed toward himself, he realized. She made him look at his own past with eyes he'd rather not use.

With a slow shake of her head, Erica moved again, starting up the stairs.

In Liam's bedroom, Brennan lowered the duffel bag onto the bed.

Liam was already reconnecting his computer equipment.

"What about your things?" Brennan asked Erica, who was now staring at the braided rug covering Liam's bedroom floor.

"Hm?" She blinked and looked up.

"Can I help you unload your things from your car?"

"Oh, no. That's okay, I can—" She abruptly stopped, perhaps catching the expression Brennan wore. Correctly, she read he would consider it ridiculous pride on her part to spurn such a benign offer. Straightening, she said, "Sure. The car's parked right out front. I'll go open it up."

She was perceptive. Brennan was glad of that as he followed her back down the stairs. He wasn't quite as pleased with the additional hit of male interest he felt as he watched her descend the stairs, her movements spare and controlled. Probably the balance of his irritation with her came from her attractiveness. He didn't want to feel attracted.

At the curb sat a gently aged mini-SUV. She clicked the locks open and reached into the back for a smallish suitcase.

Their eyes met as she handed it to him. The size of the suitcase said she didn't plan to stay long.



Her chin lifted in a defensive gesture.

The gesture made Brennan feel slightly guilty. Who was he to judge or dislike her? He could understand why she'd never come back home. He could even understand why she'd only packed for a short visit, just long enough to bid her father the briefest possible goodbye.

Clearing his throat, he took her suitcase. "I doubt there's any food in the house. I'm happy to run you and Liam to the market."

"Thank you, but I remember where the grocery store is. Anyway, I'll probably simply get takeout tonight."

The brush-off was clear. *I don't need you.* But then, as he was turning away, he felt a touch on his arm.

A small shock went through him, as though he'd connected with a wool blanket on a dry day. Disguising the odd sensation, he turned back to give her a questioning look.

She quickly retracted her hand. In the light from the front porch, Brennan could see her prickly mask go transparent. Beneath it her fear and vulnerability showed through. She bit her lower lip. "I don't know if you could tell me— But do you think we should go to the hospital right away? I have no idea...how bad things are."

Something melted in his chest. Maybe this was the real woman, a person who admitted she had feelings and cared. "I think you have time. Liam and I were there earlier, before I brought him home for a break and to get some homework done. Matters seemed fairly stable. I think you can settle in and have dinner first."

"Oh, okay. Thanks." She released her hold on her lower lip and frowned. "So, you really are friends with my father?"

Her obvious disbelief swept away his moment of softness. She acted as though Richard could not possibly have friends. Surely she was aware that her father hadn't touched a drink in twelve years. Surely she could guess he might be a decent human being when alcohol wasn't drowning his brain. As a matter of fact, meeting Richard was what had decided Brennan to make a go of becoming branch manager at Livestrength Sports equipment, who'd encouraged him to buy the branch and create his own brand, Diehard, two years ago. Richard had helped Brennan restart his life and succeed.

"We're good friends," he now told Erica and heard the huskiness in his voice. Tilting his head, he added very deliberately, "He isn't the same person you knew."

Her nostrils flared. "You think I don't know what he's like when he's sober?" She sounded bitter. "But I also know what it's like when he falls off the wagon. And I don't ever want to be around again when that happens."

Twelve years of sobriety, treated like a fluke. All the upstanding, decent things Richard had done during that time— Brennan was unable to contain his irritation. "Don't worry. You're unlikely to see that happen."

Clearly brought up short, she stared at him with widened eyes.

He felt as though he'd kicked her. Pointing out her father's imminent death had been a low blow. It probably hadn't even been warranted. Richard himself had never blamed either of his two oldest children for writing him off.

But Brennan couldn't seem to avoid taking it personally when she castigated her father.

"Here, I'll take the suitcase." She easily wrested it from his grasp. Walking swiftly, she left him behind and stalked toward the house.

Feeling a mixture of anger and embarrassment, Brennan trailed her toward the house. The woman was entitled to her feelings; he hadn't needed to try throwing guilt into the mix. Also, she had a superior claim for authority over Liam. For purely pragmatic purposes, he should have played his cards better.

She pushed open the unlocked door. Brennan was sure she intended to go inside and then close it in his face. That would not be ideal. He wasn't yet sure Liam was okay with this new situation.

Just as Erica was about to enter the house, the telephone inside rang.

She turned, and her eyes hit Brennan's.

"Hello?"

They both heard Liam answer the phone. They both waited, silent, until the boy came to the front door with the kitchen handset to his ear.

Liam's face was pale. "It's the hospital. They think we should come now."

## CHAPTER TWO

He couldn't tell they were there. This was obvious to Erica as soon as she walked into the hospital room, accompanied by Liam and Brennan. The shriveled face amid the hospital sheets barely seemed a part of this world.

"Dad?" Liam went straight up to this frightening apparition and found a hand somewhere under the sheets. He held onto it. "Dad, we're here. We're all here."

This was not quite true. Richard's oldest son, Alex, had no idea any of this was going on since no one knew how to contact him. Clint was still on his way. Liam had dialed him from Brennan's car while the Carmichael's rock-steady neighbor had driven them over here.

Brennan went to the other side of the bed and put a big hand on her father's shoulder—or where Erica assumed his shoulder might be under the swarm of sheets and arrangement of tubes. Brennan's expression was calm and steady.

Erica cleared her throat and forced herself to walk closer.

"Um... Hi, Dad. It's Erica." Her voice was a whisper. But even if she'd shouted, she doubted she would have received a reaction from the face of hollowed-out cheeks and thin, wrinkled skin.

Holy— This was not the father she remembered, larger than life and twice as blustery. He was tiny and seemed far older than his actual fifty years.

During the entire three hours of her drive from Los Angeles, she'd battled angry resentment toward the man who'd ruined her childhood. Now she couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

The utter quiet and calm of the scene could not have been in deeper contrast to her mother's agonized struggle with death twelve years earlier. The tortured gasps of her pneumonia, courtesy of overwork and personal neglect, had scored the air of the room.

In the weeks before her death, Erica's mother had complained, between coughing spasms, that she was too busy to go to any doctors. Richard had only just got out of prison, serving a sentence for assault with a deadly weapon. Moira'd been the one trying to make ends meet. No time to address a lingering cough, one that had morphed into bronchitis. Richard had come out of prison sober, but Moira hadn't had long to enjoy the phenomenon before laboring for breath in a hospital room much like this.

Now Erica considered coming closer to her father, touching him so he could know for sure that she was there—take out that emotional insurance for which she'd made this journey. But she couldn't move. A choked sensation attacked her throat. She could feel all the old anger, resentment, and fear, but it clashed now with a weird sense of guilt. It was crazy. What had *she* to feel guilty about?

Across the bed from Erica, Brennan the neighbor looked over at her. His expression was calm—not judgmental any more. But he still made her feel out of place.

He wasn't even Richard's son, but he'd been around. She hadn't.

The air behind Erica moved. She turned to see Clint walk in.

Her next-younger brother was built compact but strong, with short, very dark hair. Wearing a leather jacket and jeans, he walked in quickly, letting out a short, expressive breath when he saw Erica.

"Hey," he said, and with exactly the right sort of smile—a welcoming smile—he drew her into an embrace. "You made it."

Erica closed her eyes. Instantly, she felt a little better. Clint could do that. In fact, he always did that, made people feel better. He exuded an easy, genuine warmth.

"You're doing the right thing," he murmured softly in her ear before releasing her.

She felt pressure threaten her nose and smiled in an effort to beat back any coming tears.

"Hey, Liam. Brennan, my man." Clint went over to give Liam a lengthy hug and then walked around the bed to exchange a brief man-hug with Brennan.

Once again, Erica had to admit that the officious neighbor was more or less part of the family.

"Dad," Clint said, his tone warmly chiding. He put his hand over his father's other hand, the one Liam didn't have. Clint squatted down to say more in a voice too low for Erica to hear.

Erica could swear her father's wrinkled expression eased a little.

Liam lowered his forehead to the hand he held.

For her part, Erica felt paralyzed, unable to move any closer, unready to walk away. She was about as useful as a block of wood.

*At least comfort Liam, you big embarrassment.*

As she forced her limbs to move closer to her brother, she happened to look up and catch Brennan's eye. She thought she detected a tiny glimmer from him, the oddest, tiniest glimmer that he could somehow guess how conflicted she felt.

As tiny as it was, and possibly not even true, this miniscule drop of understanding acted like a lever on whatever emotional crack lay inside her. Erica felt the crack widen as she put an arm around Liam's shoulders.

"Hey, Dad, you feel better," Liam murmured.

With the frightening crack inside her composure widening, Erica was afraid to open her mouth, assuming there were any words she could say. She didn't love her father. How could she love the person who'd ruined her childhood? The man who at any moment might burst into some loud tirade or throw a beer can across the room?

On the other hand, he hadn't always been awful. When she was very little, he'd taken her to ice skating classes, had cheered her on when she'd gotten herself up from a fall. Once, she remembered him putting her on his shoulders in order to get a better view of a holiday parade. God, that had been a long time ago. She couldn't have been more than three or four.

The lever Brennan had stuck in her with his understanding glimmer shifted her cracked shell yet more. From somewhere very deep down, so deep she hadn't known it was there, grief materialized, after all. A horrifyingly large, indeed overwhelmingly gigantic, grief.

True terror seized Erica. No! She did not want to feel grief. It was—untrue. A phantom. She dragged in a large breath and pushed the emotion back down. Uh-uh. Not wanted. *Not real.*

Her father went very still, even stiller than before.

"Goodbye, Dad," Clint said. "You've been the greatest. Have a safe journey, there."

Liam's voice was barely audible. "Goodbye, Dad."

"Richard," Brennan rumbled. "Don't you worry. It'll be okay."

Erica had no idea what he was talking about. Meanwhile, what was she supposed to say? She felt so choked with a plethora of conflicting emotions that she could barely breathe.

She ended up not saying anything.  
So much for emotional insurance.

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It was a gray day, breezy, and threatening rain. Fortunately, the rain held off for the duration of Richard Carmichael's interment, but those in attendance grasped onto coats and hats, struggling to pay attention to the minister as they tried to keep warm.

At the end, Brennan was surprised to feel a real sense of relief. By age thirty-two he was blessed not to have suffered any true loss in his life. Oh, yes, he'd lost Lois, and that had certainly been devastating, but that had been the loss of a relationship, not a life. Any funerals Brennan had attended had been for the aged relatives of friends and colleagues, no one over whom he'd felt any grief or personal loss.

Now, however, he was seeing his friend Richard laid to rest, quite literally. The ritual ended up giving him a sense of resolution. Richard's long and painful battle with his cancer was over.

As the balance of the gathering hurried to their cars parked along the winding road that ran through the expansive lawn of the cemetery, Brennan looked toward Liam. The teenager, standing between Clint and Erica, stared at the ground, his expression solemn. Impossible to tell if he was feeling any similar resolution or relief.

Quite by accident, Brennan happened to catch Erica's eye as he shifted his gaze. He'd tried to keep his distance from Richard's estranged daughter even as he'd helped make the arrangements. But he hadn't been able to avoid noticing her. During the last few days, she'd appeared eerily calm, almost an automaton. But now, for just this one brief moment while their eyes happened to meet, he saw deep anguish and almost...pleading.

He felt arrested. Confused. Was she *asking* him for something?

In the next instant, whatever he'd seen in her eyes disappeared.

Looking away, Brennan told himself to ignore whatever he might have seen. Beneath Erica's outer calm surged a storm. He didn't want to get caught in it. He couldn't afford to get caught in it.

Clint tugged at his striped tie. It was clear he didn't wear one very often. "Guess we better head back to the house. Some of these people will be going straight to the reception from here." He looked toward Brennan. "You'll be there, right, bro?"

"Of course." In fact, Brennan planned to drop in only briefly. Give the family some space. Give himself some, too, or at least some space from Erica. He did have matters he wanted to discuss with her and Clint about Liam, but that could wait until tomorrow.

"Good." Clint nodded. "Let's go, then."

As the four of them walked in a group toward their various cars, Brennan saw Erica lean toward Clint. In a low voice, she asked, "Who *are* all these people?"

Clint shrugged as they walked along between headstones. "A mix. Friends from Dad's work. From his church."

"Dad went to church?"

"How do you think the minister was able to talk about him—?" Brennan saw uncharacteristic exasperation briefly seize Clint before he visibly calmed himself down. "He changed, Erica."

She frowned, clearly not understanding.

Brennan made sure not to catch eyes with her again in that moment.

No more was said until they reached their cars, parked one behind the other. Then Erica looked over at Liam. "You want to drive back with me or with Clint?"

Still gazing downward, Liam lifted his shoulders. "Doesn't matter."

Erica stilled.

Brennan read concern. She obviously cared about her little brother. The question was if she cared enough.

Clint cleared his throat. "Listen, I want all of you to know. I'm going to be here for Liam. He'll live with me and all. Dad wanted that. He even put it in his will." Clint eyed Liam seriously. "You get that?"

Finally, Liam raised his gaze from the ground to look at his brother. A strange expression crossed his face. Fear? Guilt?

Guilt didn't make any sense, but Brennan could understand suspicion. Clint had arrived late to the funeral, muttering something about having to avoid Judy.

"Sure," Liam said, his voice hoarse.

"I mean it," Clint insisted. Then he swore. "Shit. I can't believe it. I can't believe she's here."

Brennan turned to look in the direction Clint's gaze had shifted. A slight hill of grass overlooked their position. At the top of it, about a hundred yards away, stood a bright red car. Judy's car.

Brennan didn't know Clint's wife well, but from what he'd seen of her, he got the impression of a bright, determined, and ultimately self-absorbed creature. According to Clint, she'd got it in her head that he was cheating on her. They'd separated, and now she appeared set on making his life miserable.

"This is the absolute— I gotta go." Clint turned.

"Clint—" Erica called.

"Later." Clint waved as he rushed toward his truck.

Looking toward the crest of the hill, Liam sighed. "When is she going to give up?"

Brennan reached over to squeeze Liam's shoulder. "Clint'll work it out." Of course, it would be ideal if Clint could work it out sooner rather than later, but he did not appear ready to take the actions necessary to stop Judy's bad behavior.

Erica frowned as Clint climbed into the cab of his pickup. "He'll show up at the house, though, right?"

Brennan cleared his throat. "I'm sure he'll be there...if he can." Which was doubtful. Judy would follow him there, and Clint wouldn't want that.

Erica turned, and this time their eyes did meet. Again, for a moment, he saw her inner feelings of uncertainty and confusion. He saw a plea that, though ill-defined, was clear enough. *Help*.

An emotional shudder went through him. She'd jumped into this whole situation cold.

He had to give her credit for jumping in.

"I'll lend you a hand at the reception," he heard himself offer. Jumping in himself.

But what else was he supposed to do?

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Four dozen croissant sandwiches, a cold meat platter, ten pounds of cheese and fifteen boxes of crackers. Yesterday, when she and the guys had been ordering food, she'd been sure they were overdoing it with the quantities. Now, looking out over the people crowding the dining room, living room, and even spilling into the kitchen, Erica hoped they wouldn't run out.

She had no idea her father had collected so many friends. Or any friends. He certainly hadn't had any while she was living here. For that matter, *she* hadn't had any friends while living here. Even at a young age, she'd sensed her family situation was different from those of her classmates. She hadn't wanted to invite anyone over where they might see the ugly truth of her life.

"Such a great guy." A man about her father's age was pumping her hand. "Always there to help out if it was needed, you know?"

"Oh. Yes. Of course." Who was this man talking about? Once he let go of her, Erica watched the fellow wander toward the laden dining room table. Her father a great guy? Always there to help out? This referred to a different father than the one she'd known. The one she'd known was a tyrant who never lifted a finger except to raise a beer can to his lips.

*He changed.* So Clint claimed.

"Erica?"

Erica turned to see an older woman regarding her with a pondering expression. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Yes?" Erica put on a wan smile and prepared, once again, to fake it. Pretend she was the normal daughter of a normal man. Doing so felt unpleasantly familiar. It was how she'd spent the entirety of her teenage years.

Using a cane, the older woman came closer, smiling. "You don't remember me, do you? I suppose it's been a while. I'm Mrs. Myers. You used to mow my lawn."

The memory swept back to Erica in a painful rush. Ninth grade and the steep decline in the family's income while her father'd been in prison. She'd mowed lawns, picked up groceries, babysat—whatever she could find so she wouldn't have to ask her mother for lunch money. If she hadn't already understood why her mother put up with her father, she'd figured it out that year when it became so hard to pay the bills.

She'd also learned that if you threw a chair at someone in a bar fight, you ought to make sure you weren't throwing it at a city councilman. What might have resulted in a six-month suspended sentence became a year in prison.

Mrs. Myers took one of Erica's hands in both of hers. Her pale blue eyes were kind. "A real go-getter, you were. I'm so sorry to hear about your father."

"Thank you. It's been...a transition." It was a struggle to come up with the right words, something that wasn't a complete lie. The truth was her feelings were still in the chaos started at the hospital, an unpleasant mixture of fear, relief, and a guilt-inducing anger.

"He was a wonderful man," Mrs. Myers went on, releasing Erica's hand. "So kind and considerate. Last spring he helped me plant a whole row of orchids."

"Yes...I suppose he was like that." Erica felt exhausted by all the contradictory information and emotions. Her father had helped someone garden?

"Mrs. Myers." The voice belonged to Brennan. He strolled up from somewhere behind Erica. "It's good to see you up and about again."

The older woman turned to Brennan with a wide smile. "You remembered about my hip operation?"

"I know I haven't been seeing you in your garden every morning."

Erica felt herself relax as the two began discussing Mrs. Myers's garden and her lengthy medical recuperation.

Thank God Brennan had come to the reception and then decided to stay. He took up the slack created by Erica's complete ignorance of the man everyone was mourning—and the fact that Clint had not yet shown up. Her father's neighbor was like a rock, solid and steady. Erica found herself glad for his presence even if she still wasn't sure he liked her very much.

As Mrs. Myers limped off with her cane, Brennan turned back to Erica. The friendly smile he'd donned for the other woman sobered. "How are you doing?" he asked in a low voice.

He actually appeared to care. In fact, when he looked at Erica the way he was doing now, she couldn't help feeling that he *understood*.

Something inside her hungered for that understanding even as another, more powerful, part of her couldn't trust that it was real.

She forced a small smile. "I think I'll survive. Clint still hasn't come?"

His expression flickered. "I know he wants to be here, but his current situation..."

They were relatively alone among the crowd, nobody paying attention to their conversation, so it seemed okay to ask. "What *is* his current situation? He told me he's separated from Judy, so what's going on?"

"She shows up where she knows he'll be, makes scenes. He runs away in order to avoid it. I'm sure that's why he hasn't come to the house. He doesn't want her following him here and creating some big drama."

Clint running away from a problem instead of standing to confront it—sounded typical, unfortunately. He was a peacemaker, not a warrior. Still...

"He shouldn't do that," Erica murmured half to herself. How was Clint supposed to take on Liam's guardianship with this type of problem going on in his life?

Her vague plans to drive home tomorrow began to lose more of what little focus they'd ever owned. Perhaps she ought to reschedule that Wednesday client. Give herself—and Clint—an additional week to figure things out.

It would mean eating more into her savings, but what else was new? Every time Erica thought she was getting ahead and might have enough to rent her own gym, poof! Some emergency swept it all away.

"Clint's way of dealing with it certainly isn't ideal," Brennan carefully agreed. He threw a gaze around the room. "I haven't seen Liam in a while, either."

"Oh, I told him he could go up to his room. It all seemed to be getting too much for him."

Brennan's gaze returned to Erica, approval clear in his expression. "Good idea."

She was so out of sorts, so weak, that his approval felt like a warm fire on a blustery day. She tried reminding herself it wasn't any kind of overall approval or even particularly personal, but it still felt awfully good.

"Thank you," she heard herself blurt out. Her face immediately warmed. "I mean, for being here. I—I really couldn't do this by myself."

His gaze immediately dropped.



Uh-oh. Had she gone too far, embarrassed him? Or, worse yet, made him fear she was going to start clinging? Erica knew she was ham-handed when it came to interpersonal dealings. Give her a tight quad muscle or a recovering ankle fracture, and she knew exactly what to do. A simple thank you? She was sure to blow it.

He raised his eyes again slowly. The expression in them was very soft. Not angry or embarrassed. "I'm glad to be able to help."

She felt a surge of liking for the man. When they'd first met, she'd imagined he was judging her. Maybe he still was judging.

But right now he was showing understanding and compassion. And right now she needed that.

So she forgave herself in advance for maybe being stupid about the guy. Who knew what he was really like?

She smiled at him.

After a brief hesitation, he smiled back.

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Nobody understood. They never did.

Trying to distract himself from this depressing situation, Liam sat at his desk and ran a hand over the textbook he'd ordered from Amazon. His desk lamp lit the title: *Differential Equations*. It was a step past what he was studying in school, but he was getting bored with the pace of that class, and his father had always encouraged him to challenge himself.

Hence the fact he was taking a community college math class when he was only a sophomore in high school.

Liam opened the book. He wanted to forget the crowd down below. They wanted him to feel better. He didn't want to feel better. His father had just died. He was allowed to feel like hell.

Which begged the question why he was turning to the table of contents of his new book in an attempt to ease the dull ache in his chest. But that was different. Reading the book would be his choice.

Liam scanned the topics listed in the contents and felt a familiar excitement that did, indeed, ease the tight weight in his chest. Starting this book would be good. Better yet, it was something Dad would have approved of.

A knock on his door interrupted him in the act of turning to the first chapter. Liam looked up hopefully. Brennan? He was the only one who made Liam believe maybe someone *could* understand.

"Come in," he called.

The door cracked open slowly. His sister, Erica, poked her head around the door, her face posed beneath the poster above it of Albert Einstein with his crazy hair.

Liam felt a guilty disappointment. Erica was nice. She was obviously trying to help out. But she wasn't Brennan.

"Can I come in?"

Liam forced himself to smile. "I just said so, didn't I?" He leaned back in his desk chair, trying to disguise by his apparent ease that he was closing the textbook and hiding it behind some spiral notebooks.

He didn't want to be a snob, but he got the impression she wasn't much into academics herself. She might freak out or think he was a weirdo if she saw he was starting college mathematics.

"I just wanted to come up and make sure you're okay." Erica entered the room tentatively. "Do you need anything?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Especially since you let me bag on the stuff downstairs."

Erica let out an expressive breath. "You're telling me. Thankfully, the last of them just left."

So, she'd been having trouble, too. Interesting. But her trouble stemmed from a different cause than his, Liam supposed. She hadn't even liked Dad. Clint had once explained to Liam why Erica found it too difficult to ever come home. How for her it had been a scary, unhappy place with a father who was often drunk and in a bad temper. Given that, Liam kind of got where she was coming from, but...it seemed rather inflexible. Dad hadn't ever been that way that Liam remembered. On the other hand, Liam wasn't standing in Erica's shoes. He didn't know how she felt.

Now she came further into the room, and her gaze went around the walls. "This place sure looks different from when I last saw it." With a smile, her gaze shot to him. "Then it was all baby books and cute plush toys."

Liam felt his face warm. He still had a lot of toys on the numerous shelves lining the room, mostly Transformers from when he was in grade school. But, hey, grown men collected those.

He felt increasingly tense as she paced around and regarded his plastic robot toys and the posters of Nikola Tesla and the periodic table. He liked her and all. She always remembered his birthday and would post funny photos for him on Instagram. But she was like a stranger. She almost certainly didn't get who he was.

"What do you think you'll want to do on Monday?" Erica was regarding a model Space X rocket next to his figure of Galvatron, the main Transformers villain. "Think you'll be ready for school, or do you want to take a few more days off? As far as I'm concerned, it's up to you."

Liam lifted his shoulders. "Might as well go back to school. It'll be good. Distracting."

Nodding, she turned her attention to a silly Jar Jar Binks figure from *Star Wars*.

"That one's a joke," Liam said.

She turned to look at him questioningly.

Liam pointed to the figurine with its duck beak and floppy ears. "Everybody despises Jar Jar. I put him on my shelf as a joke."

"Oh." It was obvious she hadn't even noticed what she was looking at. With a shake of her head, she smiled. "Sorry. It just occurred to me that you're the youngest person I know."

Liam chuckled. "No teenagers hiring personal trainers?"

"I'm sure some are, fancy Beverly Hills types. Unfortunately, I'm not yet moving in those circles."

Liam's smile faded. "I hope I—this situation—I hope it's not making your life a big mess." He really did. It was stupid he couldn't simply take care of himself. He was perfectly capable of taking public transportation, shopping for food, wearing clean

clothes. Although he supposed there were more complicated aspects to adult life: taxes, insurance, and that sort of thing. He admitted ignorance of those topics.

Plus he doubted his school would look kindly on important papers not having an adult's signature. Unfortunately, kids his age were supposed to have parents or guardians.

"My life is fine," Erica claimed. "Since I'm self-employed, it's easy to reschedule clients." She turned to look directly at him and her voice took on a serious tone that made him want to squirm. "I'm not leaving here until I'm sure you're completely settled, everything squared away."

The dull ache in Liam's chest became a solid, heavy weight. No matter what she said, he *was* screwing up her life.

He was screwing up everybody's life. Clint claimed he would take care of Liam, but everybody could see that Clint was in over his head with his crazy wife, Judy. And even Brennan, with whom Liam would prefer to stay, probably had something going on in his life that Liam would screw up if he stayed with him.

"I want you to feel sure of that," Erica said.

The weight in Liam's chest made it hard to talk, but he managed a husky, "Okay."

It wasn't actually okay. In fact, a guilty voice began chanting in his head, reminding Liam of the task his father had asked him to do, the secret promise he'd made. The hard one.

Fortunately, nobody but Liam knew about the promise now. Nobody could know whether or not he was trying to fulfill it.

Erica frowned at him. "Okay, but...?"

Her query made the guilt surge upward. Anger was Liam's response. Dad shouldn't have eked that promise out of him. Liam didn't want to do it. He didn't intend to do it.

And he didn't have to. Erica had just promised to make sure Liam's situation was settled. Liam didn't have to go searching for another possible guardian, the one his father had wanted him to find.

"But nothing," he told Erica. To convince her, he managed a limp smile. "Thanks for coming, for staying. I really appreciate it." He paused and released a breath. "I don't have anything to say except that."

CHAPTER THREE

"I believe your party is already here." The gentleman manning the restaurant's arrival podium made a check mark on his list of reservations.

Both of them? Brennan wanted to ask. Not that he'd be able to avoid sitting down with Erica if she'd arrived before Clint. He was already pushing past the limits of acceptable behavior here by inviting her and Clint to lunch today with the express purpose of telling them what to do. For all Brennan knew, they'd already crossed their i's and dotted their t's.

But as he followed the maître d' through the skylit landscape of beige upholstered booths, Brennan had to remember that Clint's good intentions were not always coupled with concrete action. As for Erica, she was a complete unknown.

Even if he was out of bounds here, this meeting had to happen.

The maître d' led Brennan around a corner where he could now see the main part of the sun-filled restaurant. He spotted Erica right away, alone, sitting in a u-shaped corner booth.

She was here first, just as he'd feared. And, just as he'd feared, he felt a punch in the gut simply from looking at her. He had no idea why. She was not a stunner. Her figure was more boyish than womanly. But it was as if she were, in some mysterious way, a key that unlocked his door.

A door he'd kept shut for almost a decade, ever since finally acknowledging that Lois was never taking him back. A door he needed to keep shut. He wasn't safe when that door was open. And he sensed he particularly was not up to handling a woman like Erica. Her brave front cloaked a wealth of hidden emotional rocks.

Besides, she wouldn't like Brennan if she knew the truth about him.

She looked up. Brennan felt another punch at the slight shift in her expression.

Whatever this was, she was feeling it, too.

With a little bow, the maître d' drifted off.

Brennan walked up to the table. It wasn't easy, but he managed a smile. "Hi."

She smiled back. "Hello."

Her underlying anger, grief, and sorrow were like clouds in the air around them. As he curled into the booth, Brennan couldn't help himself from asking, "How are you doing?"

"Oh." Her lashes lowered. "A little better." She raised her eyes again. "How are *you*?"

Brennan paused. She'd recognized that he was grieving? He cleared his throat. "I'm a little better, too."

She nodded. "Liam went to school today. Said he wanted to." Her brows lowered. "He's kind of a nerd, isn't he?"

"More than 'kind of.'" Brennan smiled. "He's taking math at the community college. He ran out of options at his high school."

"Oh." Her expression showed significant surprise. "He didn't tell me. Jeez, does he need a ride over there or anything?"

"I believe he takes a bus from school after fifth period. And another one home. He's very independent."

She appeared to process that and then tilted her head. "You know him very well." It was stated as fact, not accusation.

Brennan gave her a wry smile. "As well as anyone can know a teenage boy."

That sparked a small laugh out of her.

Brennan felt slugged. It was the first time he'd ever heard her laugh. That he had caused the brief moment gave him a strange sense of power. While looking away in self-defense, he was relieved to see Clint hurrying toward them.

Thank God Brennan wouldn't be alone with her any more.

Clint glanced over his shoulder briefly before scooting into the booth on the opposite side from Brennan. "Hey, all right. Unless she's followed me, which isn't beyond the bounds of possibility, we're good." He puffed out a breath. "Hi Erica. Brennan, my man. So, what's up?"

Brennan felt taken aback. Clint wasn't usually so direct. Perhaps he sensed what was coming, which was basically a scold.

Feeling more out of bounds than ever, Brennan stalled. "Let's order first."

"No." It was Erica's voice. With a serious expression, she looked directly at Brennan. "You asked us to meet you here. You obviously have something to say. What is it?"

Brennan spread his palms. He was butting into their family situation again, but there was no way around it. "I don't mean to step on any toes, and, formally, it's none of my business." Morally, however, he was on the hook. "But I promised your father I'd make sure Liam was settled when he was gone."

A hunted expression jumped onto Clint's face. "I'm going to take care of him. Really."

Nodding, Brennan acknowledged Clint's intention. "That's great, but do you have any idea how that works, Clint? Have you spoken to a lawyer?"

Looking like a deer in the headlights now, Clint asked, "Does it have to be that formal?"

"As a general rule, I'm not sure. But in this case, I assume you want Liam to be able to access Richard's union pension. It would help with his current expenses and, for all I know, might assist in college tuition. I'm pretty sure that in order to use that money, someone would need to be named legal guardian."

Silence greeted this little speech. Clearly, neither Clint nor Erica had thought this out very clearly.

"This is beyond me," Erica stated.

"It's beyond me, too," Brennan assured her. "And that's when I go to an expert." He reached into the inner pocket of his sport jacket. "I asked the lawyer I use for my business if he knew any family law attorneys. For what it's worth, he gave me this list." Brennan set on the table the list he'd written down while on the phone with his lawyer last Thursday.

"You folks get served yet?" A woman with a white apron over black pants appeared at the table.

While Clint and Erica peered at the list Brennan had set down, he turned to the waitress. "Could you please give us a few minutes?"

"Sure thing."

While the waitress hurried off to another table, Clint put a forefinger on Brennan's list and looked up at him. "You're right. We could use some professional assistance here. I hadn't even thought about Dad's pension."

Erica leaned back in the upholstery with an expelled breath. "Neither had I. But we obviously should."

"I can help with the lawyer's fee," Brennan offered.

"No, no," Clint quickly said.

"We can handle it," Erica claimed.

Brennan bit his tongue. He was quite sure Clint's finances were currently in a tangle due to his separation. Erica probably didn't have a lot of disposable income given her occupation. But they said they could handle it. For now, he was going to have to accept that. At least they knew he was willing to help.

"I'll make an appointment today," Clint declared. "In fact, let me call the first guy on the list right now."

Brennan could see Erica regarding her brother with some concern as he dug a cell phone out of the pocket of his leather jacket. Brennan wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was: how was Clint going to house a teenager in his present circumstances, with a crazy ex and associated financial problems?

"I think I should be at this meeting, too," Erica told Clint as he turned on his phone. "The more ears to hear, the better, right?"

"Absolutely." Clint paused before punching in the number and looked toward Brennan. "Can I pick a time that would be convenient for you, too, Bren? I wouldn't mind your ears taking this in as well."

It was exactly what he'd wanted, but Brennan hesitated. He glanced toward Erica.

She looked back at him. A few days ago, her expression would have shown resentment and resistance. Today, she appeared almost eager for Brennan to insert himself into her family situation.

She looked like she was very close to trusting him.

The gratification that gave him was not a good thing. He didn't want her trust. He didn't want the charge he was now getting from meeting her eyes.

If she knew his past history, she wouldn't look at him with anything close to trust or the hint of attraction she'd earlier revealed.

But for right now, she didn't know the truth. For Liam's sake, Brennan was not about to tell her. He didn't want her having any evidence to muck things up if he eventually applied to be Liam's guardian himself.

Brennan turned back to Clint. What he wanted was the exact role Clint was offering him: part of the process, trusted confidante.

"Pick a time between eleven and one, and I can make it," Brennan said.

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"I'm sorry. I still can't tell you when I'll be home. But you'll get my check for the rent." Erica's call to her roommate was the last on her rather lengthy list.

"Aren't your clients getting antsy?" Cheryl asked. "I mean I understand your dad just died, but people don't cut a lot of slack for that these days."

Cheryl was always the voice of good cheer and optimism, Erica thought sarcastically. Maybe her emotions were still open and raw, for Erica had a sudden

revelation regarding her rather distant relationship with her roommate. Maybe it wasn't all Erica's fault. Cheryl was hardly a supportive character.

"My clients aren't happy," Erica admitted. "But so far, they seem to understand." In fact, most of them had been completely sympathetic. Unfortunately, the two or three who'd been impatient were also her biggest clients with the most hours per month. She'd probably have lost them to another trainer by the time she got home.

More of those savings down the drain. But what could she do? She couldn't make plans until they spoke to the lawyer tomorrow and got the scoop about what needed to be done regarding Liam. Until then, she had no idea whether or not she'd have to be involved.

After saying goodbye to Cheryl, Erica leaned back in the chair in her bedroom. She dropped her head backward and closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the nice new wallpaper her father had hung in her old room, the distinctly feminine wallpaper with the roses and leaves. Why had he put it up? Meanwhile, the aspirin she'd taken for the headache that had started when she'd first begun calling all her clients a few hours ago didn't appear to be having any effect.

For the first time in her life, she was accountable for matters that went beyond her own life. With her father's death, she was now at least partially responsible for her underage brother. Clint would become guardian, true, but that wasn't official yet nor did it let her off the hook entirely. Besides, there were the current problems in Clint's life. Could he solve those in a week—or even a month? From what Erica could gather, his ex was both determined and vengeful.

Meanwhile, Clint clearly lacked backbone. If he was serious about splitting with Judy, he should file for divorce. At the very least, he should apply for a restraining order.

Her head pounded harder. Then her stomach growled. Dinner. She had to do something about dinner.

Groaning, she got up from her chair, a nice, new comfortable chair that had, for no rational reason, been installed in this room that nobody used. She opened her closed door and made her way down the hall to Liam's open bedroom door.

Before knocking on the jamb, she made a conscious effort to put the problem of his custodianship out of her mind. She didn't want her youngest brother worrying about what was going to happen or thinking nobody wanted him.

He was at his computer watching a video with his earbuds in. Even so, he sensed she was behind him before she knocked and turned with a questioning expression. "What's up?" He pulled out his earbuds.

"Dinner. What would you like to do about it?" God, she wouldn't be much better than Clint for a guardian if it came to that. Various fast food chains were the options she had in mind rather than a well-balanced, homemade meal.

Liam slapped a palm on his forehead. "I'm such a doofus. I forgot to tell you." He lowered his hand and gave her a worried look. "Brennan invited us over. He figured we wouldn't feel like cooking. Is that okay?"

At the mention of Brennan, an undeniable hit of excitement kicked inside Erica. She'd felt the same thing yesterday when she'd first seen him walking toward her at the restaurant. He was tall and moved with quiet confidence. But it was something underneath the surface that really got to her, an emotional steadiness she envied.

"Brennan cooks?" Erica asked, impressed.

Liam grinned. "Pretty well, actually. So, is it okay if we go?"

Erica quirked one side of her mouth. "I assume you already told him we were."

He lowered his eyes, but his mouth was still smiling.

Erica laughed. "Of course we're going. You think I'm turning down a free, gourmet meal?"

Liam's relief was obvious when he looked up again.

Erica congratulated herself on making her assent to the outing look like she had no personal interest in going over to Brennan's house. Meanwhile, she noted how good it felt to see Liam smiling.

"He said six-thirty-ish," Liam said.

Erica managed to restrain herself from changing clothes or putting on date makeup before the six-thirty appointment. For one thing, Liam would have noticed, and for another, Erica was determined to keep some reins on this fascination of hers.

Easier said than done when, a minute before six-thirty, they stood on Brennan's wide front porch, and he opened the door. His mere presence, tall and understated in a button-down shirt and chinos, made her heart speed and her face feel warm.

Maybe when she'd been thirteen she'd felt as excited and awkward around a male. Normally, she didn't get particularly anxious about the impression she was making on a man. She didn't recall awkwardness with the handful of boyfriends she'd had over the years. But then, none of those men had owned Brennan's confident presence. None of them had seemed like a boulder. Something the ocean could hit, and it wouldn't give an inch. In other words, none of them had been quite this attractive.

"Liam." Brennan smiled and gave Erica's brother a hug. He then reached out and touched her hand. Just a touch, that was all, not even a clasp.

It was the perfect gesture. An acknowledgment, subtly warm, but not assuming too much.

"Erica," Brennan said.

"Thank you so much for having us over."

"My pleasure. Please come in."

He'd said that the first time she'd entered his house, Erica remembered. And though she didn't feel as out of place today as she had then, she did receive a second hit of inadequacy as she walked into the high-ceilinged, quietly elegant room. Clint had told her Brennan owned two sports equipment stores. Apparently, they were both quite successful.

Another quality to envy. No matter how hard Erica worked—once she'd had three jobs while taking night classes—she never seemed to get ahead financially.

"Smells great," Liam declared once Brennan had closed the door behind them. "I hope that's your famous lasagna."

"It is." Brennan gestured toward the kitchen. "And you can melt the butter for the garlic bread now you're here."

Liam headed straight for the kitchen Erica could see laid out beyond an open arrangement of countertops.

"With that great sourdough bread from Biscotti bakery?" Liam asked.

"I know. I spoil you."

Liam laughed. It was a much easier and less awkward laugh than the one he'd earlier given Erica.



Smiling, and praying it looked like a normal smile and not the smile of a complete idiot, Erica turned to Brennan. "I hope you saved a job for me, too."

"Several, actually." Brennan gestured toward the kitchen and started walking in that direction. "Would you prefer making a salad dressing or setting the table? I got home from work later than I'd planned, so we're not quite ready to eat yet."

"Better put me on table-setting duty. I'm something of a disaster when it comes to cooking."

In the kitchen now, he turned to regard her with one raised eyebrow. "No patience, then."

She felt surprised. "None at all."

He nodded. "You have too much energy to be willing to simply stand there stirring while a sauce thickens, for example."

He was right on target. Though Erica didn't give herself quite so easy a pass. "I always thought I just didn't try hard enough."

He wore a half smile as he pointed to a lower cabinet. "Plates are in there. Glasses up here." He indicated the cabinet above. "And silverware in here." He opened the drawer in between the two.

Organized, Erica noted. And he'd pegged her well with the stirring sauce comment.

"I forgot your trick for getting the peel off the garlic," Liam said, separating a clove from the bulb.

"I'll show you again."

Erica kept half an eye on the two of them as Brennan explained some secret regarding garlic while she pulled out three plates from the lower cabinet. Brennan used an easy, warm authority with her brother. Liam responded happily and with a corresponding ease. Not the almost-anxious way he acted with her.

Or that she acted with Liam, truth to tell. Erica was always a little afraid that new people she met weren't going to like her, and, frankly, Liam fit into that category.

So did Brennan, she admitted to herself as she set plates on the table that stood just off the kitchen. She experienced tremendous fear he didn't like her—while actually wishing he did. It was all horribly embarrassing, but fortunately, none of her insecurities mattered.

Clint was going to figure things out, Liam's future would be settled, and she'd be going back to Los Angeles. She might visit once in a while, but she wouldn't be living here.

In fact, she might never see Brennan again.

She halted as the thought struck her with a surprisingly painful jolt.

Surreptitiously, Erica cleared her throat. "Napkins?"

"Ah, let's use the linen ones." Brennan stepped back from Liam and his garlic.

"Where did I put them?"

Liam turned to shoot her a wink. "He never uses the linen ones when it's just me or Dad coming over."

Brennan coughed, and Erica could swear his face went a little pink. "Hall closet. I'll go fetch them." But his eyes met hers for a split-second before he headed down the hallway that was to one side of the kitchen.

The moment of contact between her eyes and his hit Erica hard. She had to pause a second, amazed by the message she received.

If she thought he was attractive, he thought the same thing about her.

Her heart pounded and blood rushed to her head. She was glad he turned away then to go down the hall to fetch those special linen napkins.

She struggled to get the warmth out of her face while she went to the silverware drawer. *He thought she was attractive.* Okay, okay, but so what? Even if she was right, being attracted did not equal wanting to make anything out of it. It didn't mean he was going to become her boyfriend or anything. Besides, she was returning to her life in Los Angeles very soon. Erica briefly closed her eyes.

She'd probably never see him again.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"I don't see any big problem here." Grover Hamilton was an older man, balding, and with a protruding belly, evidently sedentary. The lawyer Clint had called from Brennan's list had a confident and reassuring manner, something reflected in his carpeted office with the old-fashioned curtains and the many plaques of recognition on the wall.

"The minor has family who want to take him in. The family member who wants him is even mentioned in the deceased parent's will. All pretty straightforward."

The lawyer's knowledgeable manner had both Clint and Erica relaxing, Brennan saw. Clint's raised shoulders lowered, and Erica's whole body seemed to soften. When she let go like that, Brennan could see how tensed she usually walked around.

For his part, Brennan was used to slick salesmen who employed a warm bedside manner to convince a customer he was in good hands. What impressed him about the attorney were the references Brennan had called, all of whom had recommended Hamilton as a professional who knew his business and got good results.

So Brennan could stay in the background here, just as he'd planned. He was determined to maintain as small a part as he could get away with and still see Liam settled.

In particular, he wanted to keep his distance from Erica. It had been difficult having her over with Liam for dinner last night. The situation had felt both fraught and...right. Fraught with way too much physical desire. The rightness had no doubt been delusional. But he'd enjoyed coaxing her to relax a little. Seeing her able to do so had made him feel strong and powerful. He'd felt the wish to continue exercising such power, to warm her up until she softened even more. Until she was so soft and warm she could warm him, too.

Which led straight back to what was wrong with this picture. The sexual element. He could not afford to entertain such feelings toward Erica. The way she made him feel, the power behind the sensation—it went way beyond the comfortable relationships he'd engaged in over the past nine years of his recovery. It was dangerous.

In the chair behind his desk, Grover Hamilton spread his arms. "You're in California. You don't even have to apply for a formal guardianship if you don't want to."

Brennan saw Clint and Erica relax even more. But they hadn't asked the hard questions. He was going to have to interject, after all.

"What about Richard's pension?" To one side of Clint, Brennan leaned slightly forward in his chair. "My understanding is it's supposed to be paid out to his remaining minor child. Doesn't someone have to take over that income, manage it?"

"Oh, there's money involved?" Hamilton raised his eyebrows. "That's different, then."

Clint and Erica exchanged glances.

Clint straightened in his seat. "How so?"

"When a minor has any significant money to be handled, a conservator will have to be appointed by the court. In that case, the court will also want to appoint a legal guardian."

"What does that mean, 'the court'?" Erica asked.

"A judge. There will be a hearing. Let me back up a step. You'll fill out an application, something you can get at the courthouse. You can fill it out yourself, but I

can help as it's rather lengthy. Notice must be given to the minor himself, since your brother is over twelve, and to any other close relatives. There will probably be a home visit, someone who'll interview the applicant and check out the situation. A review of the minor's health and school records. The investigator's report and recommendation will go to the judge who'll conduct the hearing."

"A home visit," Clint muttered.

Brennan knew he was thinking about Judy. Though she'd left the apartment—and the responsibility for the rent—to Clint, it wasn't as though she'd really *left*. And if she got word an investigator was coming to inspect Clint, she'd be sure to make trouble.

Erica threw Clint a worried glance and then turned to the attorney. "But it's all just a formality, right? I mean, our father named Clint in his will to be Liam's guardian."

Hamilton's smile was less reassuring now. "Nothing is a shoo-in when it comes to family court. The judge will do what he deems in the best interest of the child." Looking between Clint and Erica, the attorney cocked his head. "Something you want to tell me?"

After a brief hesitation, Clint spread his hands. "Uh, my situation is in a state of transition right now. I've separated from my wife, and she's being...difficult."

Hamilton leaned forward over his desk. He drew a pen and a piece of paper in front of himself. "Difficult—how?"

"Stalking me. Creating scenes."

Hamilton made a note on his paper. "I see. And is this affecting you financially?"

Clint shifted weight in his chair. "The bank accounts are all in her name. At the time— Anyway, right. I can't say my finances are very good at the moment."

Hamilton made some more notes. His voice was neutral. "I see."

Brennan briefly closed his eyes. He'd suspected Clint's situation might be a problem, but he'd wanted to hear an expert confirm it before taking action. He cleared his throat, prepared to speak.

"What about a backup person?" It was Erica's voice.

Brennan opened his eyes to see her sitting very straight in her chair, eyeing the attorney intently. "Could we put me down as a backup? I mean, we don't want to let Liam down here."

Hamilton regarded her from over his piece of paper. "A 'backup person'." He straightened and let out a long breath. "You two are going to have to decide who's taking the responsibility. Now, the same person doesn't have to act as conservator who acts as guardian, but regarding the latter— One thing the court is going to want to see is commitment."

Erica visibly swallowed, but her voice remained even. "I see. Uh, then who's going to look like a more reasonable choice? Between me and Clint?"

Brennan regarded her in surprise. Was she thinking of taking this on? With the level of commitment Hamilton was talking about?

Hamilton picked up his pen again and resumed taking notes. "Are you married? Getting divorced?"

"Neither."

"What about finances?"

"I'm not rich, but I'm okay."

Looking up, Hamilton set down his pen and folded his hands. "Between you and Clint—what do *you* think?"

Swallowing again, Erica hesitated but then nodded. "Okay, I get it. Me."

Brennan sat transfixed. Hell, she wasn't standoffish or irresponsible at all. His first impression of Erica had obviously been distorted. Perhaps what he'd actually been feeling on the night they'd first met had been dislike for himself. He'd been seeing himself the way he'd supposed she would—if she knew his real story and how, exactly, he'd met her father.

Thinking about his past made Brennan swallow, too.

After thanking the attorney for his time, the three of them walked out of his office.

When they were out on the sidewalk, Clint stopped and turned to the others. His face was tight. "I want to do this."

"I know." Erica put a hand on his arm. "And I think you will, eventually. But for right now, we have to consider another option."

"You didn't sign up for it," Clint told her.

"He's my brother, too."

Clint looked down and shook his head. "I'm such a mess."

Erica opened and closed her mouth, apparently at a loss.

"You'll get through this," Brennan put in. "It's a temporary situation."

Anger rose into Clint's expression. "Is it? I always seem to be getting into messes, so it doesn't much matter if they're temporary or not."

"Look." Erica tightened her hold on his arm. "Nothing's on fire yet. Why don't we take a couple days, think this through? Then we'll make a decision and fill out the application."

Clint broke from her hold. "Nothing's going to change in a couple days." With an angry hiss, he whirled and stalked off.

He left Brennan alone on the sidewalk with Erica.

"Wow." Erica regarded Clint as he stalked away under the row of eucalyptus trees shading the sidewalk. "This Judy has really done a number on him, hasn't she?"

"I can't say I'm a big fan of hers." Brennan, also, looked toward the departing Clint. It was easier than looking at Erica. "But he will get past it." If Brennan, with his additional handicap, had been able to get through the long and painful breakup of his relationship with Lois, then Clint would survive, too.

Erica sighed.

*Leave.* It was a bad idea for Brennan to stay here alone with this woman, especially since she so obviously wanted someone to talk to. He was the wrong man for that role.

But he didn't move.

Erica slid her hand along her purse strap. "Who knows? Maybe I'd actually be a worse guardian than Clint. Last night— I felt so clumsy with Liam." She glanced quickly at Brennan and away. "It seems easy for you, though."

"We've spent more time together." As soon as the words were out of Brennan's mouth, he wished he could take them back. He hadn't meant to sound like he was blaming her for her long absence. Frantically, he tried to retrench. "But mostly, we're both guys. Makes for automatic understanding."

With a short laugh, Erica kept her gaze averted. "I don't know. I feel like I'll never be completely comfortable with Liam. His view of my father and mine are so different."

Brennan swallowed. Compassion mixed with guilt. Probably not a healthy combination. "You'll make it." He cleared his throat of hoarseness. "Just like I told Clint. So will you."

She turned to look at him. In her eyes was a cautious hope.

The expression in her face made his chest hurt.

Whispering, she said, "I feel so mixed up. About my dad, I mean."

The pain in Brennan's chest expanded, stirred generously with the previous guilt. He was the exact wrong person for her to confide in. But he couldn't leave her hanging with her last thought. "Every day is going to be a little bit better." Hadn't that been true of his own recovery? Every day was still a challenge, but the sharp edge had definitely dulled.

She appeared to consider this advice, and then a small smile curved her lips.

"Promise?" Still smiling, she touched his arm exactly as she'd touched Clint's.

Brennan doubted he felt it the same way Clint had. An arrow of desire shafted through him. He wanted to step forward and take her in his arms.

He didn't do that, of course. Of all men, he had the worst credentials for comforting her over the effects of her father's alcoholism.

But neither did he move away. In fact, he put his hand over hers on his arm.

The electricity arcing between them magnified.

Going against everything he knew was healthy and right, Brennan smiled back at her. "I promise," he said.

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Alexander Carmichael

Typing this name into the Google search box was a ritual Erica acted out every six months or so. Today she was doing so in the inexplicably feminine bedroom that she was still using in her father's house. She'd waited until Liam had gone to school to perform her rite since, in a way, her search regarded him, too. She wanted to know if she was, in fact, the only viable option to act as Liam's guardian. Also, the lawyer had said they needed to notify all close relatives about the application for Liam's guardianship. Erica had immediately thought of her older brother. The one-time chief of their little band, the strong one who'd even stand up to Dad.

Alex had disappeared shortly before graduating high school. Apparently, he hadn't been able to endure his life at home long enough to get that diploma. His departure had shocked Erica. For one thing, she'd wondered why she herself had not considered simply leaving. For another, she could not understand how *Alex* could have contemplated such an option, let alone acted on it.

He'd been the leader. They'd all depended on him.

But he had left, without a word, without a note, without a scrap of evidence to show where he might have gone. Since then, he'd never contacted any of them.

Maybe he was dead.

The thought gave Erica a hard thump, causing her to pause as she scrolled past the usual suspects Google had brought her, avenues she'd long ago tried and found led to dead ends. Taking in a deep breath, she moved to the next page in her search engine. She'd rather Alex had turned into a cold, unfeeling monster than be dead. Besides, she had always felt there was something more to his disappearance than simply getting fed

up. Something deeper and possibly extreme. Whatever it was could be the reason he still felt he shouldn't—or couldn't—get in touch with any of them.

By the eighteenth page, Erica was coming up with websites that bore no relation to the name she'd typed in. She hadn't really expected a different result from the usual. Anyway, even if she found Alex, he wasn't going to sweep in and fix all their problems the way he used to when they were kids. He didn't have a high school diploma—he was probably in worse shape than Clint.

Erica rubbed her forehead. It was clear *she* was going to be the one taking this on. At least temporarily. But how? She lived in Los Angeles. She had a business there. It wasn't a large business, true, but she'd spent ten years working up to what she had now. She'd started by bussing tables, moved to working in gyms—and had taken classes in physical fitness and training at night. She certainly didn't want to abandon all that.

But would it be a good idea to uproot Liam and bring him home with her? With a sigh, she lowered her hand from her forehead and ran her fingers over the keyboard of her laptop. She found herself almost idly changing the words in the search box.

Diehard Sports Equipment

Her heart beat a little faster as she pressed the send key. It would feel too weird and obsessed to Google Brennan himself, but looking up his store was allowable curiosity.

The website was impressive. Visually striking while easy to navigate. Right away, she found several items she coveted.

Of course, she was saving money now. She was always saving, hoping to start her own gym. With a place of her own, she could implement the system she'd worked out in her head for how best to address the varied needs of her customers. It wouldn't simply be a way to make a living—it would be a way to help people, a lot of people. With a gym and a staff, she could get her customers feeling fit and healthy, energized and physically improved.

Thinking about her gym while looking at Brennan's website probably hadn't been a good idea. She was now connecting all her happy gym thoughts with infatuated Brennan thoughts.

She couldn't help remembering that moment in his house at dinner when their eyes had met. She recalled the moment often, frankly, the moment when she'd seen his attraction to her. Every time, she felt a little jolt go through her chest.

Erica closed her eyes and leaned away from her laptop.

She wasn't getting her own gym. And even if Brennan were attracted to her, that didn't mean he wanted to start a relationship. For that matter, did she? She didn't even know where she was going to be living next week.

Palmwood or Los Angeles?

Hissing out a breath, Erica opened her eyes. She was back to where she'd started, wondering if it would be a good idea to uproot Liam. He'd have to change schools, drop that college class he was taking. And would her father's pension cover rent for their own apartment? What a mess.

The alternative was to give up her business in LA—but who knew? She might actually do better, physical-training-wise, if she moved to Palmwood.

Erica froze, suddenly struck by the idea. Could it possibly help her, financially, to move?

As she'd noted, her father's house was paid for, no mortgage or rent. And if she wanted to rent space for her business, it was cheaper here than in Los Angeles. Holy—Starting her own gym could happen sooner if she moved here!

Erica tried to put some brakes on her quickly growing excitement. There was a fly in the ointment, a rather big one. She didn't have a single customer in Palmwood, let alone enough customers to support a gym.

Her gaze flicked toward the computer screen where the Diehard website still glowed. Her lips curved into an amused smile. Fortunately, she had an excellent connection in the area, someone with a ton of data about the local exercise market, a person who'd have a good idea if Palmwood was a viable location for a physical trainer.

She angled back toward her computer and scrolled down the web page. There were two addresses listed for Brennan's stores. One of them was only a mile away. She could go ask him about it right now.

Once again, infatuated Brennan thoughts merged with gym ownership aspirations. Simply looking at the store address made Erica's heart speed.

Would Brennan himself be at the closer store? Maybe she should call first.

No. Calling would make her lose her courage or perhaps regain her common sense. It was a one-mile drive.

She should just go.

CHAPTER FIVE

Winter wear should be further from the ski equipment, Brennan thought, frowning at the layout on the second floor of his Mission Avenue store. If a person realized they needed a new pair of skis for that trip to Mammoth, they didn't need help realizing they also needed a new coat. Meanwhile, the walk between the two departments would give a customer the chance to take a look at the sports shoes, something they might not normally have noticed.

"Ah, there he is." It was the voice of Brennan's downstairs clerk, Sonya. "Told you I could find him."

Brennan turned. Sonya was bearing down on him, a formidable black woman with a perpetually sunny attitude. Behind her trailed Erica.

Brennan felt a big knock on his ribs. Erica was wearing crisp jeans and a sweater that hugged her discreet curves. His inner temperature grew.

"Hi." Smiling nervously, she made a fan-style hand wave.

"Ah." Only long-ingrained manners had Brennan producing a smile. He felt utterly off balance. Once again, she threw him. The shy smile, the subtly nervous body language: it all acted like a siren call. Power. You are so powerful, her body language seemed to say. He'd had no idea he was susceptible to this particular, if unconscious, form of flattery.

"This is a surprise." *A nice one. Say it's a nice one.* "A nice one," he hastily added.

"I gotta go back to my department," Sonya declared heartily. She was a model employee, adored her job. So without any apparent concern over what trouble she might have promoted here, she turned and strode back toward the wide stairs in the middle of the store in order to descend toward the camping equipment.

Erica dipped her chin. "You're busy. I should have called."

Was he showing his ambivalence that baldly? Shame prompted Brennan to contradict her assessment. "Not at all. I'm glad you came." It wasn't a complete lie. His stupid half was glad, thrilled in fact, that she'd sought him out—and particularly that she'd done so at his store.

His smarter, more moral half was horrified, however. He'd vowed to keep his distance from her—especially after the ill-advised reassurance he'd given her after the interview with Grover Hamilton.

But here she was, and he'd just invited her to stay. Making matter worse, she'd brought her cloud with her, the cloud of emotion that tended to catch him in its fog.

"This place...is amazing." Erica glanced toward the winter shoe display. "You have everything a person could want to have fun—and the way it's all laid out, like an adventure— Makes it look even more enticing."

Her words made the fog even thicker. Trying to avoid getting stuck in it, Brennan glanced in the direction Erica had looked. He saw the artificial ski slope arranged artfully with various brands of snow shoes and skis. She was right; it did look like an adventure.

He tilted his head. "I try to make things appear exciting. I happen to enjoy sports myself, so that makes it easier, I guess." He'd never thought about how his store might look to a true enthusiast. Usually, he concentrated on attracting the undecided. Heck, to an active athlete, the place probably looked like Christmas all year long.

He turned, and their eyes met.

He could immediately tell she was seeing Christmas...in *his* store.

God, that was a turn-on.

He cleared his throat. "So, what can I do for you?"

Erica crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself in a nervous gesture.

"Maybe it's silly. I just thought you might be the right person to bounce some ideas off of. But I can see you're busy..."

"Not at all." *Idiot. You should have told her you're busy. Frantic with busy-ness.*

Feeling a bit warm in the face, Brennan gestured over the store. "I was just doing my walk-through. I try to see things through a customer's eyes. Look for anything that might be off or could use improvement." *Don't say it. Don't say it.* Brennan added, "Why don't you walk along with me?"

He was acting worse than an idiot now. Inviting her companionship. But it was too late to backtrack.

"Sounds good." Erica's arms relaxed a little. "I think it'll be easier to muddle my way through this conversation if we're moving anyway."

"I was on my way downstairs," Brennan claimed and indicated they should walk in that direction. It was a lie, but there were more people downstairs. He wouldn't feel so alone with her. "Shall we?"

Erica took a position to his side as he moved toward the wide stairs in the center of the store.

"This is the thing," she began as they started down the stairs. "I've come to the conclusion I'm going to be the one applying for Liam's guardianship."

Brennan had suspected she would reach this point. He wasn't sure if he were glad or disappointed. A part of him had been ready to take in Liam himself. On the other hand, it was obviously best for Erica and Liam to establish a closer relationship with each other. On the *other* hand... "Are you ready for that?"

At the base of the stairs, Erica spread her hands. "Emotionally? Yes. On some level, I probably starting working up to the idea as soon as I heard my father was dying. But practically speaking, I have no idea how to work it out."

Nodding, Brennan guided her toward the tennis equipment. He felt an upwelling of liking for her. She wanted to be there for her younger brother, to do the right thing and be connected. His desire to sweep in and do it for her surged as well.

His instinct for self-preservation blocked any attempt he might have made to play such a hero. He couldn't rescue her. She had to rescue herself. Thanks to his support group, Brennan had figured out this lesson nine years ago.

But he couldn't leave her high and dry, either. She'd come here wanting a listening ear. He could provide that. That was a normal sort of help.

"Maybe you could go through the issues," Brennan suggested as they reached the rackets and tennis balls. The shelves looked orderly, nothing sticking out at an odd angle or obviously in the wrong place. But mostly he was aware of Erica standing right next to him. "Sometimes it helps to lay it out before another set of ears. You suddenly hear something you hadn't thought of before."

"That's exactly what I was thinking." She brightened. "Are you sure I'm not bothering you? You have time?"

Brennan continued strolling, aware of her keeping stride with him, a feminine package of controlled energy. It would take a crane to pry him away from her now. "I have time."

Erica pursed her lips as they approached the golf clubs. "The easiest thing for me would be to take Liam to Los Angeles. Hopefully, my dad's pension money would be enough that we could afford our own apartment."

Brennan regarded a nine iron while dread weighed him down. It was a logical course of action, one in which he could find no concrete fault. True, it would mean uprooting Liam, but that happened to kids all the time. They survived.

It would be sad, personally, for Brennan, though. Once Liam moved to LA, they'd have little interaction with each other. Brennan doubted Liam would have the time or take the effort to keep in touch with a one-time neighbor.

On the other hand, Brennan would also never see Erica again. That would certainly be for the best.

Erica stopped by an Old Town 15-foot canoe. "It might be easier for me to move Liam to LA, but I don't know if it would be better. And, truthfully, I can't say I'm all that attached to my life there." She grimaced. "Except for my clients. I do have clients. So my question is..." She glanced quickly toward Brennan and then back toward the canoe. "My question is if I could just as easily find clients here in Palmwood. That's why I came to talk to you. I figured if anyone might know, it'd be you, considering the business you're in." She gestured around herself.

When she looked at him again, her face was a light pink in color. Perhaps her reason for seeking him out, though logical, wasn't the whole truth.

Brennan wondered if she was thinking, as he immediately did, that if she stayed in Palmwood it would mean she'd be living right next door to him.

He carefully cleared his throat while feeling a little hot beneath his clothes. "It's a good question. My quick answer is yes. Definitely there's a community of health-and-fitness minded people in the area. I expect a generous percent of them would be interested in hiring a personal trainer. However—" He had to be honest. "I don't know what kind of competition you might already have in that department."

Nodding, she looked down. "True. I'm probably not the only person who's thought of offering physical training services." After a horrible moment in which Brennan wished he could pave the rocky roads of the world for her, she looked up again with an impish smile. "But I am probably one of the best."

Brennan laughed. Maybe she didn't need rescuing, after all. To his surprise, her confidence actually increased the pull she exerted on him.

Her smile twisted to one side. "However, getting people to know and believe that isn't easy."

"You're right." Brennan resumed their walk, heading further into the camping equipment. A Mountsmith Morrison tent, fully assembled, loomed on their right. "But any business has to start somewhere. And no matter what you do—including stay in Los Angeles—there are always risks."

Was he being sincere or was he trying to talk her into staying? And what did he hope to gain if he did? They were never getting together romantically.

Erica kept pace beside him as they rounded the tent. "You are so right about risk even in LA. I got the flu one year, was out for a month, and lost every single client I had."

"Ungrateful wretches," Brennan declared. When he looked at her, they both laughed.

"A few of them came crawling back," Erica admitted. "I *am* very good at what I do."

He definitely liked her confidence. Meanwhile, they were fully behind the tent now. For all intents and purposes, they were private and alone.

He must have led her here on purpose, Brennan realized, as they stopped and looked at each other. The energy of their brief laughter abruptly transformed into something deeper and more intense.

Perhaps Erica didn't always walk around in a cloud of sticky emotion, Brennan acknowledged. Perhaps sometimes, maybe even often, she appeared the way she did now, like a small but vibrant goddess, energetic, powerful...desirable.

Her eyes were large and luminous. Her mouth looked exceptionally soft and inviting.

Don't even think it, Brennan told himself. Don't think about what other things she might be good at besides her profession—which happened to be a very physical one.

"Then I think it's reasonable to consider taking the risk." Brennan's voice came out very deep. "It may take a little while to gain traction, but in the end you could come out ahead."

"That's what I'm figuring." She bit her lower lip, thus drawing Brennan's attention to her mouth. "It's kind of scary, but kind of exciting, too."

His heart was beating very fast as she took a step closer. Scary and exciting summed it up well.

"Thank you." She smiled tremulously. "It did help to talk it out, just like you said."

She was close enough for him to touch. He could barely breathe, he wanted so badly to touch her.

"Glad I could help out." Brennan's voice was so low now it practically dragged against the ground.

Erica's smile steadied and then disappeared. Her eyes managed to get even bigger.

I am not going to kiss her. I am not. But Brennan found himself stepping toward her. Her eyes followed him as he came close enough to set an arm around her shoulders.

Don't do it. Don't do it. He might have managed to restrain himself, too, if her mouth hadn't trembled. Just a tiny bit, her lips shook, as if she were unsure.

That undid him. He lowered his head, and she raised her chin. Their mouths met.

Brennan closed his eyes. That felt so good it was almost painful. She had a softness overlaying some real strength underneath. And her taste was—

Intense. The whole experience was scary intense. He didn't remember when, if ever, he'd experienced a kiss quite like this. Intoxicating...

At this thought, Brennan opened his eyes. He pulled back from their embrace. He did not want to be intoxicated, even if only by a kiss.

If she noticed his abruptness, she didn't show it. She opened her own eyes slowly, a dreamy smile on her face. "I had a feeling that would be nice." A small laugh escaped her. "I was right."

Brennan's heart was still beating very fast, but now it was from fear rather than desire. He had to disentangle himself. He did not want to be intoxicated, not in any way, shape, or form. "I—I have to get back to work."

The dreamy expression on her face vanished. A neutral mask took its place.

Damn. Had he sounded like he was brushing her off? He hadn't meant to hurt her even if he did need to get away from her. Immediately.

"Dinner," he heard himself say. "Are you free for dinner tonight?"

She stilled.

"Just the two of us," Brennan made clear. It was high time they got a few matters straight.

"Oh." Her stillness wore off to reveal a smile. A big one. "What time?"

CHAPTER SIX

"I can't find my phone. Where did I put my phone?"

Liam heard his sister's panicked voice from his position sitting on the sofa in the living room. He glanced away from the TV and over his shoulder.

Erica was rushing down the stairs. She wore a clinging red flowered dress and high heels. She was also wearing makeup and a frantic expression.

She was totally dressed up, which made his heart commence a happy beat. But he turned back to his TV program as if that was what he cared about. In fact, he'd turned the set to a random channel just so he'd have the excuse to be down here where he could monitor the situation.

"Did you try calling it?"

"Of course. But I must've turned off the ringer."

"How about your purse?" Liam didn't look away from the TV during this discussion. He didn't want to appear at all interested in this date she was going on although, in fact, he was deeply enthusiastic.

Brennan and Erica getting together. If this worked out, it would be *awesome*. They could be like a real family—like it had felt last night during the lasagna dinner at Brennan's house. If they got together, Liam wouldn't have to leave Brennan or Clint or Palmwood to go live with Erica in Los Angeles. Because, of course, Erica would stay here where Brennan had his stores.

If the two of them got together, it would dull a little bit how sad he still was and missing his dad.

"Of course my phone is not in my purse." Erica stood at the bottom of the stairs and gazed about with a crease between her brows. "If it were in my purse, then it wouldn't be lost."

"Desk. Bed. Under the bed." Liam ticked off the places his own phone would end up hiding. He tore his gaze away from the set long enough to look at her and deadpan, "Toilet seat."

She laughed and wrinkled her nose at him. "I already looked in all those places. Including behind the toilet." She strode over to the little table along the wall next to the stairs. It was obvious her phone wasn't there, but she picked up and set down a glass bowl sitting on the table. "Where could it be?"

Scratching his chin, Liam decided against pointing out that Brennan would have a phone. Not only that, but Brennan's cell number was on Liam's speed dial, so it wouldn't be the end of the world if Erica went out on a date without her cell phone. Over the past few days, Liam had gathered she wasn't used to relying on other people. Perhaps this habit was due to the way she'd been raised, by that father who didn't seem like the same one he'd had.

Liam squirmed in his seat on the sofa. That was a bug in the ointment all right, Erica's attitude toward Dad. If she was so set against Dad, how was she going to view Brennan and Brennan's own history? "I'll help you look." Liam hopped up from the sofa. Finding Erica's cell phone would be easier than sitting here wondering how Brennan was going to skate past that problem. "Have you tried the kitchen?"

"No. You look there; I'll check the downstairs powder room."

The kitchen was a big place that had got a bit messier since Erica had moved in. Liam was relieved when he heard her call from the living room.

"Found it!"

Liam returned to find Erica happily tapping at her phone.

Smiling, she held it up. "It was in the powder room. I have no idea how it ended up there." Lowering the phone again, she shook her head. "Guess I'm a little nervous."

Try a lot nervous, Liam thought.

"This is the thing, see." Erica stuffed the phone into the purse she had over one shoulder. "I don't remember being on a date where I felt like it mattered." With a sigh, she walked toward the mirror over the little table by the wall. Frowning into it, she ran a finger over her eyebrow and wiped away some invisible speck.

Liam bit his lower lip. Okay, now he was starting to feel downright scared. Erica was thinking of Brennan as 'someone who mattered.' What was she going to do when she found out he didn't exactly rise to her high standards?

If she wasn't able believe her own father could have changed, how was she going to believe it of Brennan?

Watching Erica turn away from the mirror and check something in her purse, Liam wished there were something he could say, some magical words to pave things for Brennan.

But of course, there was nothing.

The doorbell rang.

Smiling as she let out a breath, Erica turned to Liam. "All right, last chance. Do I look okay?"

Somehow, Liam smiled back at her. "You look great."

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*Nice set of wheels.* Erica was envious of the soft leather seats and smooth ride of Brennan's Toyota 4Runner. The only downside had been the difficulty of climbing into the high seat; her dress had hiked up rather high on her thigh.

The way Brennan's gaze had watched the proceedings had made the inconvenience worthwhile, however. Whatever this was, she was not alone in it.

"Where are we going?" Erica asked. Not that she would know what restaurants still existed in the area.

Looking forward as he drove, Brennan cleared his throat. "It's early still. I, uh, thought we might drive around a little first. Talk."

"Oh." This was weird. Why should they talk while driving around instead of while seated comfortably in a restaurant? Was he unsure he actually wanted to go out with her?

Erica concentrated on even breaths while her old insecurities bore down on her. She'd grown up constantly worried, constantly fearing it was some flaw in herself that made her father drink and get angry with her. As she got older, she'd come to understand this was not true, but the insecurity remained, the fear she somehow did not come up to snuff.

Now she wondered if she'd roped Brennan into this date. She'd ambushed him in his store. Perhaps he hadn't thought he had a choice but to ask her out. And that kiss—maybe she'd thrown herself at a reluctant man.

At least Brennan seemed to have a destination in mind. He took a right on Mountaintail Road and began going up the hill. But he didn't speak.

Confused, Erica gazed out at the increasingly mansionesque houses as the big SUV continued its ascent. He'd said he wanted to talk, but he wasn't talking. All he was doing was driving up and up—as if he meant to go all the way to the top.

A happier thought managed to sneak past her crippling insecurity. Was he planning to neck? Carefully, she slid a peek at him as he drove. He wore an intent, concentrated expression. Determined, even.

A thrill slipped past her doubts. She'd never been kissed by a man who looked quite so determined to do so. Everything about him—his features, his confidence, his intensity—it was all so attractive.

Almost too attractive, in fact. How could this perfection be attracted to *her*?

Her heartbeat picked up speed and force as he continued driving upward, though she wasn't sure if she were more excited or frightened. Whatever her perceptions were, she was sure they were wrong.

Finally, he arrived at the stretch of empty road at the top, right before the closed gates of the state park. He pulled to a spot overlooking the valley below, shifted into park, and after a brief hesitation, turned off the motor.

Erica's heart was beating very fast as she gazed out at the view—a jewel box of colored lights twinkled across the dark bed of the valley. No doubt about it. This was a spot for necking.

The brief rise in her confidence loosened her hitherto paralyzed voice box. "It's beautiful."

Brennan released a long breath. "When I first moved here, I went looking for places that would be...inspiring."

An odd word to use for a come-on. Did he need inspiration beyond her presence? Or perhaps he was looking for encouragement.

More nervous than ever, she undid her seatbelt. No longer restrained, she turned to face him. God, he was handsome. Looking at him made her body feel soft, warm, and inviting.

He glanced briefly toward her, a muscle ticking in his jaw. But he didn't remove his hands from the steering wheel.

Okay, she was officially confused. Her body language couldn't be any clearer: she was open to a move.

Instead of taking her up on the implied invitation, he faced forward again. "It was a big step for me to move here four years ago." His voice was pitched low, serious. "I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay."

He was not interested in necking. That was clear. But what surprised Erica more than this realization was the way he was talking. *Not sure he'd be able to stay*—It sounded as though he'd been frightened and insecure. That didn't seem like Brennan.

Frowning, she asked, "Why wouldn't you have been able to stay?"

She'd thought he'd begged the question with his statement about needing inspiration, but Brennan didn't answer. He simply sat with his hands on the wheel, staring forward.

She was wondering what was going on when he finally spoke.

"Meeting your father was very important to me." Brennan pursed his lips as he continued gazing forward. "I give him credit for me being able to stay. It's because of him I was able to handle managing the branch for Livestrength."



O-kay. He definitely didn't intend to come on to Erica if he was going to bring up her father. So Brennan had brought her up here for some other reason, something not romantic. Disappointment and embarrassment warred for predominance and made her feel annoyed.

Meanwhile, she wondered how Brennan could be giving her father this kind of credit. For one thing, even if Richard Carmichael had truly changed into this amazing helper sort of person, why would *Brennan* have needed his assistance?

"I don't understand." Though she was still facing him in her seat, she no longer felt warm and inviting. The chill from the night outside was starting to invade the car.

Finally lowering his hands from the steering wheel, Brennan heaved a deep sigh. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me. Things I wouldn't normally dump on a woman on a first date. But..." He finally turned to look at her. His expression was resigned. "Our situations aren't equal. I know too much about you. You should know more about me."

The dread that had already started swirling around the car tightened into a knot in Erica's stomach. He wanted to tell her more about him, things he obviously thought she wasn't going to want to hear.

He was now gazing steadily at her.

She gazed back, feeling numb. She wanted to order him to stop, to leave everything the way it had been, with him being a great guy and her liking him. She wanted to hold onto the attraction and excitement of a promising first date.

But it was already too late.

She sucked in her lips. "What do you think I should know?"

He visibly swallowed. "How I met your father."

The knot of dread inside her grew. Brennan and her father had lived next door to each other. Wasn't that how they'd met? But apparently not. Apparently they'd met in some dreadful way that was going to ruin the promise with which Erica had climbed into this nice car of his and felt the happiness of sitting next to an attractive, successful man. Her voice came out scratchy. "How?"

His gaze was so steady now it bore into her. "We met at an AA meeting here in Palmwood."

He might as well have shot a bowling ball at her. All Erica could do was stare at him as his words echoed hollowly in her head. *AA. Alcoholics Anonymous.*

Letting out a breath, Brennan turned back to gaze out the windshield. "By the time I met your father, I'd been sober for five years. But that wasn't long enough for me to feel confident about moving away from my support group and starting over in a place that might not provide the right sort of friends." He smoothed a hand over the steering wheel. "It was kind of a condition I had in my mind that if the AA group in Palmwood didn't meet my needs, I wouldn't stay. Even if it meant giving up my promotion at Livestrength."

Alcoholics Anonymous. That's where Brennan had met Erica's father. Brennan was a drunk. Like her father. Oh, sober five years, ten years—what did it matter? Erica still remembered the fear, horror, and gut-wrenching disappointment of the night her father had ended his eighteen months of sobriety, the eighteen months during which Liam had been conceived and born. Her dad had woken her from sleep with the sound of glass

breaking against the stair wall and the roar of his voice demanding something unintelligible.

Oh, no, she'd thought, the fear like a vampire inside her, sucking away the brief span of safety she'd enjoyed. *He's back. The monster is back.*

Now in Brennan's car, Erica felt echoes of the same dread chill. This man was not who she'd thought. Not even a shadow of him.

"Your father became my mentor," Brennan went on. "Encouraged me. The voice of experience." A soft, rueful laugh came out of him. "Everything he was not for you."

Damn straight he hadn't been any of that. And neither could Brennan. "You're a drunk," Erica said.

She was pleased to see him flinch.

"I'm an alcoholic," he corrected. "That's something that's never going to change. But I haven't been a 'drunk' for nine years." He shook his head. "I'll admit, I was a pretty pathetic drunk, though. Lost a job and a significant relationship by the time I was twenty-three."

Anger began to burn through Erica's numb horror. "I thought you were a together guy." She'd been looking up to him, for God's sake. Envy and admiring him.

He tilted his head. "Is anybody really together? Once you peel back the layers?"

Her anger was a heat in her forehead. She'd thought he was dependable. Instead, he had feet of clay. "Not everybody is a monster underneath those layers."

He stilled. "You're right about that."

So. He admitted it. He was a monster. Just like her father, with all the roaring and unpredictability, the complete self-absorption. All he could be depended on to produce was fear.

It was hard to believe that just a few minutes ago she'd felt any warmth toward this man. Now all she felt was fury and fear.

"You were right that we needed to have this talk first, before going out on a date." Erica was surprised and pleased by how calm her voice sounded. Inside, she felt like a screaming madwoman. "I would like to go home now."

Had she surprised him? Surely he couldn't have imagined she'd be able to accept his confession. But for a moment he didn't move.

Then, without a word, he turned and pressed the button for the ignition. In no other way did he respond. He didn't try to stand up for himself or argue. Perhaps he hadn't been surprised, then, after all.

In silence, Brennan drove the winding road back down the hill. Erica looked out at the houses lining the way: large and palatial up near the top, growing progressively smaller as they descended. She found herself wondering how many of these supposedly normal houses actually harbored families with fear and dread on their faces.

Only as they were turning onto the block back home did Brennan speak. "I do have a request."

Erica pressed her lips together. He had no right to request anything.

"I understand you don't want to have anything more to do with me, but Liam and I do have a relationship. I hope you won't prevent that from continuing."

Liam. Erica breathed through her anger, trying to think. "Does he know about your past?"

"Yes."

Then Liam had known as Erica was going out the door tonight, as she was stressing about impressing Brennan. But he hadn't said anything.

He'd apparently wanted it to work out.

Naive child. He'd been too young to remember their father at his worst.

Meanwhile, Erica had to make a decision. Liam liked Brennan, looked up to him. He barely knew Erica and wasn't about to believe she knew better than he did.

"Fine," Erica stated. "Continue your relationship with Liam." She gave Brennan a stern look. "But I'll be keeping a close eye on you."

He offered no protest or defense of himself. All he did was incline his head. Then he pulled to a stop at the curb in front of her house.

Anger was like a burning blaze all over her as she opened the door and hopped out—on her own. She didn't look back as she slammed the door closed and then strode up the walkway to her front door.

She'd thought Brennan was a rock, but he was a swaying willow in a breeze.

If she had trust issues, perhaps they were justified.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Wake up! Wake up, there, kid. Jeez, kinda young to be in the gutter, ain't ya?*

Brennan woke with a start. He sat up at once, his heart pounding in pure terror. Where was he? No. Surely this couldn't be happening again. He couldn't be passed out on a sidewalk in downtown Sacramento—again.

Slowly, the outlines of the furniture in the room around him eased out of the darkness: the wardrobe against the wall, the shades pulled down over the window, and the cushioned chair by the balcony French doors. He was at home, he was alone, and it was dark outside: probably the middle of the night.

He blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. God, he hated this dream. It was too real, too like the memory of the actual event, that miserable night he'd passed out on the stoop of a pawnshop in downtown Sacramento and been woken the next morning by the irritated owner. Brennan had really tied one on that night. He'd gotten fired from his first real job and had Lois dump him all in the same day. No amount of alcohol had been enough to dull the pain of failure and rejection. Finally, he hadn't felt anything at all. Until getting his feet kicked by a disgusted older man in a sweater vest and a plaid golf hat.

Definitely did not appreciate this dream.

*Gotta get up.* Experience told him that if he didn't, he'd spend the next couple hours lying in bed repeatedly reliving the whole episode from his past. So he threw the covers to one side and swung out of bed.

"Jeez, it's cold." He opened his closet and hunted for a robe. After pulling it on over his pajama bottoms, he tied the belt and started down the hall. Maybe he could make himself something to drink, something warm and soothing.

At the head of the stairs, Brennan flipped the light switch. He could see the stairs and the living room below. The sight comforted him with its immediacy, pushing the dream further from its semblance of reality.

Blowing out a breath, he started down the stairs. He supposed it wasn't a big surprise he'd had this particular dream tonight. It made sense he'd be remembering Lois and her rejection. His unconscious was reminding him that he should be happy that Erica, too, had rejected him. Yes, much better that it should happen now, before he'd gotten too into her or fallen in love with her or anything dire like that. Right, better to happen now than later.

He did not want to live through another breakup like the one he'd had with Lois.

In the kitchen, Brennan switched on another light and blinked at the brightness. Good. Bright, so he could really wake up here. Get those nasty memories out of his head. Brennan opened the refrigerator and wondered what he actually wanted. Warm milk sounded pretty dismal. Coffee was obviously a bad idea. He had the makings of a meal—fresh vegetables, cheese, and lunch meats—but did he want to go that far?

Hot chocolate, Brennan decided. He'd make it from scratch, too, rather than using a powdered mix. Do it right. He reached for the milk carton.

But even as he busied himself getting a pan, pouring in some milk, and turning on the flame, he couldn't rid his mind of the memories of that dark time in his life, the era remembered in his dream. Unfortunately, he could probably never delete from his brain those six weeks following his morning wake-up call on the Sacramento street. They'd

comprised a painful cycle of sobering up just enough to convince Lois he was 'better,' begging her to take him back, and then going out on a binge after she sent him away each time. Lois was no fool. Brennan hadn't been 'better.' He hadn't even acknowledged he had a problem.

Sighing, Brennan searched the pantry cabinet for a box of real cocoa. He found it and concentrated on carefully measuring the appropriate amounts of cocoa and sugar. But the banal, physical activity was not enough to crowd out the worst part of his memories.

The worst part had come after he'd hit bottom. Only then, during the agonizing period of his recovery, had he become sober enough to realize what was actually going on. The woman he loved did not love him back.

He'd had to deal with giving up alcohol at the same time he'd had to deal with giving up Lois. That had been torture. It was a torture he was determined never to repeat.

He would not be able to survive repeating it...or at least not without falling back into ruin.

"Damn." The milk was boiling. Brennan twisted off the flame and then skimmed the skin that had formed on top. He next poured the hot milk into his mug and stirred in the cocoa-sugar mixture.

Now, that smelled good. Just what the doctor ordered. He picked up the mug and took a careful sip, not wanting to burn his tongue. Yup, tasted as good as it smelled.

Brennan briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he deliberately allowed his gaze to go out the kitchen window, the one that overlooked the driveway—and toward the Carmichael house beyond that. He couldn't see the house in the darkness, especially from his brightly-lit kitchen. But he knew Erica was asleep somewhere inside.

Her angry reaction to his confession had stung. The pain of that had taken him off guard. He hadn't thought her rejection would hurt, but something about Erica evidently poked through the emotional wall he usually kept around himself.

He now realized that a small part of him had hoped, by some miracle, that Erica would have understood his situation. Yes, he fought his urges every day, but at this point he had some confidence that he'd win the battle. She might have had that confidence, too. She could have believed in him, maybe even supported him.

Brennan shook his head. Yes, some small, stupid part of him had felt that way. But a far bigger part of him had felt relief that she'd so decidedly rebuffed him. Her repudiation meant there was no risk he could fall in love. Since Lois, he didn't do that sort of thing. Never got too involved with the women he dated. Never felt more than a little vague affection.

Erica had tested his restraint. But now he didn't have to worry about that.

Brennan looked down into his hot cocoa and took another careful sip. Right. All that mattered was the end result: they were not getting involved.

For that, Brennan felt profoundly grateful.

He took three more sips of hot cocoa, set his nearly full cup in the sink, and went back upstairs, determined to get back to sleep.

Life went on, and he had work tomorrow.

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How'd the date go?

Sitting at the computer in his bedroom, Liam looked over and smiled wryly at the text from his friend Don. Don could have walked over from his house two blocks away,

or he could have phoned. But they all preferred texting, particularly about anything that might be difficult or embarrassing.

Liam took a break from the English paper he was working on—why did they make anyone take this class?—and texted Don back.

Not so good.

Probably an understatement. Erica had returned from the 'date' in about half an hour. Poor Brennan. He'd no doubt come clean about his past, and she'd lost no time in rejecting him.

Uh oh, Don texted.

I know. Liam closed his eyes briefly. Given Clint's marital problems, Liam was assuming he'd end up living with Erica. Taking in a long breath and opening his eyes, he added, ***Next stop LA.***

If Erica had been so definite in rejecting Brennan, she'd probably not want to live next door to him. Nor did she any longer have a reason to stay in Palmwood.

Silence reigned from Don's side of the conversation.

Setting his phone down on his desk, Liam gazed at his raggedly-begun English paper on the computer screen in front of him. If he couldn't make any significant progress on this tonight, he'd have to go beg Brennan for help tomorrow. Shit, he hoped Erica wasn't going to nix *Liam* seeing Brennan. The idea put a solid rock in his stomach.

Not that Liam would be seeing much of Brennan if Erica moved him to LA.

Liam pulled up a browser window and Googled, once again, a listing of the public high schools from which he could choose if he lived at Erica's LA address. He went to the website of the first on the list and found the school's report card.

He couldn't help wincing. Even putting the best face on these scores— No, there was no putting a best face on these scores. They were rotten. Standardized test scores below average, number of students testing proficient below average. And the list of colleges to which students had been admitted were not impressive—for those students who'd actually applied to college.

Liam's phone buzzed. He tilted it up to look at the screen.

Hey, hot babes out there, Don texted.

An amused smile jumped onto Liam's face. ***Right,*** he texted back. Like he'd get a chance with a hot babe. Just as good a chance he'd fit into these schools that appeared to be full of jocks and drug dealers. And if he thought he'd get some respite at the community college, the closest one to Erica was a bus ride through the 'hood.

Moving to LA would mean giving up both academic challenges and friends.

While twisting his phone back and forth idly, Liam bit the inside of his cheek. Of course, there was another option, the one his father had instructed him to take.

But that was a ridiculous option. Dad had been crazy to think his oldest son would care about Liam. Alex Carmichael hadn't been in contact with the family for thirteen years. It was obvious he'd written them all off and didn't give a damn.

But for some reason, Dad had thought Alex would give a damn. He'd been so certain that Liam had wondered if his father had actually been in contact with Alex. But Dad had claimed he had not. He'd simply said he knew Alex. He knew his boy would come through. He'd added, with a smile, that he also knew Liam would be able to figure out how to find him even when no one else could.

Liam's phone buzzed again. ***Seriously, dude***, Don texted. ***You gotta figure out a way to stay here.***

Liam tossed the phone onto his desk and stood up. If only he could. He paced toward the window that looked over the two driveways and Brennan's house next door.

Leaning against the window frame, Liam gazed at Brennan's second-story roofline and bit his thumb. He seriously did not want to move to Los Angeles. He also did not want to search for—or contact—his oldest brother, Alex. Why had his dad been so insistent? Alex had done everything possible to cut all ties with the family.

Sighing, Liam glanced back toward his computer. The blueish light of the monitor seemed to admonish him. *Find Alex.*

Liam pressed his lips together. No. Not yet. Erica hadn't even admitted she was going to be his guardian. But even if she was, she hadn't categorically claimed they'd be moving to Los Angeles. Hadn't she delayed going home for nearly a week already? Maybe she was considering staying in Palmwood, after all.

Best to leave Alex on a shelf labeled "last resort."

Below Liam, Erica's car turned into the driveway from the street. She pulled way up the driveway so her car wasn't hanging over the sidewalk.

A few days ago, she'd started using the driveway instead of parking out on the curb. That could be a positive sign, right? She was getting to feel at home, having a sense of ownership.

Erica got out of the car, reached in for a big paper bag, and right before closing her car door, gazed for a moment at Brennan's house.

Liam straightened from his position against the window frame. Okay, maybe he was being stupid, but that could be a positive sign, too, couldn't it? Maybe all was not lost yet in that department, either. Brennan was a great guy, after all. If Liam could convince her to stay in town just a little bit longer, Erica'd be forced to see that. She'd have to surrender her prejudices.

On his way out his bedroom door, Liam stopped long enough to tap out a quick text to Don.

Working on it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I am definitely not much of a homemaker. Erica grabbed the bag of takeout from Indian Palace and consoled herself with the thought that she was doing a good deed by buying dinner for her two brothers premade. This way it would be edible.

As she straightened from the act of reaching in for the bag, she happened to glance toward Brennan's house situated on the other side of her car. Just as quickly, she looked away. Fortunately, he wasn't home. His big SUV wasn't parked in the driveway. She could relax.

With her hip, Erica closed her car door. Two days had passed since their abortive date and he'd confessed his past. Her anger had worn off. Now she felt intense disappointment and a realization that her anger had mostly been directed toward herself. She'd built him up too much in her mind. Her expectations of him had been impossibly high. Nobody could have lived up to them.

On the other hand, as a 'former' alcoholic, Brennan didn't even reach the bottom threshold of what Erica expected in a man.

Could she tolerate living next door to him?

With the answer to that question unknown, she turned her back on his house and made for the side kitchen door.

Liam pulled the door open before she could get out her keys.

He was trying to stuff his foot into a tennis shoe without hands. "Need any help?"

"Nah, this is it. Samosas and some other stuff from Indian Palace."

"Cool." Shooting her a cautious look, he took the bag from her. He'd been giving her these careful glances ever since she'd come home so early from her date with Brennan. Liam obviously guessed what had happened. Perhaps he even felt in part responsible since he'd known about Brennan's past and hadn't warned Erica.

Or, more likely, he feared Erica was a powder keg, liable to overreact at the slightest provocation.

Erica closed the door behind her as Liam set the bag of takeout on the kitchen counter. *Had* she overreacted the other night? It wasn't like Brennan had owed her that information at any earlier moment. Nor was the man an ax murderer. He'd been honest with her, which couldn't have been easy.

But that didn't mean she wanted to have anything to do with him. She certainly didn't want to be in a relationship with him. She couldn't trust even a 'former' alcoholic.

As Liam was removing the various boxes from the bag, the front doorbell rang. He froze, and his eyes shot to Erica's.

No, it couldn't be Brennan, Erica thought. His car had not been in the driveway. But her stomach tensed anyway. Despite—or maybe because of—this reaction, she told Liam, "I'll get it." She didn't want to play the coward.

With her stomach still tight, she walked to the front door and opened it.

Clint stood on the other side.

Erica blew out a relieved breath. "Why did you ring the bell? Don't you have a key?"

Clint dipped his chin. "Yeah, but you're living here now. It would seem rude to simply let myself in."

Whoa. Was she living here now?

She stepped back, and Clint walked in.

He sniffed the air. "Oh, good. You got takeout."

"Thanks."

He raised his hands. "You know you can't cook."

She decided to let it go. Besides, he was right.

"Hey, Clint!" Liam pushed out through the swinging kitchen door.

"Liam. My man."

The two exchanged a man-style, shoulder-banging hug.

They got along very well, Erica thought, watching them with an odd catch in her throat. But still... "Ahem, Clint, why don't you and Liam get the TV ready to record the basketball game while I set the table?"

Clint stilled for an instant. He obviously knew when she'd asked him over to watch the basketball game that it had been a pretext. But he hadn't called her on it yet.

Relaxing again, Clint roughed Liam's hair. "Where'd you put the remote, pipsqueak?"

"I'm taller than *you*, shrimp," Liam returned, mock-punching Clint in the torso.

A flurry of mock punches and feints followed as Erica turned to go back into the kitchen and get their dinner ready. Yes, the love between Clint and Liam was obvious, but she was still the better option for guardian. Anyway, the position would only last for a few years. It wasn't a significant lifetime commitment. And it wouldn't be as if Liam couldn't see Clint whenever he wanted. He could even stay with Clint a lot once Judy got out of his life.

That is, all of that could occur if Erica didn't go back to LA.

"TV is ready whenever we are," Clint announced, pushing through the swing door.

Smiling goofily, Liam followed him. "It'll start recording if we don't finish dinner in time for the beginning."

"You were faster than I was. There, Clint, why don't you fill the water pitcher? I'll get some serving spoons."

"Napkins," Liam remembered, earning him a surprised glance from Erica. What fifteen-year-old male thought of napkins?

In about two minutes, they were all sitting at the refinished kitchen table and filling their plates with the takeout food.

"I love me my Indian Palace samosas." Liam helped himself to two of the fried triangles.

Clint sat back from his filled plate without touching any of the food, however. "So," he asked Erica. "What's up?"

Erica halted in the act of serving herself some of the biryani rice. She finished dumping a spoonful of rice onto her plate and looked over at him. "I said we should give it a few days, and it's been a few days."

Liam stopped chewing.

Maybe he didn't want to live with her at all. It was a possibility that had occurred to Erica—repeatedly—over the past few days.

Erica turned to Liam, who still looked in suspended animation. "We need to fill out a formal application for guardianship. I told you about that, right? Anyway, I think we need to go ahead and *do* it."

Slowly, Liam finished chewing his mouthful. His eyes were wide.

Erica felt bad for putting this on the kid, but they were all in difficult positions here. "The final call is yours, Liam. Really. Both Clint and I are ready to do this."

Clint leaned back in his wire-frame seat. "But we want the judge to approve whoever we put on the application. Otherwise, who knows what might happen?"

Erica struggled not to show her surprise. She'd expected Clint to be stubborn about doing what he thought of as his duty.

Visibly swallowing, Liam tossed his gaze back and forth between the other two.

Erica's sense of contrition grew. They were giving him a Solomonic choice. "I know Dad picked Clint in his will, but we're thinking I might have a better shot of getting approved."

"I agree." Picking up a fork, Clint stuck it into the curried potatoes on his plate. "Given the viper in my life."

Erica's admiration for Clint was growing by leaps and bounds. It couldn't be easy for him to be so honest about the mess of his marriage. "But like I said, it's still up to you, Liam. I understand you don't know me as well as you know Clint. It's kind of a risk for you—either way."

Liam looked down and picked up one of the napkins he'd thought of placing on the table. Carefully, he wiped his mouth, obviously using the time to think. A strange, almost guilty, expression crossed his face before he slowly looked up. "But...it's not like Clint is going anywhere, right?"

Clint appeared surprised by the question. "Nah, I'm not letting Judy drive me out of town."

"So...it's not really that big a deal who I pick, right?" Liam's expression was now all innocence. "We'd all be together, sort of, right?"

Erica bit her lower lip. "Well, yeah...if I move to Palmwood, I guess that would be true."

Utter silence greeted this limp statement.

"Oh," Liam finally said. He swallowed. "You want to go back to LA.?"

Erica felt like an ogre. "That's where I make a living." Wanting to reduce her ogre qualities, she heard herself add, "Though I suppose there's a possibility I could find clients here just as well."

It was the truth, actually. She remembered the conversation she'd had with Brennan, back when she'd thought he hung the moon. He might not hang the moon, but he'd known what he was talking about when he'd told her there was a market of people who'd want a personal trainer in Palmwood. At the time, the thought of moving here had held some definite appeal.

Had the idea lost its appeal simply because she was no longer interested in Brennan? Was she going to let the fact he lived next door be a factor in her decision? How shallow would that be?

"I guess...I could look more into that," Erica mused aloud.

Liam visibly brightened. "Oh, yeah. That'd be good. If you could stay here—and we'd all be together in one place."

He was right; it would be good. He clearly had more attachment to his life in Palmwood than she had to hers in Los Angeles. Plus, Clint was here. On the other hand, so was Brennan.

"Then you're going to apply to be my guardian?" Liam asked.

Wait a minute. Hadn't this been her question to him? But Liam had turned it around, making it her decision and, implicitly, basing it on whether or not she was willing to relocate.

She met Clint's eyes and saw his amusement. He'd obviously caught what Liam had done, too.

Erica's breath released with an exasperated whoosh. Okay, the truth: she could easily imagine moving here. The idea of getting out of the big city was definitely appealing. And what if she could finally afford her own gym? Out here, that might turn into a reality instead of remaining a dream always out of reach.

In the silence while they all waited for Erica's answer, an outside noise intruded. It was the noise of a big SUV pulling into the driveway outside, the one next to where Erica had parked her car.

Brennan was home.

Her stomach tensed even though he was out there, and she didn't even have to see him. This almost seemed like a sign, that he'd return home at just this moment. At least it was a test. Would she be able to handle living here, right next door to him?

In every respect but this, moving to Palmwood would be a plus and make everyone happy. So was this one aspect of her decision significant enough to overrule all the rest?

Erica heard a car door slam. He'd gotten out of the vehicle and was probably striding in his long-legged way toward his kitchen door. She could too easily visualize his actions.

Did that matter?

Taking in a deep breath, Erica willed her stomach muscles to relax. Of course it didn't matter. Or at least, it shouldn't. She hadn't let her father determine her adult decisions. She wasn't going to let Brennan have that kind of power, either.

"Yes," she told Liam. "I'm going to put myself down as your guardian. And we'll list me as living at this address." She smiled. "Sound good?"

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In Brennan's home office, Liam was whistling under his breath as he finished typing the second paragraph of his literary analysis essay.

The kid was not usually this cheerful when he was less than halfway through an English paper. Seated on the desk to Liam's side, Brennan wondered what was up. For his part, Brennan had been thrilled when Liam had appeared an hour ago, asking for help with his paper. Apparently, Erica was keeping her word about letting Liam see Brennan.

With an incongruous smile, Liam looked up from his laptop. "What's next?"

"You need to prove your next statement. Find some text to support the idea that Burns is referring to people when he talks about the mouse in the field."

"You mean, like, a quote?"

"Exactly."

Liam released a long breath. Then he turned to the text, a book of Robert Burns's poems, and opened it up. He didn't groan. He didn't complain about the state laws that required him to take English for all four years of high school. Something was definitely afoot.

While Liam paged through the book, Brennan wondered why the kid hadn't mentioned Brennan's date with Erica or ask how it had gone. Of course, he was glad Liam had exhibited some unusual tact. Even though he was only fifteen years old, male,

and socially awkward, Liam must have managed to figure out the date hadn't gone well. It wouldn't make for comfortable small talk.

On the other hand, Brennan rather longed for someone to confide in. Was there anyone who could explain to him his lingering sense of shame?

Surely he wasn't still ashamed of his behavior as an alcoholic teen. He'd been caught by a disease. No, his shame seemed to revolve around something much more recent.

"Okay, what about this quote?" Liam pointed with a pencil and held up the book for Brennan to see.

"That'll work."

With Liam putting his nose to the grindstone, he finished the essay in less than half an hour. During that time Brennan had to bite his tongue to keep from asking Liam about the status of his guardianship. Had Erica and Clint worked out what they were going to do about the application?

Was that why Liam was in such a good mood?

Brennan's stomach performed slow somersaults as he pondered various possible decisions they might have made and how any of it might affect himself.

He waited until Liam pressed the submit button that sent his essay to his teacher via a plagiarism-checking website.

"Done!" Liam closed his laptop with a flourish.

"It doesn't take nearly as long when you don't complain," Brennan observed.

Grinning, Liam tapped the eraser of his pencil on the case of his laptop. "It's hard to complain when you're in such a good mood."

Brennan covered the sudden acceleration of his heart by wiping a piece of dust off the desk. "Things going well?"

"Terrific."

Liam waited, so Brennan was forced to ask, "Anything in particular happen?"

Wearing a wide smile, Liam announced, "Erica's going to apply to be my guardian—and she's agreed to try staying here. In Palmwood, that is."

Liam's news delivered a low punch to Brennan's gut. He wasn't sure if the punch were the result of dread or misplaced excitement. What he did know was that he didn't want to live next door to her.

His embarrassment over her knowledge of his weakness would wear off. What bothered him was that he still thought about her. And when he thought about her, it was with thoughts that made him feel hot.

Looking on the bright side, though, Erica's decision meant Liam wouldn't be moving away. Having the kid gone would have been a deep personal loss.

"That's great," Brennan told Liam, his voice gruff.

Liam's wide smile sobered. "The thing is, she needs to find work here. I mean, I don't know how the money thing operates. Would she, like, get a salary from Dad's estate for looking after me?"

Brennan shook his head. "Maybe if there were a lot of money and she weren't a relative. But I don't think there's enough involved for a judge to approve something like that."

"So she'll need to find work to support herself."

"That would be my guess."

Completely serious now, Liam gave Brennan a direct look. "You could help."

Another, sharper punch to the gut. "I...don't think your sister wants to have anything to do with me."

Liam released an exasperated breath. "Because of your drinking problem—the one you haven't had for nine years?"

Brennan didn't want to provide fodder for a future argument between the siblings. "She has her reasons for feeling suspicious."

Liam waved a skinny arm, as if he could wave away these deep-set reasons. "Okay, maybe she doesn't want to date you, which I happen to think is stupid. But she can do business with you, can't she? I doubt she refuses to physical-train former alcoholics—or even current ones. Heck, living in LA, she probably gets all kinds of clients with drug and alcohol issues."

"Well..."

"She needs help." Liam sounded certain. "If she wants to stay here."

"Perhaps, but—"

"And *I* can only stay here if *she* does," Liam pointed out.

Brennan exchanged a long look with the kid. "She doesn't want my help." Perfectly true.

"Then you have to figure out a way to give it to her anyway." Liam sounded equally sure of this truth.

They resumed their stare.

Brennan felt his jaw tense. He didn't want to help Erica. He didn't want any further involvement with her. He didn't want to deal with her suspicion and fear—and the underlying issues that produced these emotions.

Most of all, though, he didn't want to be around that key of hers, the one that opened a door he hadn't known existed in his emotional wall.

However, none of these reasons were sufficient to put off Liam and his request. The kid was right: if Erica were to stay in Palmwood, she'd need customers, and she could undoubtedly use help in getting them.

Besides, she disliked him now, wanted no part of him romantically. His emotional wall was secure.

In theory, anyway.

"I'm not saying you're right," Brennan told Liam.

"But you know I am." Slowly, the kid smiled.

## CHAPTER NINE

*What time of year do you prune roses?* As Erica watered the flowers blooming by the front porch, she realized she'd have to look that up. It was weird to think of doing that, of wanting to. But these were part her flowers now. The yard, the rest of the bushes—the house. All part hers.

The sense of ownership wasn't bad, she mused, moving the stream of water to the next bush. She'd have to take care of it all, true—and find the money to do so—but she could also make some of the decisions. For example, she could plant some star jasmine right there in the corner where it could wind up to the porch. She loved the smell of star jasmine. And the small white flowers would pair well visually with the red roses her father had planted.

Okay, that was even more weird. She still couldn't get her mind around her father planting roses...

About a dozen feet away, the kitchen door of Brennan's house suddenly opened.

The stream of water in Erica's control jerked.

Liam came out first. His laptop was in his hands, and he was chattering, a big smile on his face.

Brennan followed, silently listening. He was wearing a considerably more subdued smile.

Erica felt shocked. Brennan was still as tall, still as good-looking. And he still seemed...solid. How could that be? She knew what he was now: fatally flawed. And yet she felt a little *happy* about seeing him.

His gaze went across the two driveways and met hers.

She felt a small internal punch.

"Ah, Erica." Liam sounded offended. "I would've watered the plants."

"I knew you had that essay to write for your English class." Her eyes flicked toward Brennan. Be normal, she told herself. She didn't want to give Brennan the idea he had any kind of effect on her. "Uh, thanks for helping him with that." She sure couldn't have done so; she was no better at English than she was at math. It was doubtful Clint could have helped, either, assuming he'd have had the time. He'd recently told Erica he was working fourteen-hour days in order to make ends meet since Judy had taken over their bank accounts.

Brennan appeared a little surprised that Erica had addressed him. She felt all the happier she'd forced herself to do so. "Um, yeah." He cleared his throat. "Liam knows I'm his go-to guy with the English homework."

"Fortunately, I don't need help with math," Liam claimed, striding across the driveways. "Hey, let me put my computer inside, and I'll come back out and finish the watering."

"Oh—" Erica had rather been enjoying the physical task.

"Be just a sec," Liam said, jumping up the porch steps. He opened the door and disappeared.

Leaving Erica alone outside with Brennan.

Feeling her skin itching at his presence, she concentrated on wetting the area under the azalea.

Brennan did not retreat into his abode as she would have liked. Instead, his deep voice carried easily, conversationally, over the two driveways. "So. Liam told me you're putting yourself down as the applicant for guardian."

Erica spared him a quick glance. "Uh-huh." Keep normal, she scolded herself. It wasn't odd that Brennan would be interested in the situation, considering all the time and effort he'd invested in helping them so far. Besides, he had a relationship with Liam.

She shrugged. "The guardian thing was kind of a no-brainer."

"Yeah, a no-brainer except for the ton of paperwork involved." Liam popped out the front door of the house. "Erica's been scratching her head over it all day now."

Erica could have strangled him. "There are just a few questions hanging me up." Try the whole damn thing. "I'm not sure what's relevant. Maybe I ought to hire Grover Hamilton to help, after all." Though the lawyer had said she ought to be able to do it herself. Now Brennan was going to think she was an idiot.

"You could call Hamilton." Brennan lifted a shoulder. "Or I could take a look at it first. In my business I have to fill out a lot of government forms. Maybe it might make more sense to me."

Was he offering to help? Erica felt socked. Wasn't he insulted? Angry? She'd rejected him quite forcefully.

But then, he was probably only concerned about Liam. Making sure the paperwork got filed properly and all that. Wasn't she, also, concerned about it?

"Um...okay." Getting the guardianship approved was the ultimate goal, right?

"Here." Liam reached to take the hose from her. "You guys can work on that while I finish watering the plants."

Now? Not that there would be any time she'd be more ready to deal with Brennan than now. She offered her neighbor an apologetic glance. "Do you have time?"

*Say no.* She couldn't afford Grover Hamilton's, but it would be so much easier to deal with him than with Brennan.

"I've got about an hour." Brennan started across the driveways. "Let's take a look at it."

He only had an hour. That was...good. She could handle an hour.

On the other hand, what did he have to do on a Sunday evening an hour from now? Did he have a date?

Oh, jeez. Did she care?

"Okay." Erica straightened her shoulders and turned for the porch steps. "You take a whack at it."

She did not care if Brennan had a date. Of course not.

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He was apparently a glutton for punishment. Why had he offered to spend an hour alone with a woman who wanted nothing to do with him?

As Brennan crossed the distance between the two houses and walked up the porch steps, he assured himself he was doing this for Liam. Having the papers filled out promptly and properly would help assure the kid's future.

Right.

Erica opened the front door, and Brennan could sense her tension as he followed her into the house.

From the front foyer, she turned right into the dining room. Papers littered the top of the round walnut table.

"There." She gestured toward the chaos with an arm. "I can't believe anyone can do this by themselves. I don't even know which of these forms are relevant; they're all written in government, lawyer language. I'm sure I need Grover Hamilton."

She wanted Brennan to give up. She wanted him to leave.

Paradoxically, her attitude allowed him to relax. She had her fences up, so he didn't have to worry about what might be happening to his own. Meanwhile, her assumption Brennan wouldn't be able to sort through a little red tape touched his competitive nerve.

"Perhaps we'll have to resort to Hamilton." Not if Brennan had anything to do with it. "But let's take a look first."

With a shrug, Erica took a seat at the table. Four chairs were set at ninety-degree angles around the circular table.

Brennan took the seat next to hers. "What have you got?"

"A big mess." She crossed her arms over her chest and didn't look at him.

Despite every signal she could possibly give that he was unwanted, Brennan felt his skin heat at her proximity. Her sex appeal had not changed one iota since she'd told him off so emphatically the other night. He easily remembered the way she'd felt in his arms when they'd kissed behind the Mountainsmith camping tent in his store. The warmth and strength of her lips...

"Is there a list?" He was determined to redirect his thoughts. "Oh, I see it." From the messy pile, he pulled out a piece of paper that appeared to list all the guardianship forms. Scowling, he forced himself to focus on the document. "Okay, the 'Overview' is not anything we have to fill out. Next is 'Petition for Appointment of Guardian of Minor'."

For the next ten minutes, he went down the list of forms and helped her pull together those she actually needed to complete. Forty-five minutes after that, minutes during which Liam returned to the house and went upstairs—but whose presence had not prevented Brennan from being aware of every breath Erica took and the precise location of every curve of her body—they'd completed all the questions she hadn't known how to answer.

Brennan leaned back in the dining room chair. "Oh, and don't forget you have to give notice to everyone who might have an interest in Liam's welfare or the estate." He tugged the corner of the form in question.

"You mean relatives?" Erica shook her head. "There aren't any. My mother and father were both only children, so no aunts, uncles, or cousins."

"There's Clint."

"Oh." With a laugh, Erica covered her mouth. "I hadn't thought of him."

Her laughter got to him as nothing else so far had. It made her seem accessible again. And happy. He liked seeing her happy.

Trying to control himself, Brennan inched out the form. "Clint does have to be served, believe it or not, and by someone who's not a party to the action. I can do it."

"Oh." She seemed surprised. "Okay. But—wait." Her brief smile sobered considerably. "What about my oldest brother, Alex? Don't we have to serve him, too? But it would be impossible. Nobody's heard from him in over a decade."

"The court doesn't expect miracles. I thought I saw— Yes, there's a place to explain why you haven't served notice to someone."

"Good. I'll fill that out."

The tension with which she'd begun this exercise had disappeared. Brennan's monster persona had apparently vanished. She even looked at him.

"Thank you. You were right. You did know how to do this."

Their eyes met.

A spear of pure desire went through Brennan. Quickly, he looked away. He didn't want her to see his lust. Hell, he didn't want to be feeling it. Surely this isn't why he'd agreed to come over and help her fill out the papers. Though he couldn't pin down exactly the reason he had. Perhaps later he could sort out why he kept acting contrary to his own interests.

Meanwhile, Erica, too, had apparently felt something she hadn't liked in that moment. She cleared her throat and her voice came out cool. "You said you had an hour, and it's been a little more than that. So, I'll let you go."

Now was clearly not the time to admit he'd only claimed to have an hour so she wouldn't feel apprehensive about inviting him inside. Nor was it a favorable time to act on Liam's request that Brennan offer to help her get physical training customers in Palmwood.

Clearly, persuading her to accept that sort of help was going to require some creativity.

"Yes," Brennan agreed. "I should go."

Truer words had never been said.

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Pat, pat, pat, pat. Erica's feet created a healthy rhythm as she ran in the street alongside parked cars. Sidewalks were too hard on the joints. Asphalt was only marginally better. She was on her way to the local middle school where she'd noticed the brand-new track was open to the public before classes began each morning.

She needed a new routine if she intended to stay here, something to keep her at her prior level of fitness.

Plus, a good long run would help clear the anxious sensations left over from having cut all her ties to Los Angeles. Yesterday she'd called her roommate, Cheryl, and given her a month notice she was giving up her half of the apartment. Then she'd called every customer to deliver the bad news that she was not coming back.

In a way, doing all this had felt liberating, particularly surrendering the cramped room she rented in Mar Vista. It could be nice to start over. But it had also freaked her out a little.

Breathing steadily, Erica got close enough to the school's track to see it was not empty. Someone was already there running laps, fast and athletic. She didn't have to be close enough to see his face to know who it was. Brennan.

Her heart jumped. Damn. She hadn't considered he might be using the track.

Panicking, Erica halted her forward progress, then jogged backward to ponder the situation behind the safety of some fir trees.

She was confused about what to make of her next-door neighbor. The other day he'd helped her fill out the guardianship forms with no apparent ill will. This was weird. She'd not only dumped him, she'd dumped him hard. Ultimately, his calm assistance with all the forms had made her feel rather stupid and petty about the way she'd reacted to his past.

Breathing through pursed lips, Erica watched Brennan round the far end of the track. For heaven's sake, he'd been honest with her. How many men had she dated who'd done that? Heck, most of them had remained closed books even after she'd begun having sex with them.

Damn, she shouldn't have thought about sex while watching Brennan run. He'd rounded the turn and was coming back toward her.

She forgot about reducing her visibility and inched forward to get a better look. He was gracefully tall and moved with elegant strength. Both biceps and leg muscles were clearly visible in the T-shirt and shorts he was wearing.

He was obviously not an alcoholic now.

Heat spread over her skin. Oh, no. She couldn't think that way. She didn't want to get involved with him, no matter what he was now.

That meant she was not spending more time with him. She was definitely not going to share the track with him and thus do something physical in the same space with him where she might be tempted to observe the way his body moved.

Just then, Brennan stumbled. Erica gasped, but he recovered quickly and then produced a wan smile as he waved.

Shit. He'd seen her. Judging by that weak smile, he wasn't any happier than herself at the chance meeting.

Immediately, Erica sprang into a fast run. Smiling briefly, she waved back at Brennan.

Then she ran right past him. She ran past the track and the school—as if that's what she'd been intending to do the whole time. Right. Just passin' by.

It took a long while before the heat left her face. Shoot. This was definitely not going to be easy, living in the same town as Brennan.

## CHAPTER TEN

There were three flights up to Clint's apartment, and Brennan's right leg ached like a bitch on every other riser. When finally in front of the door, he rang the bell.

Clint didn't take long to open it up. Brennan had called that he was coming over.

"Brennan, my man." Clint's greeting smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"Pulled a muscle running." Judging by Clint's observation, this even affected the way Brennan stood.

The smile jumped back onto Clint's face as he stepped back from the door. "Not good advertising, bub. Everyone knows it's the shoes that prevent running injuries, and you're wearing some that came from your store."

"Very funny." But Brennan was glad Clint assumed it was Brennan's shoes which had caused his injury. In fact, it had been the surprise of seeing Erica while he was jogging which had made stumble and consequently pull the muscle in his thigh. The three Tylenol he'd taken this morning hadn't made a dent in the pain. He hobbled into the apartment.

"Want a cuppa java?" Clint walked backwards toward the kitchen that sat behind a counter.

"Sure." In glancing around, Brennan saw a far emptier apartment than he remembered. Apparently, Judy had removed her things.

"Here." Brennan set down the manila envelope he'd brought. "Consider yourself served. These are the documents declaring Erica is applying to be Liam's guardian."

"I already know that. I told her it's okay." In the kitchen, Clint spooned coffee grounds into a filter.

"It's a formality, one the court requires." Gingerly shifting his right leg, Brennan sat himself in one of the two folding chairs Clint had set around a card table in the dining area next to the kitchen. He doubted the missing furniture had truly been Judy's. Clint had probably built most of it. Meanwhile, he was glad Clint had offered to make coffee and extend Brennan's visit. He had something he wanted to ask Clint.

"Yeah, yeah." Clint shoved the filter into the coffeemaker. "Tell me about court requirements."

Brennan tilted his head. "What dealings are you having with courts?" Then he realized it was obvious. "You filed for divorce?"

Staring at the coffeemaker, Clint heaved a deep sigh.

"Hey. Clint. She didn't leave you a choice."

Clint pressed his lips together and nodded. "I guess."

How or why Clint seemed to blame himself for the breakdown of his marriage was not something Brennan could understand. But he supposed that as much as a union required two, so did a dissolution. Brennan had certainly done his part in pushing Lois into telling him to get lost: all the occasions he'd shown up at her door, barely sober, whining about how he needed her— To recall it now made his skin crawl with humiliation.

"At least you don't have any kids or property," Brennan pointed out. "The divorce should be easy."

With a glance toward Brennan, Clint laughed. "With Judy, nothing is easy."

Probably true. "Is she still stalking you?"

Clint raised a shoulder.

"You ought to get a restraining order."

Clint sighed again. "I'll think about it."

In other words, he wasn't going to. Brennan suppressed his own sigh and wondered what Clint wasn't telling them. Why did he resist standing up to Judy?

Or perhaps Clint was simply being Clint. He didn't like being the bad guy.

This aspect of his character was actually one Brennan planned to use to his advantage today. "Speaking of women who are trouble, I need some help with Erica."

Clint's eyebrows jumped. "Yeah?"

"I, uh, told her about my past," Brennan explained as Clint came around the counter into the dining area. "She...didn't take it well."

"Big surprise." Clint smirked and pulled out the other folding chair.

"Thing is, I still need to deal with her. See, I told Liam I'd help her find some clients here in Palmwood. Doing that would help her stay here, so *he* can stay here." Brennan regarded Clint.

Clint simply looked back, his expression bland. Either stupid or stubborn. "Yeah?" he finally asked. "What's the problem?"

Brennan spread his hands. "I've got a database of about five hundred people she could contact. But how am I supposed to give it to her?"

Clint shrugged. "You live next door. Hand it to her."

Brennan breathed through his teeth. "She already thinks I've been acting like some kind of stalker philanthropist. I helped her fill out the guardianship papers last weekend, and she couldn't wait to shove me out the door."

"So..." Clint leaned back in his chair. "You're afraid if you help her so much as to give her this great potential client list, she'll assume you're still coming on to her."

Brennan closed his eyes. "Exactly."

"Are you?"

Brennan's eyes snapped open again. "Of course not. All I want is for her to get some clients, so she doesn't have to haul Liam to LA if things don't work out here."

Clint's cheek hollowed as if he were biting the inside of it to keep from laughing. "Uh-huh."

"Please. Erica made it crystal clear what she'd think of dating a drunk, even a reformed one. I don't expect, or particularly want, to change her mind about it. Besides—"

Clint tilted his head. "Yes?"

Besides, Brennan didn't want to get involved with her even if she weren't completely turned off by him. He wasn't at a stage of his recovery where he could handle a real relationship, the kind with big emotional challenges. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to handle one. While weaning himself from Lois, the urge to turn to alcoholic anesthesia had been sharp. To have that urge again now would be horrific.

"Besides," Brennan continued. "I'm not interested in her."

Clint's eyelids drooped over his eyes. "In that case, no reason not to hand her the list yourself."

"No doubt. But I'd rather you do it." Brennan opened the manila envelope he'd put on the dining room card table and took out a smaller version. He handed it toward Clint.

"Here."

Clint didn't move to receive the valuable database list. "Forget it."

"What?"

"I have enough problems of my own. I'm not getting in the middle of this."

"There's no 'this' to get in the middle of," Brennan insisted.

"Bullshit. Oh, good. Coffee's done." Clint got up from the table.

"I'm leaving the list here." Brennan could use Clint's return to the kitchen to make his own escape—and leave the damn list behind.

"What about your coffee?"

"I'll take a rain check."

Clint called after Brennan as he was opening the front door. "I'm not giving Erica that list."

Brennan didn't answer as he went out and closed the door firmly behind him. Of course Clint would give his sister the list. It would provide her with valuable information to help her grow her business. Besides, Clint was a pushover, never wanted to be the bad guy.

But as he hobbled painfully down the three flights of stairs, Brennan had to remember one other salient aspect of Clint's character.

He never lied.

Damn, Brennan cursed as he limped down the street toward his car. What did Clint think he was accomplishing by being stubborn about *this*? Of all times for him to decide to take a stand.

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"I am a failure." Erica regarded the contents of the kitchen trash can. A full helping of spaghetti marinara draped the can of tomato sauce and empty pasta packaging that had been used to make the meal. Liam had apparently tossed his dinner here surreptitiously.

Erica couldn't say she blamed him. She'd overcooked the spaghetti, resulting in a rubbery paste. The sauce had tasted metallic. So much for trying to go healthy and economical by cooking their own meal.

With a sigh, Erica threw her napkin over the discarded food and closed the lid of the trashcan. The culinary disaster might not have stung so much if she felt she were making strides forward in her business venture. She'd spent the entire day on the phone, researching places to advertise, asking old clients if they had any leads in the area. It was all background work, probably necessary, but gave nothing to show for itself.

As Erica washed her hands in the kitchen sink, she heard the doorbell. "Darn Clint." Why didn't he just use his key and save her a trip to the door?

It wasn't until Erica was at the front door and turning the knob that she recalled Clint hadn't mentioned he was dropping by. By then it was too late. She finished opening the door to find Brennan standing on the other side.

From an apparent study of his athletic shoes, he looked up. "Ah. Hello, neighbor." He tried a smile, but it seemed forced.

"Hi, Brennan." Erica hoped her own muted smile looked more natural. It was completely perverse how her heart had skipped to find him here. Meanwhile, she noticed he was standing oddly, with most of his weight on his left leg. "What's up?"

Brennan's gaze dropped back to his shoes. "Uh, I was thinking...that you could use some data I happen to have. For your business, that is."

Her heart sank. They'd discussed this before. Though she could certainly use his store's database to solicit clients, she hadn't wanted to ask for his help—yet again. What with all his assistance regarding Liam's guardianship, she already felt uncomfortably beholden.

He held up a flash drive. "This is contact information for a list of customers who've agreed to receive solicitations from ancillary businesses. Some of them might be interested in hiring a physical trainer."

"Ah..."

"It's really for Liam," Brennan explained, clearly reading her hesitation. "He can't stay here in Palmwood unless you can, right?"

When he put it that way... "Okay." Erica held out her hand for the flash drive. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." After giving it to her with a relieved sigh, Brennan turned to go. The odd stance Erica had earlier observed now became a noticeable limp.

"Whoa," she said, before stopping to think about it. "What happened?"

"Hm?" Brennan took a firm grip on the stair hand railing.

"You're injured," Erica declared.

"It's nothing." He took one careful step downward.

"That doesn't look like 'nothing' to me." Erica came out the door to scrutinize his tender progress. "That's serious."

"Just a pulled muscle." Brennan's face tightened as he descended another step.

"Quads?" Erica guessed, observing closely.

Brennan grunted, indicating neither affirmation nor denial.

"Sheesh, don't be so stubborn."

He shot her a quizzical look.

"I can help."

Finally, he stopped. "What?"

Alarm flickered through Erica. Was this a good idea? Treating a pulled muscle would require touching. However, the notion of being able to help Brennan—for a change—was very appealing. It would be a chance to even the score. She decided to ignore her flicker of alarm. "I have a certificate in sports injury therapy. Why don't you let me take a look at it?"

"Oh." He threw her a quick glance. "No. Uh, this'll clear up in a few days, I'm sure."

He didn't believe she could make a difference. Erica's determination expanded. "Inside. Now."

"No, really—"

"Brennan." Erica held up the flash drive he'd handed her. "Does this only go one way for some reason? I have to be the beggar and you the generous king?"

He turned to look at her again. A moment of silence stretched between them in the cool evening air. "Okay," he finally said. "You win. Besides, it hurts even worse than it did yesterday."

"Let's see if we can do something about that." Erica held the door open while Brennan slowly made his way back up the steps and inside.

They'd need a table, one long enough to accommodate Brennan's length. "The laundry room," Erica decided. "Once I throw a sheet on the table in there, it'll work."

"At this point, I'd take a bed of nails."

"You should have told me," Erica scolded, rather ridiculously. She and Brennan did not even have a friendship. There was no reason he would have complained to her about his sports injury. But it felt good to scold as she led the way to the laundry room, situated between the kitchen and the backyard door.

The location was a little isolated, Erica noted as she went to fetch a sheet from the linen closet. But Liam was just upstairs, and what was there to fear from being isolated anyway? Even if she felt Brennan's presence like a large male animal prowling her territory, nothing was going to happen. He wouldn't take advantage of the situation, and for her part, she wasn't about to jump him.

The main thing was she'd be able to do something for him for a change.

With a groan, Brennan hefted into a sitting position on the table. "Now, what?"

"Which leg did you pull?"

"This one." He touched his right thigh.

"All right, then. If it's not too difficult to do, lie down on your left side." These were words Erica had told a hundred injured clients, but they felt different, somehow, addressed to Brennan. It felt distinctly peculiar to order him to lie down. She cleared her throat. "Does your leg hurt in the front, back, thigh, shin?"

"Pretty sure you were right before, and it's my quads," Brennan mumbled, lying on his side.

It was a good thing he was already wearing knit jogging pants. They wouldn't have to get into the issue of disrobing for better movability.

"Okay, I'm going to take your leg and gently stretch those upper thigh muscles by pulling it backward. Be sure to let me know if it hurts. It's not supposed to." Erica got behind Brennan and picked up his leg at the knee and ankle. It was heavy relative to its size, full of muscle. A little flutter went through her stomach, but she ignored it.

"Hurts," Brennan muttered.

Erica reduced the arc of her stretch. "How's that?"

"Good." He paused while she rotated his leg from the center position back twenty degrees and forward again. "Where'd you get the certificate?"

"Cal State LA, night school."

"While you were working?"

"Uh-huh. I was employed by a gym back then, but wanted my own customers."

"And eventually a gym of your own." Brennan apparently remembered the whole conversation. "This is starting to actually feel good now."

"Pain rarely gets rid of pain. Probably should ice this when you get home."

"Okay." Whatever skepticism he might have owned toward her ability seemed to have disappeared.

Satisfaction coursed through Erica. She continued working on stretching his muscle in a silence that grew oddly relaxing. She really enjoyed that he was needing her.

Her brows knit as she suddenly wondered why she should enjoy him needing her. Meanwhile, it was gratifying to feel the muscles in his leg relax and to see the tightness that had been in his face soften.

"Why did you start drinking?"

Erica only realized she'd blurted the stupid question out loud when his leg jerked. The relaxation on his face also disappeared.

"Sorry," she backpedaled. "That was completely out of line—"

"No," Brennan interrupted. "Not really."

It wasn't? Erica didn't think the answer was any of her business.

He took in and released a deep breath. "Not at all out of line," he claimed.

Biting her tongue to keep from saying any more idiotic things, Erica resumed her rhythm of stretch and relax, stretch and relax.

Brennan closed his eyes and seemed to make a determined effort to regain his state of relaxation. "I was a star in high school."

Erica bit her lip. Now that she'd started this, might as well see it through. Besides, she *was* curious. "A sports star?"

"An everything star: sports, academics, student government. You name it."

Erica continued rotating his leg, waiting, wondering how this connected to drinking.

Brennan kept his eyes closed. "I wasn't allowed to let anything slip. Once I became a star, I sure as hell had to stay one. That was what I thought, anyway. Had to keep the record for baskets scored in a game. Keep the four point whatever average. Keep the prettiest girl by my side for every party."

Erica tilted her head, pondering this. She'd never considered there might be a downside to being the high school brain or sports legend. "No room for failure," she translated.

"No room at all." Brennan visibly swallowed. "Meanwhile, though, there was this voice in my head, a sneaky, snarky voice that kept warning me I was going to screw it all up. Because it was all a masquerade, not real. In reality, I was nothing but a weak, stupid troll."

For a moment, Erica's stretching rhythm hitched. She knew that voice.

"A six-pack made the voice shut up." Brennan opened his eyes and regarded the wall across the room from him.

Erica's throat felt tight. If that were true— No wonder so many people turned to the stuff. For her part, she'd simply resigned herself to living with the nasty voice, the one that told her she wasn't good enough, that of course she was going to fail.

"That's— Well, I can kind of get that," Erica admitted, surprised to find this was true. He'd been young, inexperienced, and had put himself under tremendous pressure. The temptation to find relief must have been enormous.

Brennan sighed. "The truth was somewhere in between. I was neither the superstar nor the troll. It wasn't until I dried out I was able to come to terms with that."

Really? He'd come to terms with the voice? "But—how? I mean, I'm still hearing that voice." Erica was a little surprised to hear herself admit this. But she was even more surprised by Brennan's reply.

"I know."

Stunned, she halted work on his leg.

He pulled his limb away from her and slowly sat up.

All she could do was stand there, dumb.

Seated on the edge of the table, Brennan looked at her. "I know the world you grew up in," he stated quietly. "I built my own version of that hell. It's not hard to imagine what having a father like that would do to his children."

Pins and needles broke out all over Erica. He understood. Somebody understood what she'd never been able to articulate. It *had* been hell. Her gratitude felt so overwhelming she wanted to cry.

And when she looked into Brennan's amber eyes, she saw he felt the same way.

That stunned her more than anything at all. What? Why would *he* feel like crying? Did he need someone to understand him, too?

Looking away abruptly, Brennan hopped down off the laundry room table. "Oh, wow," he said, in a vastly different tone of voice. A no-longer-intimate, normal-sounding tone. "That feels much better." He threw her a quick, almost guilty, glance. "Thank you."

Erica felt thrown off her own railroad tracks. What had just happened here? Had she just felt a moment of connection, incredibly deep connection...to *Brennan*?

Somehow, she managed to reply. "You're welcome."

The only indication Brennan, too, might have been a little thrown was the speed with which he left—through the backyard door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In a sane world, Brennan would not bake sugar-filled chocolate-chip cookies for a physical trainer. He considered this issue as he scooped the last of the two dozen cookies into a napkin-lined wicker basket. But it was hard to miss that Erica, though undeniably fit, had no interest in health food.

Of course, in a sane world, Brennan wouldn't be baking cookies for Erica at all. Sighing, he whipped open another linen napkin to place over the top of the cookies. He was supposed to be seeking distance from Erica.

He certainly hadn't sought distance from her last night, however. He'd bared his soul and then invited her to bare hers. This had obviously not been wise, but when she'd asked why he'd started drinking, he'd felt an overwhelming desire to explain.

Brennan stood at his kitchen counter and slowly tucked the top napkin in. Hell, he could still feel the connection of that moment. It had been as if she'd looked all the way into him. But, oddly, that hadn't felt bad. Scary as all get out, but not bad.

He wondered if she'd felt the same way.

In fact, he wondered if her attitude toward him had softened at all. Now, why he'd want to know that was a question he didn't want to answer. Probably his support group would do it for him, though, the next time they met.

Following a rueful tap to the top of the linen napkin, Brennan picked up the basket. The bottom line was that he did want to thank Erica for treating his injury.

He could have paid a lot of money to a PT for that and without as much result.

She really was good at what she did.

Going out the kitchen side door, Brennan let the screen bang behind him. He went down his driveway and then looped out front to reach the Carmichael's front porch.

His heart pounded unnaturally hard as he ascended the steps and, after a brief hesitation, pressed the doorbell.

Liam answered the door.

A wide smile came over the kid's face. "Hi, Brennan. What's up? Hey, come on in."

Brennan would have preferred it to be Erica who invited him inside. He wasn't absolutely certain his presence was welcome. But—

He walked in.

"What's in the basket?" Liam seemed to have guessed the answer, though. His eyes riveted on the linen-covered wicker.

"Cookies. I made them to thank your sister."

"Oh? What'd she do?"

Brennan had no idea how to explain without the kid jumping to conclusions. He was saved having to figure it out by Erica coming down the stairs.

"Oh, Brennan." She stopped for a moment, obviously surprised. "Uh, hi."

She was surprised, but was she dismayed? He couldn't tell.

Feeling rather stupid now, Brennan lifted his basket. "Chocolate chip with walnut. The least I could give you for last night." Hell. That hadn't come out right. With his face blazing, Brennan added, "My leg is nearly all better now."

"What happened to your leg?" Liam asked.

Erica answered as she finished descending the stairs. "He pulled a quad muscle. Needed a simple stretch. Did you ice it like I told you to?"

Brennan thought maybe her face was a little red now, too. But was it red with embarrassment or with anger? "A little bit," he said.

"Chocolate chip, you say?" Liam reached for the basket.

Brennan shifted it away. "It's for Erica."

"Oh, man," Liam complained.

Brennan dared to look straight at Erica as he handed her the basket.

She smiled a little, her gaze lowered, as she accepted it.

That tiny smile sent the sharpest thrill through him. She wasn't angry he'd come over, then. She wasn't angry he'd made her cookies and brought them to her.

He felt as happy as if she'd pronounced undying love.

"This is incredibly silly." She shook her head at the basket. "Those stretches were so I could thank *you*."

"Maybe it'll turn into an infinite loop," Brennan joked and then held his breath.

Would she correct him? Remind him she didn't want to have anything to do with him?

But she only looked down at the basket with that same small smile.

It was the best smile he'd ever seen in his life.

Finally, she looked up.

Their eyes met in a wordless moment of inexplicable intimacy.

Another thrill went through Brennan.

Her attitude toward him had most definitely softened.

He had to wonder why that made him so happy.

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Erica could still taste Brennan's high-fat cookies more than a week after she and Liam had polished them off. Nobody had ever made cookies just for her. Not even her mother. The gesture had been...warm. Not exactly romantic, but not distantly polite, either.

It had made her feel happy.

The taste of them was particularly sharp in her memory this afternoon, given the route she'd chosen for driving Liam to another student's house in order to finish a school project.

They were going to pass by Brennan's second store.

Why she had chosen this route over the others available was a question she did not care to ponder.

"Thanks for the ride." It was the second or third time Liam had said this. He gazed out the side window and seemed subdued. "I don't think it'll take more than a few hours for us to finish this world history project. I'll see if Nelson's mom can give me a ride back home when we're done."

"Whatever you think will work out best." It wasn't as if Erica would be too busy to come pick Liam up. She didn't even have to worry any more about moving her things out of the LA apartment. Last weekend Clint and Liam had helped her take care of that. Then, while Liam had been at school this week, Erica had designed and printed flyers for the list of potential customers Brennan had given her.

She had yet to work up the courage to distribute them, however. What if nobody wanted her services? What if they thought her fees were laughable? What if everybody already had trainers who were better than she was? She'd decided to wait until the weekend.

"Hey, you see Dobber's Home Improvement over there?" Liam suddenly straightened in his seat and pointed toward a store coming up on the right. A small smile graced his face. "Dad used to love that place. He could wander the aisles for hours."

Blinking, Erica wondered how to respond to this information. It was difficult for her to imagine her father happily wandering a home improvement store. Okay, he'd obviously worked on the house during the time she'd been gone. There was, for example, the rose-printed wallpaper in her bedroom. The chandelier over the front stairs. Oh, and the roses in the front yard. "Uh...cool," Erica tried.

"He was happy going by himself," Liam continued. "But he liked it even better when I came along."

Now Erica had to shift in her seat. She could not picture her father ever wanting her to come along—anywhere. In fact, one of her clearer memories of her father was when he'd growled for her to get lost. At the time, she'd been attempting to approach him with a card she'd made at school for Father's Day. "Ah," she told Liam.

Liam's smile faded as he looked at her. He slouched back into his seat and didn't add any further happy memories.

Damn. Now Erica felt inadequate as a surrogate parent. But what could she add to a conversation reminiscing about her father? The best she could do was avoid the whole subject.

"Oh, hey!" she exclaimed, doing her own pointing now. "Isn't that Brennan's store over there on the left?" She didn't really need to ask as it was obvious that was the store, at the address she'd looked up before they left home. Not only did it flaunt a large Diehard Sports Equipment sign, but it also wore the same exterior paint scheme of sea-green and silver as the other store she'd earlier visited.

"What? Oh, yeah." Liam spared the store a tepid glance.

Apparently, avoiding the subject of their father hadn't been the ideal choice as far as cheering up Liam. Erica's sensation of parental inadequacy deepened.

Meanwhile, she stole a better look at the store as they drove by. Whatever monsters lurked in Brennan's past, it was clear he had his present in good order. The place looked sleek, classy, and top-notch. Her sense of inadequacy expanded to include her professional side, which overlapped with her character in general. What, really, did *she* have to offer *Brennan*?

The happiness she'd earlier felt in remembering his cookies faded the same way Liam's brief animation had.

"You want to turn right at the next corner," Liam advised.

"Right, right."

Brennan's store disappeared as Erica turned the corner. Even if she were ready to trust Brennan regarding his past with alcohol, the two of them had no future. She was a nobody, a rank amateur in life compared to Brennan. She hadn't a single client while he owned two successful retail outlets.

But it was good they were friends again. Yes, friends was definitely okay. Safe. Good.

Maybe when Liam came home later, he and she could become friends again, too.

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"I'm so excited you're spending the night!" Nelson's heavily freckled face split into the widest smile Liam had ever seen on his fellow student. "I've never had a friend over before."

They were sitting on the green carpet of Nelson's large bedroom. It wasn't easy, but Nelson managed to be even more of a nerd than Liam was. In one corner sat a two-foot high model of Optimus Prime, the Transformer hero. In another lurked an authentic Japanese G1 Star Saber, a collectible Liam frankly envied.

But Nelson wasn't actually a friend of Liam's. Seeing the other kid's obvious joy now made Liam feel a little bad about using his fellow student to avoid going home. Once he and Nelson had finished their project for history, Liam had felt a serious disinclination to be with Erica.

His sister...frustrated him. Okay, she made him angry. So when Nelson's mother had so hopefully asked if Liam wanted to spend the night, he'd said yes.

Even if Erica had hated Dad, couldn't she believe that *Liam* loved him? Couldn't she let Liam have his own feelings? But, no. She didn't even want to hear about it.

"You won't fit into any of my pajamas," Nelson mused, regarding Liam's much taller self doubtfully. "And I don't think you would fit into my Dad's, either."

Nelson was a pipsqueak while his father was the size of an NFL linebacker.

"I can just put on my PE clothes." Not terribly hygienic, but it was only for one night, and Liam could wash them tomorrow when he got home. Luckily, he'd brought his whole backpack with him this afternoon, so the sweats and T-shirt were inside.

"Do you want to play Minecraft?" Nelson asked, glancing up toward his enviable PC system. "Or maybe Assassin's Creed?"

"Your mom lets you play Assassin's Creed?" The player went around murdering people, complete with gore.

Nelson leaned forward and whispered, as if anyone were around who could hear. "I convinced her it was educational. All the history, you know. Every assassination accurate."

Liam laughed. "Good work." Nelson wasn't actually so bad.

Particularly now when he was looking pleased. "So, you want to play?"

"Sure."

As Liam watched Nelson happily rise to open the application on his computer, Liam thought how little it had taken to make his new friend happy. It wouldn't have taken much from Erica to make Liam feel the same way. All she'd had to do was listen. But she hadn't been able to give even that much.

So Liam had been left with his unresolved sorrow.

"You want to use your laptop or my second computer?" Nelson turned from his chair to grin down at Liam.

"Your computer is better for gaming," Liam had to admit. He did feel a little cheered as he got up to take a seat in front of Nelson's second PC. Maybe he could lose himself in the game for a while.

At the very least, he was going to make Nelson happy.

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Brennan spent the day at the Broadway Boulevard store. It was a particularly difficult day, for he'd had to confront an employee with theft. The expression on the young man's face had been one with which Brennan felt painfully familiar. The excuses

thrown forth had been similarly familiar and just as painful. *I didn't do it. Okay, I did do it, but it wasn't as bad as it looks. I had good reasons...*

Unfortunately, Brennan doubted the experience was going to serve as a wake-up call. Perhaps he should have pressed charges in addition to terminating the guy's employment.

But Brennan's sense of identification had made him feel unfit to mete judgment. If he hadn't finally looked in the mirror one day— If his parents hadn't been supportive enough to take him back and help him dry out— He could easily have landed in the same situation as the thief or maybe in one that was even worse. No, he couldn't press charges.

But he did have to fire the guy. It was the part of his work Brennan disliked the most.

It was a pleasant surprise, then, when pulling his car into the driveway at home to find Erica dribbling a basketball next door. Of course, he wasn't supposed to want to run into her, but he couldn't help a lift in his spirits.

As he shifted into park, she swiveled and shot.

Two points.

One side of Brennan's mouth kicked up as he watched her slender legs while she retrieved the ball. He'd give her a lot more than two points for the snug knit tank top and shorts she wore. They managed to keep her perfectly modest while displaying her lithe body to perfection.

He was pretty sure she hadn't even noticed his car drive up since she was clearly engrossed in what she was doing, dribbling in a figure eight, then turning and shooting. This was apparently an exercise regime.

He turned off the motor, but she still hadn't noticed him. So he got out of the car slowly, enjoying the show. She was quick, agile, and sexy as all get out. A good part of the latter came from her intense physical energy.

When he closed his car door, she finally noticed his presence. She started a little, shot him a quick smile, and continued her routine.

That smile did not satisfy him. It wasn't the real smile he could occasionally coax out of her. Or that shy, precious smile he'd gotten when he'd brought over the chocolate-chip cookies.

Brennan tilted his head, watching her continue her figure eights. She wasn't smiling at all now. In fact, she looked rather grim.

Perhaps she was simply concentrating on finishing her workout, but Brennan could not convince himself this was the case. She looked upset. She looked like she shouldn't be left to run in figure eights all by herself, unsmiling and grim.

Suddenly, Brennan found himself shucking off his sports coat. Hell, he could use a little physical exercise himself to work off his difficult day.

She didn't appear to notice what he intended until he stole the ball out from under her. "Hey!"

"Sloppy," Brennan told her and dribbled toward the basket.

"We'll see about that!" With a laugh that made the whole thing worthwhile, she leapt to block him and succeeded in causing him to miss the basket.

They both went for the ball. Erica slipped underneath Brennan's height to steal it first.

He didn't give her an opportunity for a shot, though, effectively blocking her puny stature and then intercepting the ball when she tried a wild throw.

Now she shadowed him as he attempted an approach to the basket.

Back and forth they went, taking turns attempting baskets, shadowing each other and then blocking shots. They didn't say much, though there were plenty of frustrated shouts and laughter.

Brennan didn't give her any favors. She was fast and her throws were accurate.

On the other hand, he had a considerable advantage in height. Possibly that's why she started resorting to fouls, knocking into him, grabbing his waist. She succeeded in stealing the ball. She also succeeded in turning him on. Big time.

He wasn't about to let her get away with it, or at least not without suitable retaliation. While she had control of the ball, he locked his arm around her collarbone.

"Hey!" she squawked, but she laughed.

Brennan's inner temperature shot up about a zillion degrees. Her soft rear end had connected with his front. Though Erica had dropped the ball, he wasn't able to follow up on his advantage, and she recaptured the prize.

"Gotcha!" she crowed.

Oh, no. He wasn't going to let stupid sexual impulses make him lose the game. He went after her again and this time got the ball.

She slammed into him.

The play got increasingly rough. Increasingly physical. Over and over, Brennan got brief hits of her—feminine softness overlying muscle. He knew he was pushing boundaries, both in the basketball game and in that other game they were playing. It didn't matter. This was so exciting, so stimulating. He kept on pushing.

She wasn't shying away from the contact. Far from it. She gave as good as she got, grabbing, slamming, shoving. If anything, she appeared to relish the tussle.

Yes, Brennan concluded on catching a glimpse of a brief, mischievous smile. She was definitely relishing it.

At one point, he was practically embracing her, his arms to either side of her shoulders, preventing her from moving or trying for a basket.

He had the advantage of size, but she was quick and flexible. She twisted out from under his block, twirled and then jumped to throw the ball.

As the basketball swished through the net, she threw her arms up straight into the air and laughed gleefully.

That laugh was the final straw. Seeing Erica look happy and triumphant made *him* feel happy and triumphant. It made him feel...like her man. He grabbed her beneath her arms and pulled her back against his chest. "No fair," he panted. "You're better than I am."

She giggled. Erica-the-Solemn Carmichael actually giggled.

His triumph soared. Overwhelmed by the sensation, he growled and caught the rim of her ear between his teeth.

She froze.

So did he.

In that instant, everything changed. The playful atmosphere took on about a ton of weight. The very air seemed heavy, closing them in together.

He could hear her breathing, feel her chest expanding and contracting beneath his enclosing arms. As he slowly released her ear, she turned to look at him.

Her eyes were very wide, her pupils very dark.

Yes? What that a yes?

Hell. Had he asked a question? But, looking at her, he knew that he had. His blood was pumping hard and thick in his veins.

Far away, a thin voice asked him what he was doing.

He brushed the voice aside. "Where's Liam?" he asked Erica instead. His tone was low and rough.

"He's staying at a friend's house overnight."

This information, together with the invitation in her eyes, was like throwing gasoline on the fire already inside him. "Good," Brennan declared. He knew his expression did not match the innocence of his words. "Then I'll make you...dinner."

Her eyes looked liquid. "Okay."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Brennan was not planning to make her dinner. Erica knew that perfectly well. She knew what it meant when a man looked at you with that quantity of hot intensity in his eyes. True, she'd never had anyone look at her with quite so much hot intensity, but that only made the message that much clearer.

Her heart beat like she'd just finished a ten-mile run. Like a run, the sensation made her feel good, healthy strong—basically all right with the world. She'd been feeling bad about herself before Brennan had jumped into her basketball routine. Liam had called to say he was staying overnight at Nelson's house. It was clear he'd wanted to avoid being with his sister. The phone call had made her earlier sense of parental inadequacy return and swell.

"Let's go inside," Brennan now said. His voice was very deep, excitingly rough. He drew back enough that he could take her hand. His grip was firm and possessive.

Erica had only once gotten intoxicated. She felt a similarly lightheaded disorientation now as she let Brennan guide her toward his house.

With his free hand, Brennan dug frantically in his trouser pocket until he pulled out a set of keys.

"Your jacket," Erica said, spying the tan blazer lying on the grass beside his SUV.

"Leave it there," Brennan grumbled, moving toward his side door.

"Hang on." Erica pulled on his hand, disproportionately pleased that he let her lead him close enough for her to snag the jacket. The garment was heavy and satin-lined and smelled like him when she put it up to her face.

"Erica." His tone warned her to stop dallying.

Erica smiled, liking the fact she was obviously more in control than he was. This was comforting as she was feeling pretty out of control.

She was about to go into Brennan's house and have sex with him. Two weeks ago she'd thought she was never going to speak to him again.

Finally, Brennan unlocked the side door and drew Erica inside. He took his jacket from her and threw it on the center island of the kitchen. Then, with his eyes intent on her, he pulled her into his arms.

She closed her eyes, lifted her face, and her mouth met his.

It felt like going up the top hill of a rollercoaster. A buildup of anticipation. She clutched him close, and his arms enclosed her. The kiss went on.

God, this felt good. So very, very good. She felt wanted and desired. Perhaps it was an illusion, but she felt accepted.

"You taste so good." Brennan smoothed his lips from her mouth down her jaw. His hands rubbed her back.

Completely lost in how wonderful it felt to be held close against him, Erica merely hummed in reply.

With a low sound, Brennan slid one hand beneath her breast to cup it from below.

As she was wearing a thick sports bra, Erica only received a vague impression of pressure. But the increased intimacy went through her like a storm anyway. She moaned. Then, kissing his jaw, she murmured, "I don't think we're ready for dinner."

"No?" He worked up the hem of her shirt.

The excitement inside her wriggled up along with her hem. "After that game, we probably ought to shower first."

His palm was against her skin right under her bra. "You think we're going to make it that far?"

"Sure. In fact, I'll bet you." Erica was surprised to note she was having fun. She was pretty sure she'd never had fun while engaging in sex. But then, she'd never felt as sure of a man's interest as she did right now.

Brennan shook with silent laughter. "A bet about what?"

"How far—" She didn't get a chance to finish her sentence because Brennan had covered her lips again with his own.

The rollercoaster had gone over the top and was on its downhill slide now. Erica felt a similar drop in her stomach as his kiss took her over.

Then his fingers found the front zipper of her bra. She drew in a sharp breath as he undid the two sides and slid his hands over her breasts. His palms rubbed against the stiffened tips of her nipples.

"Brennan..."

"At this rate, we won't get out of the kitchen," Brennan muttered.

"No." She woke up a little. "I don't want to do this in the kitchen." The locale was not a place that gave her confidence.

"All right, then. Come on." Pulling away, Brennan grabbed her hand and tugged her out of the open-plan kitchen.

They sped through the airy living room and up the fancy wood staircase. Erica had the naughty sense of trespassing. This wasn't her house, Brennan wasn't really her man, yet she was here about to do this anyway.

Brennan led her into a bedroom, presumably his. There was more paneled woodwork, deep red upholstery—the dim impression Erica received was that this room successfully maintained the classiness she'd already noticed downstairs. She might have started to feel inferior again if Brennan hadn't pulled her into his arms for another deep, drugging kiss.

Briefly, she recalled the reason she'd originally not wanted to get involved with this man. She hadn't thought she could trust a person who'd shared the same problem as her father.

But she knew she wasn't afraid of Brennan. Maybe she should have been, but she wasn't. All she could feel was heat and a powerful desire to get closer.

Brennan apparently felt something similar. He broke off the kiss to drag her shirt over her head. Then he pushed off her bra.

Erica arched back her head as Brennan lowered his face to lick the space between her breasts.

"Salty," he hummed.

God, he was turned on by her sweat. Erica's hands tangled in his hair. She revelled in the sensation of his desire for her. She revelled in her own surrender.

With his hands on her rear end, he pulled their hips close. The feel of his erection against her lower belly made her own desire swell.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes."

He shifted his hands to the waistband of her shorts and pulled them down, together with her panties. His palms smoothed back up her legs to cup the naked skin of her rear end. "Beautiful," he murmured.

But she wanted to feel him, too, Erica realized. She fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and finally got it open enough to slide her hands against his chest. His muscles were hard and well-defined, his skin covered by rough curls. He was so wonderfully male.

"I love the way your skin feels against mine," Brennan said in a low voice. His hands confirmed his words, roaming all over her. His lips nuzzled her cheek.

"Mm." She had no words to describe how wonderful his touch felt, the intimacy it created.

Brennan's roaming hands swept to her breasts, cupping and massaging them. "I've wanted to do this since I first met you."

Erica couldn't help laughing. He'd wanted to touch her small breasts?

"Why does that make you laugh?"

"Because— Oh, just kiss me." It amazed Erica that she had the confidence to ask that. It amazed her even more when he complied. She loved the way he kissed, the mastery of his mouth, the hunger in him that she could feel.

That hunger was also evident in the speed his hands worked at the waistband of his trousers. As he pushed his pants down, he leaned them both over the bed. They ended up lying atop the red patterned counterpane, Brennan splayed over Erica.

She looked up at him with heavy lids. It felt good to be surrounded by his bulk and his strength. She felt protected and possessed.

He looked down at her, the intensity in his eyes nearly scorching.

"Go on," she invited.

His lashes lowered. Then his hands moved. They smoothed all over her as if trying to learn her curves: over hips, waist, thighs.

Erica breathed her appreciation and arched her back. "More," she breathed.

He gave more. Those roving hands drifted in toward her center. His fingers dipped here and there, clever, manipulating, spiking her pleasure. Slowly, his head lowered until he was nuzzling her neck.

Erica moaned her pleasure. He genuinely seemed to care about how she was feeling, that he was giving her pleasure. The mere idea that he cared spread a deep warmth inside her.

"More," she urged. "Closer."

He hesitated.

Did he not understand what she meant? Or was he, at this late point in the game, having second thoughts?

Dismayed by the idea, Erica resolved to conquer any last-minute regrets. She lowered a hand to wrap it firmly around his erection.

His reaction, a full-body jerk, assuaged any doubts she'd developed. Enjoying her power, she stroked him fully down his length, which was considerable.

"This," she said huskily. "Now."

He garbled something she couldn't understand and then reached past her. He opened the top drawer of the nightstand. From inside it, he snatched a condom.

She did not feel the least bit surprised by his action even though Brennan had to be the first man, ever, who'd taken the initiative to protect her without her first demanding it. But that's who he was: solid and trustworthy. She could feel safe with him.

As Erica lay there, still beneath his strength, she had an overwhelming, if peculiar, sensation. It was another first, a sensation of belonging. In that moment, she felt as if she was where she belonged. With him. Uniting their bodies.

Meanwhile, he ripped open the package and rolled the condom on. Then his eyes came back to lock on hers.

Erica's sense of being in the right place expanded ten-fold. He was concentrated on *her*, not just the sex. She was sure of it.

She reached up her arms.

Brennan came down over her with apparent gratitude. He kissed her deeply, and then his fingers, down below, teased and parted her for his entry.

"Yes," Erica murmured. This at last. Union.

He kissed the tip of her ear before starting to push inside her. The gesture was so unexpectedly sweet that it startled her.

"You okay?" He paused.

"Yes, yes. Please keep going."

He let out a breath and flexed his hips, pushing in another bit. His hands were on her rear, helping to guide their bodies together.

The further he penetrated, the more together they seemed to become. She felt more whole than she'd ever felt in her life. The sensation was so strong that tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

"You...feel...amazing," Brennan breathed. With a muscular movement, he pushed in to the hilt.

"Oh," Erica said, her voice unnaturally high.

"You okay?" he asked again.

"Oh," she said again, in the same voice. She was so beyond okay. This—this utter connection. It was amazing. Euphoric.

Brennan appeared to conclude all was not well for he began to withdraw.

"No!" Erica said quickly and held onto his rear. "I'm—I'm all right. Incredible. Great."

He released a long breath. "Thank God." He flexed. "I have to move."

"Yes. Please. Move."

He moved. Long, elegant, powerful thrusts. His strokes hit Erica in a surprisingly sensitive spot inside.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, *Brennan*." Pleasure streaked through her with each movement of his body. She'd thought she was euphoric before. Now she felt quite outside the world of everyday experience.

But he kept pushing her further, higher. Until at last she was so high she saw stars.

"Oh, God," she whispered, overwhelmed by the climax.

"Erica." It was a half-shout as his whole body jerked. "Erica," he said again, much softer, and lowered over her.

She held him as close as he was holding her, his body still buried deeply inside her. She was certain they'd, at least for a moment, become one. For as long as she could, she held onto this infinitely precious feeling, the feeling of belonging.

She wished she could hold onto it forever.

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This was a terrible mistake.

Brennan lay on his back on top of his counterpane, naked. Next to him lay Erica, similarly naked.

He'd just had sex with her.

A cold feeling gripped his stomach. He recognized the sensation as terror. He'd gone and done *exactly* what he'd warned himself not to do. Gotten involved with her.

One couldn't get much more involved than naked and physically entwined.

With a sigh, she curled and snuggled against him.

The small movement, trusting, softened the bite of his terror. But softening his terror wasn't a good thing. If she was snuggling against him, it meant she wasn't feeling the mistake the same way he was.

Or, at least, not yet.

"I knew I was going to like that." She giggled breathily. "Just not that much."

A wave of gratification surged through him. Stupid gratification! As if her praise meant the start of anything. It didn't.

Nothing could grow out of the interaction they'd just had. Hell, he could already feel himself falling down a slope that was getting more slippery with every moment. And when he hit the bottom, he'd be destroyed.

But he'd just had sex with her. Certain conventions had to be upheld. "Amazing," he agreed. It was true, after all. He cleared his throat.

Beside him, she went still.

What had she heard? And how? Hastily, he turned and embraced her. Despite his recent climax and his anxiety, the sensation of her body in his arms sent an arc of lust through him. "Thank you," he told her. "I've been wanting to do that. Badly. And it was wonderful. Beyond anything I imagined."

She relaxed a little in his arms and hugged him back.

The dangerous part came when she pulled away to look at him. Brennan knew he had to meet her eyes. Forcefully, he put in mind how amazing their lovemaking had been: her tight muscles and soft breasts, the snug warmth built just for him. It was all true.

But as she looked at him, the softness in her eyes dimmed into a growing suspicion. One side of her mouth curled upward. "But?"

She was incredibly perceptive.

"But—nothing." Brennan found a smile. This mistake was his. She shouldn't have to pay for it. At the same time, he did need a way to stop this train.

She drew the edge of the counterpane over herself, covering her nakedness. "But—you hadn't planned this. You hadn't intended to get this...involved." Suspicion was now the dominant expression on her face.

He paused. She was exactly right, but... "Did either of us plan it?"

With one arm holding the counterpane over her, Erica looked up at him with her sky blue eyes. It was an unflinching, penetrating gaze. "Of course not. Neither of us planned this. Because neither of us was *thinking*." She tilted her head and waited. Handing him the conversational ball.

He pushed up onto one elbow and looked down at her. She was naked under the counterpane she clutched. If he gave her the correct response, he could unwrap her from the bedding and enjoy that marvelous body again.

But giving her that response would be disastrous, probably as much for her as it would be for him. He could not handle a relationship. Not once since Lois had he even tried to do so.

On the other hand, she deserved better than having him cut her off at the knees.

He picked at a loose thread on the blanket and thought carefully about his words. "Sometimes things that aren't planned turn into wonderful surprises. Other times, they turn out to be...mistakes." He glanced at her. "I think this was a little of both."

Her penetrating gaze dropped.

Shit. He reached to touch her.

She whisked her arm out of reach. "It's okay."

Her gesture clearly told him that it was not okay.

"Erica—"

"I get it." With her voice sharp, she sat up, still clutching the blanket to her. "It was a mistake. Of course it was. And I agree."

Had it been a mistake? Okay, he'd pretty much just said so. Yet, even so and even given his desperation to extricate himself from the situation, Brennan rebelled against the characterization. He sat up, too. "I'm not sorry about it."

This was true. It would be impossible to feel sorry he'd experienced Erica at her most glorious. And he had to admit that while inside her, for a few amazing moments, he'd felt fulfilled, as if he were doing what he was supposed to be doing.

But that didn't mean it hadn't been a mistake. Brennan knew from bitter experience that one's mind could play tricks, convincing a person that something potentially destructive was wonderful.

She obviously heard his thoughts better than his actual words. With a sharp look in his direction, she quickly unwound from the counterpane and then slid off the bed. She reached for and grabbed her knit shorts. "But it was still a mistake."

He swallowed at the sight of her naked body shimmying into her shorts. It occurred to him he wasn't going to get to see this again.

"Like I said already, I agree," she went on. She found her shirt and drew it over her head. "I haven't changed my mind about...things. I don't want to get involved with you."

Since this was exactly what Brennan had been thinking, the stab of pain her comment produced was inexplicable. To disguise this effect, he too got off the bed and scooped up his pants. Perhaps, given their mutually impulsive actions, it was inevitable they'd end up lashing out and hurting each other. So when Brennan spoke, he did his best to keep his voice even and his tone neutral. "I understand."

Erica's head emerged from the top of her shirt. She wiggled to straighten the garment. "So, we'll just put this whole thing down to 'better left forgotten.'"

"Right." The anger that was climbing up through his hurt was completely unfathomable. She was offering him exactly what he wanted.

She shoved her feet into her shoes. "I want you to know I'm not angry or anything."

"Neither am I." Brennan was well aware they were both lying through their teeth. "Let me—let me walk you out." Despite everything, he didn't feel ready to let her go.

She'd never come here again, they'd never do this again... Hell, was he blaming *her* for that?

Grabbing her underthings in one hand and with her face a stone mask, Erica shrugged.

Brennan followed her down the stairs. The air was thick with everything each of them wasn't saying. Perhaps the frustration of future desire unfulfilled contributed its share to the tension.

Erica led the way to the kitchen and back to the door through which they'd entered, oh, so impetuously. She stood for a moment before it and then turned. She looked up at Brennan with a light of challenge in her eyes. "Listen. I think we should avoid each other from now on."

Not an unexpected conclusion, but Brennan felt as though she'd socked him in the gut. There was nothing to say, however, except: "Okay."

He was an idiot. He'd had her talking to him again, even laughing with him. They could have socialized together, been able to do things all together with Liam.

He'd screwed up everything.

Once again, she seemed to know what he was feeling. The hard expression on her face softened a little. "Look, you're a good guy, but neither one of us wants a relationship—at least not with each other." Her mouth curved ruefully. "And I think today demonstrates we're not very good at impulse control."

She was absolutely correct, practically saying out loud everything he'd been thinking, yet he couldn't help feeling resentful. "You're right."

She shot him a brief, unreadable look. "So—goodbye." Saying which, she whirled back toward the door, opened it, and closed it after her.

Slowly, on auto-pilot, Brennan turned the deadbolt.

He supposed he wasn't going to be making her dinner tonight after all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Erica slowed and turned her car into the driveway of the house where she'd dropped off Liam on the previous afternoon. She bit her lower lip. Simply sit here in the car and honk for Liam or park and knock on the door? Would it be looked upon as rude to honk? Or overprotective to park and knock?

If she were actually a mother, she'd have had fifteen years of experience to tell her things like this. Instead, she opted to park the car and walk up the stone walkway to the front door of the ranch house. Better safe than sorry.

Those were words she should have paid attention to yesterday. Before the door, Erica grimaced and briefly closed her eyes. She wished she could delete the whole episode from history. On unconsidered impulse, she'd completely let down her guard. She'd *had* sex with him—with a former drunk. What an idiotic thing to do.

Letting her eyes flutter open, Erica released a resigned sigh. To be honest, the idiotic part had nothing to do with Brennan's soiled past. She'd long ago concluded he wasn't evil. In fact—this was the hardest part to admit—she'd been open to the idea of beginning a relationship with him.

Obviously, this had not been a wise thing to want. He'd thoroughly rejected her.

Pausing before she knocked on the door, Erica tried to remember how Brennan had put it. He wasn't sorry about having sex with her, but it had nevertheless been a huge mistake. Why? She hadn't had enough time to scare him by acting clingy or anything. But he'd basically panicked.

Shaking her head, Erica concluded his reasons didn't matter. Bottom line, she shouldn't have trusted that far. She should have known better. You couldn't trust anybody.

Taking a breath, Erica knocked on the door. As she heard someone approach, she quickly put on a game face. She didn't want anybody, and particularly Liam, to guess she'd had wild, unconsidered sex with her handsome next-door neighbor—and promptly been dumped.

A middle-aged woman, pleasantly plump, opened the door. She wore her hair in an old-fashioned, fifties-style bob and had an apron tied over polyester pants. Her face broke into a wide smile on seeing Erica. "Oh, are you Erica? Good morning. So nice to see you. Come on in."

Feeling somewhat a fraud—no one could be that happy to see Erica—she stepped over the threshold. The house was simply decorated but had a warm, homey atmosphere. A needlepoint image of flowers adorned the foyer wall.

"We were so pleased you let Liam stay overnight," Mrs. Jorgensen went on, leading the way to a carpeted living room, here decorated with surprisingly modern paintings. "Nelson doesn't have many— Well, it was awfully nice of you both. That's all." She beamed at Erica. Then she hurried to the base of a set of stairs that ended on the carpet. "Nelson! Liam's mother is here!"

Erica coughed. When Mrs. Jorgensen turned back to her, she explained. "Actually, I'm his sister."

Mrs. Jorgensen's face seemed to collapse. "Oh, that's right. I'm so sorry! Nelson told me about Liam's father— I guess your father, too. He told me about him passing. I'm so very sorry for your loss."

The other woman's sincere sympathy drew a now-familiar sensation of mixed grief and anger over Erica. "Thank you."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Liam appeared, followed by a much shorter, rounder boy. Liam had his backpack over one shoulder and a neutral expression on his face. He looked at Nelson's mother. "Thank for having me over, Mrs. Jorgensen."

"Oh, we were happy you could stay." Mrs. Jorgensen was back to beaming.

Erica noticed that Nelson wore a big smile, too. "So we'll meet up on that server at five, right?" he said, addressing Liam.

"Yeah, the players aren't quite as rude on Skywars," Liam replied. He turned to Erica, and his neutral mask softened into a brief, shy smile. "Uh, hi."

"Hey." Erica felt a little of her tension relax. He didn't appear to be angry at her any more. "You ready to go?"

"Sure."

After they walked out the door, accompanied by Mrs. Jorgensen with her big smile, Liam shot Erica another quick smile. "Thanks. I do appreciate you coming to pick me up."

Erica realized she recognized the signals Liam was sending. He was afraid she might be mad at him or didn't like him any more. Probably because of the sullen slump he'd given her on the way over here yesterday. He'd been upset she hadn't wanted to talk about Dad.

Erica threw an arm around his shoulders and gave a brief squeeze. "No problem, punk. Better than letting you drive."

"Hey, in six months..." Liam claimed as they walked to her car. "Learner's permit, baby."

Erica's mood felt much lighter than before as she climbed into the car. Maybe she'd be okay at this guardian thing, after all. "We'll see," she claimed teasingly.

Liam closed the door after himself. "What do you mean, 'we'll see'?"

Erica smiled as she put her key in the ignition. "Got to prove you're responsible and everything."

"Oh, yeah? Well, so do you." Liam was grinning, obviously intending his words as a joke. But then, while looking at her, his smile faded. "Oh, man. I'm sorry."

"What?" She struggled to maintain a smile. The truth was, his words had hit a nerve. She certainly hadn't been responsible last night.

"I shouldn't have implied you don't come up to the mark or anything." Liam sounded earnest. "I know you're working hard to get your new business going, and it's going to be awesome."

Erica could feel the color drain from her face. "Right." She still hadn't sent out those flyers. But she would. Tomorrow. She'd get over her stupid fear and insecurity. Of course someone would call her out of the two hundred flyers she planned to mail. She was good at what she did, and soon people in the area would learn about it.

As she backed the car out of the Jorgensen driveway, she shot Liam a quick look. He seemed enthusiastic about her business. Maybe he could talk her out of her fears.

With a mental head shake, Erica shifted into drive and proceeded down the road. No. Better not to confide.

It was always a mistake to trust.

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Chem exam first thing tomorrow, but that wasn't what was on Liam's mind as he sat at his bedroom desk, shooting rubber bands at a poster of Xenomorph, the horrific killer creature from *Aliens*. He already knew the chemistry material. Once he read it, it was in the gray cells. So his mind wandered far afield from the open textbook in front of him.

Erica. She'd been acting weird ever since she'd picked him up from Nelson's house this morning. It was obvious something was bothering her, but she just as obviously didn't intend to tell Liam what it was.

Liam drew back a rubber band and—splat—nailed ol' Xeno. His mind went to the most obvious problem Erica might keep from him: the guardianship. He knew they had the home visit scheduled for Wednesday next week. Maybe she was freaking over that. He shot another rubber band and only nicked Xenomorph's tail. Or maybe Erica was stressing about restarting her physical training business here in Palmwood.

Liam winced as he picked up another rubber band. Unfortunately, both of those were issues he'd pretty much foisted on her.

Restless now, he got up from his chair and wandered toward the window. He peered down. No car in the driveway next door. Brennan was probably working today. Sunday was a big day at the store. Although, hadn't he started to delegate most weekends...?

Liam's eyes widened. Brain blast. Was it possible Erica's mysterious problem involved Brennan? Oh, yeah, she claimed she didn't want to have anything to do with a former alcoholic, but as far as Liam could tell, she was still into their neighbor.

Last night, Liam hadn't been home. While he'd been gone, could the two of them have...?

His blooming enthusiasm faded. No. Erica would be acting much weirder than she was if they'd gone and done *that*.

Liam's lips tightened, and he rubbed the edge of the window frame as another thought occurred. Maybe what had Erica bothered had something to do with their older brother, Alex. Could she have found out something about him?

Could she have discovered that Liam knew more than he'd admitted to anyone?

Guilt surged up his throat. Breathing steadily, Liam struggled to reassure himself. Erica didn't know anything about Alex. And if she guessed Liam knew something, she would not have been shy about confronting him with it.

But his guilt did not recede. Liam closed his eyes and set his forehead against the window frame. The truth was, he didn't feel guilty toward Erica. It was his father he was letting down. Dad had trusted Liam, and Liam was betraying that trust.

He had no call to get mad at Erica for not allowing him to grieve for Dad. Liam didn't deserve to grieve for him.

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The sun was warm for the middle of March. Brennan figured he and Liam had a good chance of running into some rattlesnakes before they finished their hike in the Saddleback Butte State Park. Fortunately, neither of them were phobic of the shy creatures, and they would both enjoy the natural encounter.

"Red-tail," Liam said, pointing toward the sky.

Brennan glanced upward where a graceful hawk soared through the blue. "Wonder where the other one is." Red-tails mated for life and were known to hunt in pairs.

"I'll keep a lookout, but he could be a loner."

On top of the fresh air and physical exertion the hike afforded, Brennan was grateful it gave him a break from his hectic schedule. Both stores had been demanding the lion's share of his time over the past couple weeks. But he'd made a firm date to spend today with Liam.

He didn't want either his work or his screwup with Erica to interfere with his relationship with the teen. Admittedly, he'd recently allowed both work and his screwup to do so. When Brennan wasn't busy at the store, he was careful to avoid Erica. Which meant, at times, avoiding Liam.

She appeared to be doing her best to avoid Brennan, too. For example, she'd been conspicuously absent when Liam had run out to jump into Brennan's car two hours ago.

Now in thinking about her, Brennan had to bite his tongue—once again—from asking how she was doing. He badly wanted to know if she'd used the database he'd given her. He hoped she wouldn't scruple to take advantage of that resource. He was quite sure the list would help her find clients.

What he did not know, and did not bother asking himself, was why he cared.

Ahead, Liam came to a stop at a fork in the trail. "Are we taking the south or the north route?"

"Your call."

Liam lifted a shoulder. "Let's keep going up. North route."

"Sounds good." But inwardly, Brennan frowned. Other than his alert about the red-tailed hawk, Liam had been unusually subdued.

Brennan really should have made more of an effort to spend time with the kid.

Lately, it seemed as though there were a lot of 'should haves' in his life with respect to the Carmichaels. Brennan now wondered if he should have made such a panicked exit from what he'd begun with Erica. At the time, he'd thought he was taking a restrained, even heroic, path. But perhaps instead what he'd chosen was the cowardly, wimp-out path. Was she so potentially volatile? Was he so delicate? Yes, yes, it was better safe than sorry, but still—

But still— There was no way to go back and change what he had done.

Brennan called ahead to Liam. "When do you want to stop for lunch?"

Turning back, Liam gave Brennan his first grin. "Now."

"Bottomless pit. I always said that's your middle name."

"Think of it this way. Our backpacks will be a lot lighter after I'm through with them."

"True, true."

Liam pointed toward a scrubby live oak about twenty yards ahead. "How about sitting under that tree?"

"Sounds good."

They settled on some boulders under the oak. Brennan extracted the roast beef sandwiches he'd made and the bags of trail mix.

Liam got right to work on the food with the appetite of a growing teenager. But he didn't talk while he ate, which would have been his normal mode. By now, he usually would have peppered Brennan with a thousand questions about politics or handed him space trivia he'd gleaned from the Internet. Instead, complete silence.

Brennan concentrated on opening a Ziploc of mixed nuts and yogurt chips. "I could be wrong, but I get the idea maybe something's on your mind."

Liam glanced at him and finished chewing a bite of sandwich. "Yeah, sorta."

Calmly, Brennan opened his plastic bag and reached in for a handful. He wasn't so old he couldn't remember being a teenager himself. Besides, nobody liked to get pushed.

Brennan enjoyed two more mouthfuls of trail mix before Liam spoke again.

"Do you know there's a date now? For the guardianship thing?"

Carefully, Brennan swallowed while his heart picked up its pace. "You mean for the hearing?"

"Right. It's set for Thursday next week." Liam pushed the toe of his hiking boot in the dust. "It's kinda scary, you know? I mean, sure, Erica is going to get appointed and everything, but it's still a...fraught event." Liam glanced over toward Brennan with a brief smile. "Fraught. SAT word, right?"

Brennan chuckled. Meanwhile, he wondered where Liam was going with this. Perhaps he simply wanted validation it was okay to feel anxious. "Fraught, yeah. I can see that," he cautiously agreed.

"Well, see, here's the thing," Liam went on. "Erica's been great. She really has. Moving to Palmwood and all, but..." While his voice trailed off, his expression grew agonized.

"But?" Brennan hadn't a clue.

"But...she's not, like, a port in a storm, if you know what I mean. She's not even old enough to be my mother. And—" Liam's gaze averted and he finished in a rush. "I'd really like it if you could be at the hearing, too."

Brennan paused in the middle of chewing a cashew. The kid wanted *him* to attend the guardianship hearing? Horning in on Erica?

Perhaps sensing ambivalence, Liam returned his gaze to Brennan. "Please, Bren. I would just feel, you know, more confident if you were there. Like nothing bad could happen."

"I can't prevent bad things from happening." Brennan immediately shook his head. "I mean, nothing bad is going to happen." Damn. He didn't like handing out paper promises. But, really, what bad thing could happen—other than him being there and thus annoying Erica?

"Okay," Liam conceded. "But, still. You could handle it if something, you know, unexpected happened."

Tilting his head, Brennan narrowed his eyes at the kid. He sounded as if knew about something unexpected that might happen. "Such as...?"

Liam raised his shoulders. "I have no idea. But it's court, you know? I've never been in a real courtroom. And that home visit—" He mock shuddered. "I did not like that lady, poking into our business. It was totally insulting."

Yes, Brennan could see how it might have been. And he couldn't blame Liam for feeling apprehensive about a courtroom setting. But for Brennan to attend? With Erica? It would be completely out of bounds.

The woman had apparently adjusted her schedule to make sure she never ran into him while jogging, gardening, or going to the grocery store. It was unlikely she'd welcome him at so significant a family event as the guardianship hearing.

"I don't know..." Brennan hedged. He didn't want to expose the problems existing between himself and Erica.

Liam's gaze went pleading. "Please."

Was there a valid reason to turn Liam down? Embarrassment? Shame? Because he still thought about—and fantasized about—Erica?

Brennan released a long breath. "It has to be okay with your sister. She has the last word." There. He'd dropped the 'bad guy' role on her. How was that for acting like a responsible, recovered adult?

Liam's face lit. "All right. Thanks, Bren!"

Feeling like a complete fraud, Brennan accepted Liam's grateful hug. "It's up to Erica," he reminded Liam.

He wasn't sure if he wanted her to say yes or no.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Hi, Erica. We're back!"

Erica heard Liam's voice from her position in the dining room. Her file folders regarding her new business were spread over the table, and she'd just hit the 'end' button on the phone. A big smile was on her face.

Her first client. She had an appointment to meet the woman tomorrow. Okay, this didn't make her business a full-fledged operation yet, but it was a start.

Her smile abruptly dropped. Wait a minute. What was this about 'we'? Liam had said, '*We're* back.' He and Brennan had gone hiking. Was Liam bringing *Brennan* into the house?

No, Brennan would not intrude on her that way.

But her chest felt tight as she rose from her seat at the table and approached the opening to the front hall.

Two dusty males were pulling heavy backpacks from their shoulders. One of them was Brennan.

Looking up, he gave her a nervous smile.

Okay, she could guess what must have happened. Liam had invited him inside, and Brennan hadn't known how to refuse without giving away that he and Erica had issues.

Liam bent to put his hands on his knees and blew out a long breath. "It was a great hike, Erica. You shoulda come along."

Crossing her arms, she leaned against the jamb of the dining room opening. "And horn in on your guy time? I don't think so."

Liam turned to face Brennan. "She only does clean, girly kind of exercise."

Brennan's gaze flashed briefly toward Erica. In that moment she knew they were both remembering their rough and dirty basketball game.

Heat sparked through her.

"Anyway." Abruptly straightening, Liam picked up his backpack and spoke in a rush. "Brennan has something he wants to ask you, so I'll just take my stuff and run upstairs."

"What—?" Erica lowered her arms, but she wasn't fast enough to halt Liam, who literally ran up the stairs.

She was left alone in the hall with dusty, manly Brennan.

Awkward didn't begin to describe how she felt at being so obviously shoved together with him. But then her own awkward feeling made her angry. She needed to grab herself some pride.

Putting the idea in mind, she slowly turned from her regard of the empty stairs and raised an eyebrow at Brennan.

"Sorry about that." He winced. "I made a promise I couldn't get out of."

Normal, Erica told herself. *Act normal*. She maintained a determinedly neutral expression even though her heart was beating stupidly fast. "What promise?"

He ran a hand through his hair in obvious frustration. "Liam wanted me— Look, this is completely out of bounds. I know that. But Liam wants me to come to the hearing about the guardianship." Brennan closed his eyes and opened them again. "I said it was fine with me, but it would have to be okay with you."

Great. Leaving her to be the bad guy and say no. Hell, no. She didn't want Brennan at such a...an intimate family event. He didn't belong. He'd rejected her. Okay, she'd also rejected him, but only after he'd started it.

Brennan blew out a breath. "I know it makes you out to be the bad guy if you say no, so if it's not okay with you—and I completely understand if it isn't—I'll tell him I decided on my own it wasn't a good idea for me to come."

Perversely, Erica didn't feel any less irritated with Brennan for his willingness to play the heavy, after all. Of course he would do that...because he was nice. Always the nice guy.

She realized then that if she wanted to appear normal and as if she weren't still hurting from his rejection, there was only one thing she could say. "It's okay."

Brennan's eyes widened.

Privately pleased that she'd been able to surprise him, Erica lifted a nonchalant shoulder. "Sure, come along. The more the merrier. Clint'll be there, too. Anyway, it's all just a formality." Even as she said this last bit, however, Erica recalled the pinch-faced investigator who'd done the home visit. It had felt ugly and dirty to have her walk through the house and ask intrusive questions—as if this weren't the same home in which Liam had grown up for the past fifteen years. Erica would be glad when this whole thing was behind them.

"Um, thank you." Brennan looked oddly overwhelmed. "I guess you know I feel some connection to Liam even if he's going to be surrounded by family. It's because, uh..."

"Because of my dad and your relationship to him." Why pussyfoot around the fact? Brennan and her father had been buds. Alcoholic buds.

Okay, fact check. They'd met as *recovering* alcoholics. Erica was coming to terms with this reality about her father, his lasting recovery. The work put into the house and the yard clearly showed how diligent and responsible Richard Carmichael had become. As for Brennan, he'd obviously got past his problems, too, considering he ran two amazing sporting goods stores.

Now Brennan was giving Erica an odd look. She supposed it was the first time she'd spoken of her father without going off the deep end, emotionally.

"Right," he said carefully. "Because I became friends with your father. In part. Anyway, thank you again for letting me do what Liam asked."

Erica noted how clear he was making it that he was lending support to Liam. Only Liam.

She shrugged again. "No problem."

"Uh, can I ask, how does he seem to you?"

"Fine," Erica automatically answered. Then she had wonder if that was true. Liam usually acted fine, but underneath it all she sensed depression. She had no idea what to do about it, assuming there was anything she *could* do.

Brennan nodded, but he didn't make any move to leave, instead shifting weight and clenching his fists. "Look—"

Erica's brows drew down. He appeared almost...nervous. Despite herself, her heart sped up again. What could he want to say that might be so difficult? That he'd made a terrible error in calling their lovemaking a mistake? Some other, equally unlikely statement?

When Brennan finally looked up, her heart stopped altogether. The yearning in his eyes was deep and unmistakable.

What? Had she been *correct* in imagining he might want to retract his rejection?

The air in the little hall grew heavy. Her heart started up again, violently.

He let his breath out with a small laugh. "Nothing. What can I say? Only thank you again. I'll see you on Thursday."

Somehow, Erica managed to speak. "Yes, see you then."

With one last look at her, Brennan picked up his backpack and went out the front door.

Erica stood in the hall by herself, feeling confused and excited. She had to be wrong. Brennan could not still feel attracted to her. Then she released a breath and gave her head a brisk shake. How ridiculous to even consider the notion. Besides, she didn't care if Brennan were still attracted to her.

Of course she didn't.

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The courtroom was clean but clearly old. The linoleum on the floor was circa 1980, the acoustic tiles on the ceiling reminded Erica of her high school. She received the same sensation here of looming authority.

Erica thought Liam caught the same vibe. He was breathing a little fast, and his eyes were wide. Everyone had repeatedly told him this was going to be a slam dunk, but Erica could not blame him for his nerves. The place reeked of bureaucratic power even without the judge yet before them.

Clint appeared oblivious to the atmosphere, lounging casually on the other side of Liam in the metal chair behind their table at the front of the room.

Erica glanced toward the clock—still early—and smoothed a nervous hand down the front of her beige pantsuit. Her hand froze as she heard the door at the back breathe open.

Brennan had arrived. She didn't have to glance in that direction to know this. The nerves in her back constricted.

She had not been able to forget that strange moment in the front hall last Sunday when he'd looked at her with apparent yearning. In retrospect, she supposed he'd only wanted to continue talking about Liam. Maybe there'd been a confidence given he hadn't wanted to break. Yeah, whatever Brennan had refrained from telling her had probably been something like that.

Probably...but she was unable to completely convince herself of this theory.

"Hey." Clint roused from his lethargy to stand and smile. "Brennan, my man. I'm glad you could make it."

Brennan was wearing a blue suit the near side of black. His hair was newly clipped, and Erica would've bet money his tie cost over a hundred bucks. He smiled easily at Clint. "Anything I can do to help." He set a hand on Liam's shoulder, and the teenager shot him a grateful look.

Briefly, Brennan's gaze shifted to her. "Erica."

"Brennan." It was a sad fact that her heart rate increased as their eyes briefly met. She did her best to disguise any reaction she had to his presence, however, returning the nod he gave her with what she hoped was a similarly casual expression.

Was it remotely possible that he was having to make a similar effort to look unaffected?



A man dressed in uniform stepped out of a door near the front. "Please rise," he intoned.

Erica hastened to her feet. Her stomach couldn't help constricting with her old childhood fear of authority, a fear born from her run-ins with an unpredictable father.

A small woman dressed in long black robes strode out the door the bailiff had opened. She looked to be in her sixties but moved like a much younger woman as she went to take a seat at the high podium at the front of the room. The nameplate on the podium announced she was Judge R. Devon.

The stricture in Erica's stomach tightened. The judge reminded her powerfully of her eleventh grade English teacher. They both had the same sour expression that seemed to complain, 'you didn't do as I asked.'

"You may be seated." The judge's voice matched her face. She shuffled among some papers in front of her.

Sinking to a seat, Erica could not relax the tight ball of her stomach.

"Which one of you is Erica Carmichael?" Judge Devon asked, ridiculously, Erica thought. She was the only woman sitting at the front table.

But her heart pounded as she tentatively raised one hand. "Ahem. I am."

"I see." The judge looked down through her half glasses at Erica. "And Liam?"

Liam's face was pale. "Here, ma'am. I mean, your honor."

The judge gave him a penetrating look.

In the remnant of her brain not taken over by old, irrational fears, Erica found Judge Devon's attitude hardly befit a family court and a boy who'd recently lost his father.

"You've written, Liam, that you would like your sister, Erica Carmichael, to become your guardian now that your father has died. Have I stated your opinion correctly?"

Liam was trembling. "Uh... Yes, your honor."

The judge folded her hands on her desk. "In this case, that means your sister would have control of your father's money—your money now in trust. So, tell me, Liam, how well do you know your sister, Erica?"

"Uh..." Liam frowned, obviously confused.

Judge Devon leaned over her hands. "How often have you seen your sister over the past year?"

"Oh. Well, she came to live with us—that is, with me—um, in February."

"That was right after your father died. Now, before then, how often had you seen her?"

Liam was silent a longish moment. "I—I—"

"You did not see her at all, did you?"

"I— There was Facebook—"

"In fact, you have not seen your sister very much since you were born, have you?"

Liam's pale face was now red. Erica started to feel angry. Why was the judge badgering him when the person she obviously had a problem with was Erica?

"Your honor—" Erica began.

"You'll get your turn." Judge Devon shot Erica a killing glance, looking even more like the eleventh grade English teacher. Then she turned back to Liam. "Liam, why have you stated that you want to live with your sister and let her act as conservator for your money?"

Liam was still red in the face, now clearly angered beyond his earlier fluster. "Because I do. Erica's been great. She moved to Palmwood for me, gave up her business—"

"Yes, yes," Judge Devon interrupted with a small smile. "We'll get to that. Now, Clint Carmichael."

By now Clint had obviously got the same picture of this woman that everybody else in the room was receiving. He answered with an enviable mix of respect and determination, "Yes, your honor."

"Mr. Carmichael, you live in the area, you're in your father's will as guardian, and you have a longstanding relationship with your younger brother. Yet you are not, in fact, taking over his guardianship. Why is that?"

Clint hesitated. "Erica, Liam, and I all spoke about this, discussing our relative situations—"

"Answer the question, Mr. Carmichael."

Clint looked taken aback, but he kept his characteristic cool. He even smiled reassuringly. "This is the thing: I'm going through a divorce. A rough one. So, we all thought it would be better to keep Liam out of it."

The judge smiled back at him but not in a nice way. She'd clearly got whatever she was looking for. "Of course. Now, Ms. Carmichael." She drew the name out while turning to Erica.

"Yes, your honor."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a physical trainer."

"A physical trainer. And what kind of income does a physical trainer make?"

Erica could feel her face warm. "I can support myself."

The judge's lips twitched into an unpleasant smile. "Where are you living now, Ms. Carmichael?"

The heat in Erica's face increased. "I'm living in our family home, where Liam lives."

Judge Devon feigned surprise. "That's right. Liam said you'd moved to Palmwood. But physical training is, well, physical, isn't it? How are you doing this job if you aren't physically with the clients you left behind?"

They were now in territory where the judge had some justification for her disapproval. Erica refrained from clearing her throat. "I'm setting up my business here in Palmwood and plan to find new clients here."

"Um-hm, and do you have any?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you have any new clients?"

Erica had exactly one. The woman she'd met on Monday had been thrilled with Erica's work, but she was still only one client. Erica's throat moved, but she had nothing to say. One damn client.

"That's what I thought." The judge's fake smile sobered. "I have to confess, I don't like the way this looks, Ms. Carmichael. You might be for real, but how do I know? After years of absence, you're mighty quick to move into your minor brother's house as soon as there's money to be had. Meanwhile, you have no visible means of support."

Dread added weight to the rock that was Erica's stomach. Not only was she a career failure, but now she was going to screw up Liam's access to their father's pension. Oh,

jeez, was this going to affect the actual guardianship, too? "If you're not satisfied with my credentials, then let my brother Clint be conservator—"

The judge waved her words down. "He's even less trustworthy than you are. Messy divorces are costly."

Erica could hear Clint draw in a hard breath. She couldn't believe this was happening. The hearing was supposed to be a slam-dunk. Instead, her business inadequacy, of all things, was putting Liam's future at risk.

And Brennan was witness to the whole thing. Somehow, that made it even worse.

Sighing, the judge folded her hands on her desk again. "On the other hand, you're all family. God knows, that's supposed to count for something. So this is what I'm going to do. I'm giving you four weeks, Ms. Carmichael. Four weeks to prove to me that you have some means of supporting yourself and thus no reason to plunder your brother's estate. The clerk will set a hearing, and I will see you then." She picked up her gavel and tapped it. "Case put over for four weeks."

And that was that. The piece of cake had crumbled in their hands. To Erica's side, Liam sat very stiffly. He was obviously terrified. It wasn't clear how the judge's ruling on the conservatorship of the estate affected his actual guardianship. Seated beyond Liam, Clint was clearly furious.

Brennan, of course, presented his very best version of a rock.

Erica was aware that no judge on earth would have presumed to decree Brennan unfit to handle money put in trust for a sibling. He was a success.

While she'd been deemed exactly what she knew herself to be: inadequate, suspect. The anger heating her face was directed toward herself. After four weeks of supposedly 'getting her business off the ground' she had all of one client?

She almost didn't blame the judge for her decision.

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For a moment Brennan couldn't move. Unbelievable. The judge had rejected Erica as guardian for her brother—and after all Erica'd done for Liam.

From his seat behind the family, he could see Erica's determinedly neutral expression and Liam's frankly terrified face. Clint stared forward in apparent disbelief.

"Come on," Clint spoke, his voice carefully calm. "Let's get out of here." He rose from his seat.

Erica and Liam followed his lead.

Brennan trailed the three of them out the big double doors at the back of the courtroom.

He wondered frantically what they could do now. They'd all assumed Liam's guardianship had been taken care of when Erica had agreed to move to Palmwood. Now it was back in a state of uncertainty.

Anger swelled inside him as he followed the rest of them down the echoing corridors of the courthouse. The judge had had no call to put Liam's situation back in flux. Neither had she had any right to treat Erica like an opportunist. But anger was rarely useful. He did his best to suppress the emotion as they walked past the checkpoint and toward the main door. What he needed was something constructive he could do.

That he needed to do something was not up for debate. He'd promised Richard Carmichael to make sure Liam would be okay. Having his money cut off was not okay.

Meanwhile, Brennan had encouraged Erica to close her business in LA and move to Palmwood. It appeared that idea was a disaster as well.

He had to fix this.

Clint led the way through the paved plaza in front of the courthouse. By the flagpole in the center of the plaza, he came to a halt, blowing out a gusty breath.

Liam, Erica, and Brennan gathered around him.

"Okay, I'll admit it," Clint stated. "This is insane. That *judge* is insane."

Erica, her face still carefully masked, lifted a shoulder. "I can see her point of view."

Clint looked offended. "The hell you can."

"So..." Liam's voice wobbled. "What's going to happen now?"

"First of all, we're not going to worry," Clint advised. It was clear his words were intended to reassure Liam rather than indicate his own state of mind. His hand shook as he set it on Liam's shoulder. "Judge Devon just wants to see Erica make some gains toward having a job or a going business. It's all—symbolic."

Was it? Brennan supposed it was possible, but he had a feeling even Clint wasn't sure this was true.

"Oh, symbolic," Liam said. "Well, Erica's obviously going to make gains."

Erica made no claim one way or the other.

How many clients had she acquired? Brennan wondered. Surely by now she had at least a few. He knew from her treatment of his pulled muscle that she was excellent at her craft. Given time, she could build herself a healthy little business, possibly even branch out...

But they didn't have time.

"You betcha," Clint assured Liam. "Your sister's going to pull this off. She's never quit anything."

Brennan detected concern, however, beneath Clint's apparent confidence. While Brennan agreed that Erica wasn't a quitter, four weeks wasn't very long to go from zero to full financial stability. They needed something more certain, something that would convince the judge Erica had no designs whatsoever on her minor brother's money...

Brennan's heart began beating heavier as an idea occurred to him. There was indeed a surer way, one that would not involve the risk of time. Oh, it would involve some personal risk, true, but not all that much, not if he kept this a business deal.

He regarded Erica, whose thoughts appeared to be inward. She was probably wondering how in the world she could build an entire, viable business in four lousy weeks.

Whatever anger and distress Brennan had been feeling was transforming quickly to a happy excitement. There was an incredibly silver lining here. His idea could work. It could work out well for everybody.

Okay, himself included.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Erica dropped Liam back at school to attend his fifth period class. She'd judged it best for him to continue his normal routine as if the sky hadn't fallen in on him—again.

The mask she'd drawn over herself ever since the judge had given her ruling was starting to wear thin as Erica let herself into the house. Judge Devon had done an excellent job of cutting Erica down to size. Everything the judge had said had, unfortunately, been true. Okay, Erica did not actually plan to raid Liam's estate, but that was a detail. She was inadequate, both financially and as a sister. All those years away—she had only once seen Liam in the flesh during that time. Facebook, my butt.

Still in her business suit, Erica dropped onto the couch in the living room and folded her arms over her chest. She was unable to contain the anger now surging up from the shield she'd put over it. She knew the anger was all directed at herself, which made it particularly unpleasant.

The doorbell rang.

Hardly thinking about what she was doing, Erica rose and went to open the front door.

Brennan stood on her threshold.

Her chest constricted. He, also, was still in his suit, and he looked amazing. Cool, calm, controlled. Nobody would look at this man and assume he was going to raid the kitty.

"Hello, Erica," he said in his luscious, deep voice.

She thought about reminding him of their 'let's avoid each other' edict, but she could understand him disobeying it under the circumstances. "You want to come in?"

"Please."

Hopeful that she was not revealing how humiliated she felt, Erica stepped back from the door.

Brennan walked in.

After leading the way to the living room, Erica indicated the cushioned chair for Brennan and seated herself back on the couch. What she wanted was solitude in which to lick her wounds, but she had to admit Brennan had some stake in the situation. Since her father's death, Brennan had invested a great deal on Liam's behalf.

Plus, she should probably listen to whatever advice he had to give. Unlike her, he had his act together.

"For the record," Brennan began, "I think Judge Devon is as blind as a bat. If she couldn't see all you've sacrificed in order to do what's right for your brother— The woman should be kissing your feet."

To her surprise, Erica felt a smile tug at her lips. "That would've been something to witness."

Brennan's mouth kicked into a half smile of his own. "Unfortunately, I suspect that woman wouldn't kiss the feet of God himself."

Erica laughed out loud. Wow. She certainly hadn't thought she'd be laughing this afternoon.

"Listen." Brennan leaned forward, his forearms on his knees. "Seriously. What Judge Devon seemed to be concerned about is the appearance of financial independence."

"Yeah, I got that much." Erica's brief amusement faded.

"Clint may be right that she's not looking for a miracle. She probably just wants to see you've made some gains in starting up your business. Really, how much does she think a person can accomplish in four weeks?"

"With this woman, I'm taking no bets."

An odd gleam came into Brennan's eyes. "Exactly. She's a loose cannon. So it would be better by far if you could present her with a sure thing, a situation she couldn't argue with or belittle."

Erica frowned. "How is that possible?"

Brennan inched forward in his seat. "It's possible if we— Listen."

Listen to what? A buzzing sensation rang in Erica's ears, a warning. Something bad was about to happen. She hoped he wasn't going to offer her a job. She sucked at retail and would cost him more than she brought in.

"If you were in a financially stable situation, the judge would have to agree you're no threat to Liam's inheritance."

"Ye-e-s." *No, please don't offer me some charity job.*

"You could be in that situation if we got married."

Married! The buzzing in her ears grew so suddenly loud she could barely hear herself think. She'd only been worried about a pitying job offer. But he'd just suggested *marriage*. Impossible. Three weeks ago Brennan had rejected her. He'd thought making love to her had been a huge mistake.

"It would be like...a business deal," Brennan went on. "I wouldn't expect you to fall in love with me—and vice versa."

No, of course not. Why would anyone fall in love with inadequate Erica? At least the judge's humiliating set down hadn't been personal.

"Let me understand you." Erica took care not to raise her voice. If she looked angry, he'd win. She'd be even more humiliated. "In order to please the judge and convince her I'm not actually a dirty, rotten, conniving thief, I should...marry you."

Brennan looked taken aback. "It's not— We all know— We would do it to assure Liam's future."

Erica nodded slowly. The anger she'd been feeling toward herself earlier was now finding a different target. "Because you don't believe I could do that on my own. No way could Erica Carmichael manage to become financially stable or convince the judge on her own merits."

"That's not what I—"

"Of course it's what you meant. But it doesn't matter because big, strong Brennan can take the whole problem on his hefty shoulders."

Brennan's face went red. "I'm in a position where I can help. That's what I'm offering."

"Sacrificing yourself in marriage is a little beyond 'help,' Brennan. It's asking for sainthood."

"I don't think of it as a sacrifice."

"No? Then why haven't we spoken to each other since we landed in bed?"

"That was your idea."

"And you were plenty glad of it."

Brennan's jaw went tight. Erica was pleased to see he appeared to be getting angry, too—and showing it.

"I was not glad of the avoiding idea," he claimed. "I like you. I—I'm still attracted to you."

"Au contraire. You've made it clear you considered our little...interaction to be the biggest mistake you ever made."

"That's not— You're mischaracterizing. I was—I was—"

"Mortified? Shocked?"

"I was scared!" Brennan shouted.

His words rang into a stunned silence.

If he hadn't been mortified before, Erica could see he was feeling so now. He clearly hadn't intended to admit his fear. Meanwhile, she couldn't understand it. He'd been scared? Of what?

Brennan rose swiftly from his seat in the chair. "You're different, okay? I can't feel...safe with you."

She wasn't sure if she felt more gratified or distressed. She liked being 'different,' but what did he mean that he couldn't feel safe with her? "Okay," she said slowly. "But if I don't feel...safe, then why would you want to marry me?"

"Because." He paced toward the fireplace. "It would only be a business deal. I wouldn't need you."

Erica's lashes lowered halfway. "No, I'd be the one needing you."

At the fireplace, he winced. "Okay. Maybe. That shifts the balance of power, yeah."

Erica was starting to get a dim picture of his goal. He wanted to be the hero, and he was determined to do it by maintaining power and control—doling her charity. She was to have no power over him, not even this dubious power of making him scared.

She had no idea where he thought sex fit into this picture.

A headache stabbed behind her forehead. She wasn't so low and so incapable that she had to accept charity, particularly when it was coming in the form of a martyr sacrifice. She could take care of herself, and she could take care of Liam. In fact, she was determined to prove it.

"Go," she told Brennan.

"Erica—"

She put her hands to her forehead. Her headache was starting to concentrate, putting tremendous pressure on her eyes. It occurred to her that this was her first marriage proposal. Too bad it was such a rotten one. Brennan apparently didn't want her love even if she were willing to give it to him. "I'm not going to marry you. So you can go."

He hesitated.

She didn't take her hands away so she couldn't see him, but she could sense his eyes on her, could hear the arguments he was lining up.

She readied herself for battle. No way was he going to win.

He stilled. Did he sense her determination? Apparently so, for the next thing Erica knew, he quietly walked out of the living room. She heard his steps in the front hall and then the door opening...and closing.

He was gone.

Now alone, she felt the pressure against her eyes increase. Ever since coming out here to watch her father die, she'd been trying to do the right thing, but it had all turned to crap. Was it any wonder Brennan would offer her a loveless marriage and assume she'd be desperate enough to take him up on it?

I am not going to cry.

It required a major effort, but Erica managed to refrain from tears. She sucked it up: all of it, the judge and her accusations, Brennan and his assumption of her inadequacy. Drawing in a very deep breath, she finally lowered her hands from her forehead.

She stood up and walked into the dining room where her business files lay spread over the table. She had things to do.

And a ton of customers to rustle up before the next court date in four weeks.

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He could have offered her a loan, for crissake. Seed money for advertising her business and renting gym space. Or a job. Brennan ground his teeth together as he drove from Erica's house toward his Mission Avenue store. He could have offered Erica some more practical, less personal form of aid. But, no. He'd had to play superhero.

By the time he parked in his spot in the underground garage, he was filled with self-disgust. Had he seriously imagined Erica would go for such a piss-poor proposal? It was bad enough he'd imagined he could rescue her; he'd gone and compounded his sin by telling her that's what he intended! He could not have been more arrogant and insulting if he'd tried.

He stomped up the stairs and took the door leading straight into the store.

Sonya, his downstairs assistant, was adjusting the sign near the entrance that advocated using Diehard's tennis racket repair services. She turned with her habitually sunny smile. "Hi, Mr. Swift."

With great effort, Brennan managed not to snarl at her cheer. His bad mood was not poor Sonya's fault. He could not come up with a smile, however. "Good afternoon, Sonya."

"Uh, Mr. Swift—" She swiveled to accompany him as he stalked toward the cash registers. "I just want to remind you, you said you'd help me rearrange the team sports section today."

Brennan halted. He looked at Sonya.

She took a step back, her big smile shrinking. "Uh, when would be a good time to do that?"

*Get a grip. You're frightening Sonya.* Brennan drew in a calming breath. "Now," he decided. "Now is fine. Great, in fact." Sure. Something to distract him from his self-disgust. His only consolation in the situation was that he hadn't offered Erica love. If he'd gone that far before she rejected him, this would feel even worse.

"Oh," Sonya said. Apparently she read Brennan's expression rather than his words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt anything—"

"No, no. You're not interrupting." Brennan scrounged up an unconvincing smile. "Let's walk over there."

"Okay." Sonya did not look entirely certain, however.

Sensing that he was infecting Sonya with his mood, Brennan made a greater effort to modulate his behavior once they stood before the display of basketballs and handballs. His angst did not improve. As they discussed the arrangement of colorful boxes, he felt no interest in the task at hand, its potential outcome or rewards.

All he felt was raw, scraped misery. It was a sensation he remembered from years ago, when he was going dry and dealing with Lois's rejection.

So much for avoiding pain.



"I think you have the right idea," Brennan told Sonya, wrapping up their discussion as quickly as he could. His mood was clearly infectious. Her smile had disappeared altogether.

Not wanting to do any more damage to his employee, Brennan excused himself and made his way to his private office. Once the door was closed after him, he put his hand over his eyes and squeezed them shut. Mistakes, one after the other, ever since he'd first met Erica Carmichael. Could he possibly have handled matters any worse than he had, from helping her at the funeral to—to—just everything?

Suppressing a groan, Brennan sank into the chair behind his desk. He did not lean forward to switch on his computer but sat with his head in his hands.

He should not have had one single thing to do with Erica. She'd always been off limits to him. If he'd been smart enough to avoid her completely...?

Oddly, the thought of never having associated with Erica—never having made love to her—managed to make him feel even worse.

Brennan stared at the surface of his desk and wondered what he could do to ease this sensation of pain. Was there any way he could crawl out of his own skin?

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"Twelve sixty-one Elm," Liam told Erica as he sat in the passenger seat of her car. "It's right...here."

Erica pulled to the side of the residential street while Liam set down the list of addresses they'd printed out from Brennan's customer database. He grabbed a stack of the bright orange flyers Erica had printed advertising her physical training services.

"Take it easy this time," Erica advised him. "It won't help our case if you break your neck."

Liam threw her a grin. "I didn't fall, did I? Made it over the hedge and even missed the dog."

A short laugh escaped her. "An easy jog to distribute the flyers is good enough. Olympics-style hurdle jumping is not required."

"Be right back." Liam jumped from the car and, despite Erica's warning not to, sprinted on his way to the front door of the address on Brennan's list. There he stuck an orange flyer under the doormat. He then jogged to the next house up and set a flyer by that front door, too.

Erica had already sent the same flyers in the mail. She and Liam had decided hand-delivering a second batch would be a good idea. People might notice an ad stuck under their door better than they'd notice one mixed with a pile of competing envelopes in their mailbox. Furthermore, driving door to door this way provided an opportunity to hit a bunch of other houses in the vicinity of each target address.

As Liam left the front door and the advertising flyer, he was aware of Erica waiting in the car. Even from this distance, he could sense her anxiety. She wanted to show the judge she could build a going business.

Liam kept his face turned away from the car as he jogged past it to distribute flyers to the houses down the street. He felt bad about Erica's anxiety. He felt bad that she probably feared he was anxious, too.

Okay, he was anxious, but not about becoming destitute or—highly unlikely—scooped up by Child Protective Services. He knew neither of those things was going to happen.

He had an ace up his sleeve.

Panting, Liam made it back to the car. "Okay. Ready for the next location."

"Great. I got it on Google Maps right here." Erica handed him her phone with the next location mapped in. "You navigate."

The determinedly brave smile she flashed toward him sent an additional stab of guilt through Liam. The braver Erica had tried to act over the last week, the more frequently Liam had felt these guilty arrows. He was letting her feel afraid and anxious on his behalf when she didn't have to. Liam had a solution to the problem the judge had posed them at the hearing.

It was money the judge cared about. She wanted someone, preferably a family member, who didn't have a possible financial stake in the matter of administering Liam's money. Well, Liam had a sterling candidate for that position, someone with enough money to erase any fear of misappropriation. The guy was an attorney himself, for God's sake, one with a multi-million dollar business of his own.

"Left on Eucalyptus," Liam instructed Erica, forcing his concentration toward the map. "And then five miles. We're headed to the other side of town."

"Kay."

Liam bit his tongue and gazed out the side window at the gathering dusk. Alex Carmichael was an unassailable candidate for conservator of the estate. Wait, no. He was using a different name now. It had been absurdly simple to figure that out. All Liam had had to do was search the state's website for applications to legally change a name. The result had yielded Alexander Carmichael's transformation to Alexander Wayland. Heaven knew how he'd come up with that fake surname. They had no relatives or ancestors on either side of the family named Wayland. Probably lifted it from a phone book.

Liam silently snorted. Alex had obviously wanted to cut all possible ties to his family. Too bad Liam had proved his father right and figured out a way to locate Alex despite his effort to disappear.

"I got a guy call me from the flyer yesterday," Erica told Liam after making the left onto Eucalyptus. "Wants to meet with me tomorrow for a trial session. That's a possible lead out of only putting out twenty-five flyers."

"Hey, just the start of bigger things." This was another reason Liam was keeping his mouth shut about Alex. Erica wanted to prove herself. She deserved a chance to do that.

Or was he just making poor excuses for lying by omission?

"Oh, and how could I forget?" Erica briefly took one hand off the wheel to smack her forehead. "Also, a lady from the north side. Says she has bunch of friends who are interested in a group session. Unfortunately, she can't meet until after next week, but if I impress her, that would make ten clients at once."

"Fantastic," Liam enthused. It was okay to keep mum about Alex, he assured himself. Yeah, his oldest brother might look like a financially stable candidate for conservator of the estate, but who said Alex would be willing to take on the job? He'd left, hadn't he? Left and never come back. He'd gone so far as to change his name.

Liam had no idea why his father had been so set on Liam contacting the guy. Alex obviously didn't return the sentiment.

"Five miles goes fast in this town," Erica muttered. "Do I turn left or right at Idaho?"

"Right and...stop at the end of the block." Liam grabbed another stack of flyers. He was out the door before Erica had even pulled to a complete stop. It didn't do any good,

though. His memory of that day when he'd been alone in the hospital with his father followed him into the cool night air.

"Promise," his father had said, lying helpless on the white sheets. With a hand of skin as thin as parchment paper, he'd held Liam's hand and squeezed. "You promise to find Alex? Swear?"

"Sure, Dad," Liam had told him. He'd have promised his father the moon at that point. "I swear."

Now Liam's lips pressed together as he bent to stick a flyer under the woven doormat before a heavy, paneled door. He turned swiftly and ran at top speed toward the next house over.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Eighteen, nineteen, twenty." Erica counted over the figure of Mrs. Wilson, a well-maintained woman in her mid-fifties who, at the moment, was lying on her back in the weight machine, lifting ten pounds over her head. In the hope of gaining as a client Mrs. Wilson—and her nine exercise-minded friends—Erica had rented use of this gym on Main Street for the afternoon. Fortunately, she'd managed to schedule three other prospective clients before Mrs. Wilson.

In a row. Otherwise she'd be obliged to pay for an extra hour. Erica wouldn't get even a five-minute break, but it would be worth it if she could build up her practice.

"Twenty-one, twenty-two," Erica counted, watching Mrs. Wilson's form. It was impossible to miss the designer label blazoned on her tank top. Erica was pretty sure Mrs. Wilson's bright purple leggings alone cost as much as the two-hour rental of the gym.

"Twenty-five and done," Erica declared.

Mrs. Wilson looked winded and displeased as she rose to a sitting position.

"You did really well," Erica offered. "Now I'd like to move on to your upper abs. We'll go to the mats for crunches."

Mrs. Wilson brushed a lock of expertly dyed blond hair out of her eyes. "Shadawn always had me do squats next."

Shadawn again. It was the fourth time Erica's prospective client had mentioned her previous physical trainer in the last quarter hour. This woman had apparently been a paragon, perfect except for the unforgivable flaw of moving away to Philadelphia three months ago with her new husband.

"If you'd prefer to do squats next, that's fine with me," Erica claimed. She told herself she was catering to a client's wishes, but she suspected she was acting like a pushover. Part of her job was to take charge.

"No, we can do crunches." Mrs. Wilson shrugged. Whatever enthusiasm she'd had at the beginning of the session was quickly ebbing.

This was Erica's fault. She should have kept control and provided structure. Now her client was feeling rudderless.

"Crunches it is." Trying to repair the damage, Erica added some incentive. "That upper ab strength assists in all kinds of everyday motions and helps define your figure."

On the pale blue mat, Erica's disgruntled client settled herself on her back and raised her knees.

"Ready, go." Erica knelt next to her and counted each time Mrs. Wilson rolled her elbows toward her knees. "Good, good. Try to relax your neck."

"That's impossible," Mrs. Wilson huffed as she continued the sit-ups. "Shadawn never told me that."

Erica bit her tongue. "There are different methods."

Mrs. Wilson grunted.

The session was getting away from Erica. Of course, the one time Erica was really on the line to do a good job and impress the client was the one time she crashed and burned. She'd had six other first-time sessions with prospective clients in the last week. All six had signed up for bi-weekly sessions. Under normal circumstances, Erica would have found such data cause for celebration. Maybe it wasn't much, but it was a start.

But circumstances were not normal. Judge Devon was expecting her to have a full-fledged business by next week. If Erica could win over the difficult Mrs. Wilson, she'd gain Mrs. Wilson's nine lady friends—Mrs. Wilson had already told Erica they all wanted individual sessions along with the group time.

"Forty and done," Erica told Mrs. Wilson, whose crunches were becoming observably more wobbly.

"Thank God," Mrs. Wilson said in a gravelly voice, sitting up. She set her forearms on her knees and wrinkled her nose while looking around. "This floor is— Is this the best place you could find?"

Erica regarded the expanse of new wood plank flooring. It looked good to her, as did the clerestory windows at the ceiling, which allowed indirect light and gave the whole place an airy feel.

But she swallowed her irritation and looked toward Mrs. Wilson with a smile. "I'm open to suggestions. Do you know some other place you'd prefer?"

Mrs. Wilson lifted her shoulders. "Anywhere."

A new surge of irritation had to be tamped down before Erica had the inspiration to ask, "Where did you meet Shadawn?"

Mrs. Wilson's eyes lit up. "She had her own gym. In her house. With a view of the valley."

Of course she had. Shadawn had been perfect. "Biceps are biceps no matter what the view. I'd like to see some work go into your arms."

"I hate arm exercises."

Clearly. Erica had noticed how underdeveloped Mrs. Wilson's arms were compared to her legs. It was a trainer's job to keep her clients balanced no matter their personal preferences. On the other hand, she did want Mrs. Wilson and her nine friends as clients. "We'll build up slowly."

Mrs. Wilson heaved a long sigh. "If you insist."

"You'll be happy later." Erica smiled at her as she rose to her feet.

Mrs. Wilson did not smile back. She pretty much scowled as Erica handed her the weights from her rolling gym backpack.

Something. Erica had to do something that would impress or please the difficult and wealthy Mrs. Wilson. And then she had to think of a way to get about thirty more clients through the door.

Would even that impress Judge Devon? Erica had no idea. If she had as many clients here as she'd earned at the height of her career in Los Angeles, she probably wouldn't impress Judge Devon. To be truthful, there'd never been a "height" in her career. She'd only ever barely scraped by. Never had she been able to gather together enough cash to expand her business.

She certainly didn't own two profitable sporting goods stores. This was the kind of financial stability the judge was looking for, what she would deem adequate.

A tight sensation began to climb Erica's throat even as she began counting for Mrs. Wilson to lift the weights. Maybe she should have surrendered, not been so full of pride. For Liam and to do the right thing, maybe she should have accepted Brennan's pitying marriage proposal.

"Elbows in," Erica cautioned Mrs. Wilson.

"Okay, okay."

Erica breathed along with Mrs. Wilson, forcing down her anxiety. They managed to finish out the session without too much more grumbling and not even one more mention of the great Shadawn.

As Mrs. Wilson was reaching for her designer jacket, Erica asked. "Same time next week?"

The older woman didn't meet Erica's eyes. "I'll let you know." She handed Erica a check for the session and marched out the double door to the street.

Quickly, Erica gathered the weights and the other equipment of her own that she'd brought. Her head ached and her throat felt uncomfortably tight.

But she would not cry. She would not submit to that ultimate humiliation.

Besides, Mrs. Wilson might call. She and her nine friends.

Erica was not yet proven to be a complete failure.

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"And then she told me she could live with me taking over half the garage with my new table saw—so long as I remembered to put down the toilet seat every time I used it." Bob laughed at his own story about a minor dispute with his wife.

Brennan did his best to smile as the other members of his informal support group laughed along with Bob. They'd all met at AA and, being in similar places in their recovery, had decided a couple years ago to meet on their own once a month. Today the five of them were in Bob's living room.

Three weeks had passed since Brennan's idiotic marriage proposal to Erica, but his self-disgust had not abated one iota. He could find no way to escape it nor from a creeping sense of shame.

"Are you okay?"

The question came from Joan, a pretty woman in her late twenties, the youngest in the group. She gazed at Brennan with some concern.

Brennan opened his mouth to claim he was fine and then halted. If he couldn't be honest with his support group, he was in true trouble. "Not really."

Now he had the attention of the rest of them.

He spread his hands. "I've got a problem." When he saw the near panic on Joan's face, he added, "Not with alcohol. It's...a woman."

Brennan could see surprise on Bob's face and also on that of the older woman, Rachel. He'd never brought up relationships with the group—mostly because he hadn't had any.

"Yeah," he joked with a small smile. "Since when have you heard me mention a woman?"

"I don't believe you ever have," Joan agreed.

"Too right." Brennan shook his head. "I haven't been seriously involved with any for years. See, when I was first becoming sober, I was also breaking up with my fiancée. That was tough. Too tough. I never wanted to do that again. So I've made sure never to get too emotionally intimate, too close."

"You haven't fallen in love," Bob translated.

"Right." Brennan pressed his lips together. "But a couple months ago, I met someone. She's different. I don't even know why. Anyway, she tests my restraint." He paused and gave a brief laugh. "No, beyond tests it. I proposed marriage to her."

"Whoa," Bob murmured.

"Yeah, 'whoa' is right." Brennan looked down at his hands. "Fortunately, she said no." He sighed, feeling all the itchy, constricting pain again. "I made sure not to fall in love with her, but it still hurts. Hell, it's just as bad as what I'd been trying so hard to avoid. And now—I just don't know what to do. How to get away from...this."

He was done. A brief silence ensued while he imagined they all processed his dilemma.

"You say you're not in love with her," Joan began, speaking slowly, as if thinking it through. "Then...why did you propose marriage?"

Brennan lifted a shoulder. "There were extenuating circumstances. If she were married, a lot of family issues would have fallen into place for her. It would have been...convenient."

"So, you were simply trying to solve her family issues?" Rachel, the older woman, queried.

Brennan was about to agree when he had to stop. Had that truly been his motivation? He remembered how happy he'd felt when he'd got the brilliant idea to marry Erica. Had that happiness been solely regarding the idea of solving the problem of Liam's guardianship? "Okay, maybe I thought it would be good to be married to her." He frowned. "For my own sake."

"In what way?" Joan asked.

Bob and Merv, the two men, chuckled.

"Well, that, too," Brennan admitted, but he thought about Joan's question. What had been running through his mind when he'd devised the idea of marriage? He'd thought they could be a family together, he, Erica, and Liam. He'd thought they could...  
...love each other?

Had he gone that far?

"I don't know," Brennan slowly claimed. He looked up to find Rachel regarding him with her dim, older eyes. Bob and Merv were still smirking, but Joan looked confused.

"Don't you know?" Rachel asked. She tilted her head, resembling a little bird. "I wonder who are you lying to? And why?"

Lying? Had he been *lying*? But the swell of recognition Brennan felt told him the accusation was true. No wonder he'd been feeling ashamed. Making a searching and fearless moral inventory of oneself was one of the twelve steps of AA. "Oh, man," he breathed.

He was in love with Erica. Of course he was in love with her.

"I'm in much further than I've been admitting." Just saying it out loud caused a shiver of deep fear to go through him. "That's bad, isn't it? I'm not ready for love. I'm not strong enough to deal with it."

"You're not strong enough for *love*?" Bob looked baffled. "Man, that's like saying you're not strong enough for *life*."

Joan nodded.

"But I thought I was being prudent. Safe." Brennan's voice petered into silence as he heard how he sounded. Like a coward.

"About as safe as the guy who won't eat because he doesn't want to gain weight. So he dies of starvation." Bob laughed.

Brennan shook his head, which felt like it was spinning. "I thought I was staying healthy."

"But you were avoiding a full recovery," Rachel supplied.

Brennan had never looked at it that way.

He gazed at Rachel, who looked back at him with a kind expression. But a pitying one.

Brennan had never looked at falling in love as being part of his recovery.

But maybe it was time he did.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*After careful consideration, we have decided not to schedule your tryout with our exercise group.*

The email was from Mrs. Wilson. Apparently, she didn't even want to let Erica try out leading her group of nine friends in an exercise session.

It was late, well past midnight. Regarding her laptop set on the desk in her bedroom, Erica blinked a few times to make sure she really was reading the "not" typed in there. She was tired after having spent the day on the phone soliciting clients and also calling around—for the third time—to get an interview for a job at one of the local gyms. None of them were hiring, but they'd all promised to keep her resumé on file. Big help.

And now this email from Mrs. Wilson.

A lead ball sank in her stomach. It probably hadn't been prudent for Erica to place so much hope in gaining Mrs. Wilson and her nine friends as clients. But adding them to her roster would have upped her number of customers from nine to nineteen.

Still not very many, to be honest.

Slowly, Erica closed her eyes. The new hearing before Judge Devon was to take place in less than a week, and Erica was not coming up to snuff. She had no viable business or income. Of course she didn't. She was pathetic.

Opening her eyes again, Erica turned back to her computer and hit the delete button on the email. But the words were burned into her brain. *After careful consideration...* Narrowing her eyes, she fought back the pressure behind them. She was not going to cry. No, not even if the critical, monster voice in her head, the one about which she'd long ago confessed to Brennan, was absolutely correct. She was an abject failure.

She hadn't even been smart enough to snap up Brennan's marriage proposal when she'd had the chance. She'd been too stupid to recognize what a washout she was. Now she was letting Liam down because of her own uselessness. The judge would never appoint Erica his guardian.

The pressure in her forehead grew, but she was determined not to give in to it. She closed her eyes again and breathed in deeply.

"Erica?"

Startled, she blinked her eyes open and found Liam standing in her bedroom doorway.

"Oh. Hey." She scrounged up a wan smile. "I didn't know you were still up."

"I could say the same thing about you. Is everything all right?"

What was her face showing? "Everything's fine." Hopefully, he didn't catch the slight wobble in her voice.

Liam's gaze went down the hall. "I couldn't sleep."

Frowning, Erica stood up. "What's wrong?"

With his gaze still down the hall, Liam's face contorted. "I feel so bad."

"Oh, no." Erica hastened toward him. "What is it?"

"Dad—" Liam gulped back a sob and shot Erica an agonized look as she approached him. "I let down Dad..."

"What are you talking about?" Poor Liam looked so distressed that, awkward as she felt at the gesture, Erica put her arms around him.

It was apparently the wrong thing to do. As soon as Liam felt her arms around him, he completely broke down. Hunching over, he put his head in his hands and started sobbing.

Not knowing what else to do, Erica kept her arms around his back. The gesture did not appear to comfort him in the slightest.

After a minute of hard sobs, Liam sniffled and made a muscular effort to control himself. Gently, he pulled away from Erica's embrace. "I'm sorry. I just—I wish I could talk to you about him. About Dad, I mean." He threw Erica a frankly pleading look.

Oh, boy. It was the middle of the night. Erica was exhausted and completely wrung out. The last thing she wanted to do while tired and disgusted with herself was discuss her abusive father. But... She looked at her younger brother. His eyes were red, his face drawn.

If she could avoid being a failure in this one simple thing, letting Liam talk about his father, then she ought to go for it.

"You can talk to me." Amazingly, she didn't choke on the words. "Here. Come on. Let's sit on my bed." One thing Judge Devon had been right about, among others, was Erica's absence from Liam's life for so many years. She owed him far more than one heart-to-heart sibling talk.

Liam, still sniffing bravely, sat next to Erica on her flowered counterpane. "I don't know," he mumbled. "Maybe you're not the right person to talk to, really. I mean, I know you had a very different experience of him as a father."

"Don't worry about that," Erica recklessly declared. "Just talk to me. Tell me—" She searched for something to ask. Not how Liam might have let down Dad—that was obviously a downer. "Tell me—what's your favorite memory of him?"

"My favorite?" Liam stopped sniffing and frowned, obviously thinking. Then a small smile curved his lips. "Well, *one* of my favorites is the time he tried to make a pie. I remember the timer going off on the oven, and he went to open the door with this happy, expectant look on his face. But that pie looked like a caved-in volcano. And it had the consistency of a rock." Liam chuckled. "We ended up throwing out the pie tin along with the pie. It was impossible to get that volcano out of it."

Erica tried hard to imagine the scene. Richard Carmichael, the loudmouth king of the household who used to complain about her mother's vacuuming skill while sitting in his easy chair with a beer in his hand—baking a pie?

The thing was...she almost could imagine it. Richard Carmichael was also the man who'd planted those roses, put up the decorative garden fence.

Liam was smiling now. "And then there was the time we went to a bonsai show. Dad had a big argument with one of the vendors over whether he was selling a true miniature maple or just a small branch of one. That guy was totally wrong, but he wouldn't give an inch. Dad pointed out the size of the leaves, which were way too big and then the texture of the bark—until this dude started to pretend he didn't understand English. We were laughing so hard..."

All right, this story Erica could imagine easier. Her dad had loved to argue. And she could believe in his interest in plants since she'd been sharing his garden. She could almost imagine him—sober, pleasant, humorous—trying to buy a genuine bonsai maple.

"Okay, okay." Liam was now on a roll. Apparently, he was no longer concerned that Erica couldn't relate. "One night he thought there was a burglar in the house. He went

downstairs with my baseball bat. I heard a loud crash and ran downstairs. He turned on the light and we found out he'd 'killed' the suit for the cleaner that he'd hung over the front closet door." Liam started to laugh.

While watching her younger brother laugh, a strange sensation crept over Erica. In her mind's eye, she started to see her father, the father of her oldest, dimmest memories. This was the father who'd taken her ice skating. He was the man who used to sit her on his lap so he could read her picture books. This father had once put her on his shoulder to watch a parade. Oh, she remembered him.

Emotions started to bubble to the surface: sharp, powerful emotions—all the emotions she'd been holding down for so long. Despair over Mrs. Wilson's email sat right on top, but under that was more. So much more...

She felt anger and frustration and—envy. Incredible envy. The relationship Liam had had with her father had been wonderful. It was a relationship she wished very badly she could have had. It was one she *would have* had if only—

The denial she'd set in place and fed for so long wasn't holding up any more. She was envious. In fact, her envy was gigantic. On some level, she must have suspected the danger of acknowledging this demon. Her envy overwhelmed everything in its path, like a tidal wave.

"Oh, I wish—" Her throat was so tight so could barely get the words out. "I wish I could have known him. I mean—" What did she mean? She really meant she wished *he* could have known *her*. That he could have taken her on long rambles through the home improvement store and that he could have tried to bake a pie for her.

She wished he could have loved her.

Oh, God, yes. That's precisely what she wished. The tears Erica had been holding back were now too powerful to resist. Her *emotions* were too powerful to resist. They poured forth, and she cried.

No, she didn't cry. She sobbed. Great, gut-wrenching sobs. She'd wanted her father to love her.

As she sobbed, unable to stop, she realized that this was what she'd been resisting ever since watching her father slip from this world at the hospital. This horrible, gigantic grief that her father had not loved her.

"Aw, Erica." Liam put his arm around her shoulders. "Erica."

The power of her grief was terrifying. No wonder she'd done her best to keep this caged. It was a runaway steam engine and yet— And yet— There was a distinct relief in letting go, in admitting it all. About a ton of weight lifted off her chest. She didn't have to pretend any more.

She wanted to be loved. She'd always wanted to be loved. But her father had not loved her. Her mother hadn't loved any of them, putting up with his bad behavior the way she had. So none of them had been lovable, Erica least of all.

She cried and cried all her old, ancient grief.

"Erica." Liam squeezed her close.

"Liam." A realization hit Erica like a cannonball. She struggled for enough composure to speak. "I love you. You're my brother. I really, really love you. I want you to know that." Nobody else should suffer the way she had.

"Hey." His eyes were red again. Had he been crying, too? "You're my sister and I really, really love you, too."

She hiccupped a laugh amid her sobs. For one bright shining moment, she believed him. Someone loved her. She was lovable. "You are the best," she told him.

"So are you."

She started laughing. "We are so strange."

"Yeah." Liam joined her laughter.

Erica put a hand on Liam's shoulder. An odd exhilaration chased through her grief. "We're sticking together. No matter what the judge says."

"Agreed." Liam smiled.

Erica had no idea of the financial or legal ramifications of the promise she'd just made, and she didn't care. They were sticking together like glue.

She had no sustainable business, no financial stability, but she had something better now.

Hope.

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Brennan was running late getting to the Broadway store. He burst out his kitchen door with his briefcase unzipped and his tie half-knotted.

But all thoughts of the time, his conference call with a vendor in Atlanta, and the fishing waders he wanted replaced flew out of his brain when he looked across the driveway and saw Erica standing in the frame of her own kitchen door.

She stopped as suddenly as he had.

Brennan's heart took a running leap and then kept galloping. He was still reeling from the revelations of his support group three days ago. He was in love with Erica. He'd been in love with her for a long time but had held back because he was still listening to the inner voice that had crippled him since he was a teenager, the one that taunted him he wasn't good enough.

Apparently, he was still listening to that voice for he stood there, completely tongue-tied.

"Uh, hi," Erica spoke. She'd been wearing a big smile when Brennan had first burst out his door. The smile had disappeared. Her face now expressed wariness.

Brennan couldn't blame her for caution. Who knew what insult he might throw at her, judging by those he'd tossed in their last conversation?

As he stood there, still dumb, regret overwhelmed him. He'd messed up so much. Was there any way he could repair the damage? The old fear rose up and shouted *no*. A large lump in his throat made it hard to finally reply, "Good morning."

She cleared her throat and straightened her back. "On your way to work?" She appeared to want to act as though they were normal neighbors.

Brennan reached toward his half-done tie. "Uh, yes. I'm a little late, obviously. Uh, and you?" Thank God he wasn't so self-centered he'd forgotten to ask. "Are you off to see a client?"

A pale ghost of her earlier smile played with her mouth. "Sort of. Maybe even better than a client."

"Oh. Uh, good." Perhaps her business had taken off. Brennan hoped so. And yet, deep down, he realized he felt fear. If Erica succeeded financially, she wouldn't need him. She'd have no reason to have anything more to do with him.

Blinking, Brennan was shocked by his own thoughts. Is that how he'd been reasoning all this time? Had he imagined he could only get Erica to be with him if she needed him?

Clearly, his monster voice had been alive and well.

His support group had nailed it. He'd not been operating like a man who was fully recovered. Instead, he'd been repeatedly hearing the door Lois had shut in his face.

It was time to start listening to a different tune. And he knew where to start that song.

Taking a deep breath, Brennan stepped into his driveway, moving slowly toward her. "Listen, I've been wanting to apologize. For that proposal. It was...inadequate." To put it mildly.

Her small smile faded, and her brows drew down. "O-kay." Her body language was subtle but clear. He should come no closer than the halfway mark.

Brennan stopped and swallowed. Maybe he couldn't go more than halfway physically, but he owed her more than halfway emotionally. Hell, he owed that to himself.

So he went ahead and leaped. "I wouldn't want the kind of relationship with you that my proposal intended. Business only. Or with me being top dog— Anyway, that's not how I actually feel about you."

She stood very still, simply staring at him.

"I would want us equals. On equal ground." Brennan's heart was racing faster than ever. He felt like he was running toward a cliff, but he'd set this course and he was determined to go on. "I—I want to tell you that day—that day that we— I want to tell you I don't think it was a mistake at all. I think it was the most marvelous experience I've ever had in my life. *I* was the mistake. So I guess what I'm trying to say is—is—" Hell, what *was* he trying to say? "I'm sorry," Brennan finished raggedly.

He'd meant to tell her more than that, but Erica did not look receptive toward what he'd so far spewed forth. She probably hated his guts. Hadn't she been very careful to avoid him?

Finally, in a small voice, she said, "Okay."

Okay? What did that mean? Did she accept his apology? Dare he go on? He wanted to convey how much he wanted to start over, try a real relationship with her—one that might very well end up in marriage after they actually got to know one another.

But he needed more than 'okay' to say any of that. So he stood there with his heart beating years off his life and waited. He could not take this further without some sign from her, no matter how subtle. She had to indicate she was open to hearing more.

No such sign occurred. She simply looked at him with very wide eyes.

"I...have to go to my appointment," she finally said. Her voice was small, as if he'd hit her.

Damn. He hadn't wanted to hurt her!

"Sure. Oh, sure." He stepped back. "Look, I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset." But she looked shell-shocked. With a little laugh, she put a hand up to her forehead. "It's been a weird couple of days."

And he'd clearly just made it weirder.

He held up his hands. "Time out. I get it." Oh, yes, he got it. And now he had to remember another one of the twelve steps of the recovery model: let go. Whatever might or might not happen between himself and Erica, he'd done all he could. It was not in his hands any more.

It was difficult, but he took another step back.

The grateful look Erica shot him almost made the effort worthwhile. "Thank you. I—
Goodbye."

Goodbye. As she got into her car and started the motor, Brennan wondered if that was a forever sort of goodbye or the sort that only applied to right now.

The question plagued him for a long while afterward.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Oh, boy, oh, boy. A half an hour after her encounter with Brennan in the driveway between their houses, Erica sat in a modern-art chair in the office of Terrence Nickel, the business advisor to whom Grover Hamilton had referred her. She kept her gaze on Nickel's face as he went through the papers she'd brought, but her mind was still replaying Brennan saying all those incredible things while standing there looking heartbreakingly vulnerable.

What was she to make of him? Of everything he'd told her? Sex with her had been the most wonderful experience of his life? He wanted a relationship with her...on equal terms?

"This is a very good start," Terrence Nickel finally remarked, looking up from Erica's pathetic attempt at a business plan.

No, no. She would *not* think of it as pathetic. She had to stop thinking that way about herself. Maybe her father was responsible for creating her low self-esteem. He'd never given her the love she'd craved. But it was on Erica now if she chose to retain that poor self-image.

She had to stop doing so. Immediately.

This was why she'd made an appointment with a business advisor. She wanted to treat her business as if it was worth something. For a change.

"Have you a page in here that talks about expenses?" Nickel asked.

"Well, that's going to depend..." Erica leaned forward to pull forth one of the papers. It was difficult to say out loud words she would have considered presumptuous a few days ago, but she forced herself to articulate her ideas to the professional.

Nodding at her explanation, Nickel made some notes on a pad. He did not stare at her and tell her to stop her fantasy dreaming. It seemed that because she'd treated herself as serious and worthy of consideration, he was doing the same.

Amazing. Respect was as easy to come by as that.

While Erica watched Nickel continue to make notes, she wondered if a similar phenomenon might have happened between herself and her father if she'd given the both of them a chance. The man Richard Carmichael had become over the past ten years might have treated her as if she were worth something—worth being his daughter—if she'd thought she was worth something, too.

After her talk with Liam, she'd realized she'd had it backwards. All this time she'd thought it was her father she considered to be the unacceptable one. But it had actually been the other way around. It was really *herself* she'd considered unacceptable. She hadn't come home in all those years because, deep down, she'd been afraid her father would see she was unacceptable—and he'd reject her all over again. She hadn't been willing to risk such rejection because what she'd actually wanted, with utter desperation, was to be loved.

Nickel glanced from his notes to Erica's pages. Her heart sank. He was the one who was going to reject her now: because of her silly business plan, because she was not as much of a prize as Brennan had acted like she was in the driveway, because... Jeezus, she was still holding onto that low self-esteem like it was a security blanket.

Nickel looked up and straight at her. The corners of his lips twitched into a small smile.

A mocking smile? No, Erica thought he probably meant it to be reassuring.

"Erica," he said. "Are you ready to get serious?"

She took in a deep breath. "That's why I'm here."

His smile broadened. "Good."

He hadn't mocked her decision. He was pleased. Erica let out the breath she'd been holding.

It occurred to her that Brennan had asked her a similar question about the personal side of her life. Was she ready to take herself seriously?

She was not yet sure of her answer.

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This did not bode well.

Erica had made an appointment to see Brennan. An *appointment*—through the clerk who'd been the one answering the store phone yesterday afternoon.

Standing by the window of his office and staring out at the bustling street, Brennan wondered why Erica thought she had to hide behind such formality to talk to him. Had he led her to believe it was unsafe to do so under any other circumstances?

All he knew for sure was that she was due to arrive in five minutes, and he was a nervous wreck. He'd run his hands through his hair so many times that he could only hope so much combing had resulted in more taming than disrupting. His stomach was in knots. He hoped there weren't bags under his eyes from losing so much sleep last night.

The knock on his door made him jump. *Damn*. She was here. Three minutes early! Okay, true, he'd been waiting roughly twenty-four hours to find out what she wanted. To find out if she was ever going to respond to what he'd said to her in the driveway two days ago.

Taking in a deep breath and smoothing his tie, Brennan went over to his office door—something he normally kept ajar. *Play it cool. Cards close to the vest*. He opened the door.

Erica stood in the hallway outside, dressed in a tailored skirt suit, a different one from the outfit she'd worn to the guardianship hearing. Her hair was recently cut, her makeup light but effective.

She looked like a million bucks. It wasn't even the clothes or grooming, it was—Brennan couldn't put his finger on it. She looked different, though. Strong. Happy?

Oh, God. Had she moved past him? In his mind, he was hearing Lois's apartment door slamming in his face.

No. Brennan straightened. He wasn't going there, not going to assume the worst.

He did his best to smile. "Hello, Erica. Come on in."

With her own smile, she accepted his invitation and walked into his spare, second-floor office. Her natural energy was at maximum. She practically shimmered with it.

"Have a seat." Brennan surreptitiously cleared his throat while going behind his desk. Hey, she'd made an appointment. So he was playing this like a business meeting.

He wasn't being a coward to hide behind his desk.

"Now." He gave her what he hoped was at least an approximation of his usual business demeanor. "What can I do for you?"

Erica sat on the edge of the utilitarian chair on the other side of Brennan's desk. Her smile turned nervous. "Ah, but I'm here to tell you what I hope to do for you."



An incredibly stupid hope flared in Brennan's chest before he realized Erica had produced a leather portfolio—she must have been carrying it—and was setting it on his desk.

"I have a business proposition for you," she announced.

A *business* proposition? His earlier hope withered into disappointed char. She wasn't going to discuss what he'd said to her in the driveway, about trying a relationship?

His critical monster self was not surprised.

Driving down his disappointment, Brennan took another deep breath. Whatever she wanted, Erica was obviously excited. For her sake, he would play along. So he gave her a smile. "That sounds interesting. Let's hear it."

Her own smile brightened at his assent. The only sign she was still nervous were her hands trembling as she unzipped the portfolio. "I don't know if this idea will satisfy Judge Devon, and frankly, I don't care. Liam and I have come to an agreement regarding the court's decision about his guardianship and the estate."

Brennan raised his brows. This was news. He decided it was good news from the determination in her tone. "I'm glad."

She paused, shooting him the first personal-type glance yet. "Thank you."

Brennan's heart picked up a little speed from the intensity of her glance.

But she returned immediately to an all-business manner. "What I'm concerned about now is the long term." Opening the portfolio, she displayed the first page of what appeared to be a business plan, sheathed in glossy plastic. "I want to talk to you about profit—mutual profit."

"Keep going." He was getting more intrigued by the second, both by her presentation and by this new, confident side of her. He was finding the latter a definite turn-on.

"Diehard Sports is already a profitable venture, but I've noticed your biggest challenge is leading the customer from observation to purchase. Carmichael Physical Training can assist you in achieving this transformation in the following way."

Brennan listened while Erica went through her portfolio, explaining how she would run a training exhibition and tip-giving session right on his store floor. She'd invite walk-ins for exercise sessions and give advice on the best equipment for their needs.

It was actually a fantastic idea. The advantages for Erica and her business were obvious, but she wouldn't be the sole beneficiary. Brennan could easily imagine the way her exhibitions might translate into increased sales for Diehard.

There was only one problem. While she was enthusiastically delivering her pitch, he was getting increasingly hot for her. The better her ideas and the more excited she was by them, the more excited he was getting for *her*.

After smoothing a hand over the last page of her plan, Erica leaned back in her chair and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "So." She sounded a little breathless. "What do you think?" She delicately cleared her throat. "I mean honestly."

Brennan watched her while he tapped a thumb on the desktop. "I think it's a fantastic idea." He had the pleasure of seeing her face light up. "I agree wholeheartedly about the potential benefit to Diehard. The only alteration I'd like to see is that you would trade between our two locations, with at least one exhibition per week in each store. I'd like to spread the benefit of your presence and the enthusiasm you'll generate."

She nodded, obviously containing her joy with difficulty.

But he had to admit, "There's only one problem."

A shadow crossed the sun of her euphoria.

He stood up, unable to sit still any longer. "I foresee possible legal ramifications."

"Really?" Her head turned to watch him pace past her toward the window, her brow furrowed as she tried to puzzle this out. "What legal ramifications?"

He forced himself to look from the view out the window toward her. With great difficulty, he shoved aside his fear. In his mind, he placed front and center the positive image he wanted to create. "One thing is, I'd want to make sure there's no clause in the contract we'll write that regards fraternization."

Regarding him, she blinked several times.

Brennan drew in a breath. "Because I plan to do everything in my power to get your attention and convince you to go out with me."

She stared at him, completely still, not saying a word.

*Stupid. Idiot.* These were words Brennan wanted to call himself, but he restrained the impulse. Not yet. He waited.

Slowly, she smiled.

His heart started beating again.

"Is that right?" Erica asked.

"You better believe it."

She stood now, too. Facing him, she crossed her arms over her chest. "That might not be as easy a task as you think."

"Did I say I thought it would be easy?" Oh, he hoped it wouldn't be. Her challenge got him even more fired up than he'd already felt.

Still smiling, she tilted her head. "I consider myself quite a prize."

"As well you should."

Her smile broadened. "I figured out a lot of stuff recently. About my dad. About how my childhood formed my self-image. I understand now why your marriage proposal really flamed me. It had involved no emotion, and I'd wanted you to *care*."

Hope leaped like a gazelle in his chest. Had she wanted that? *Good.* "I look forward to proving to you that I do." Thinking about starting right then, he moved toward her.

"That should prove interesting...eventually." There was a smirk in Erica's smile.

Brennan halted in his forward progress. An amused quirk twitched his mouth.

"You're not going to let me kiss you, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, let's say I ask you out to dinner tonight, and you agree. Maybe on your porch after I take you home...?"

She laughed, clearly delighted. "You'll have to go through the exercise and find out."

He loved that laugh. Optimism and hope were like balloons inside of him. It was a feeling he hadn't had in a very long time. "Then it's a date."

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The room looked the same as it had the last time, the old linoleum on the floor, the school-style acoustic tile on the ceiling, and the air of cold authority. But this time as Liam sat in the courtroom waiting for Judge Devon, he didn't feel nearly as nervous and scared as he had the last time. He wouldn't say he wasn't nervous at all, but mostly he was proud and very happy.

Erica was taking care of him no matter what.

Adding icing to that cake, she'd apparently delivered one kickass business pitch to Brennan because Brennan had already signed a contract for her to give exhibitions and classes in his two stores.

Liam imagined Brennan had delivered his own kickass romantic pitch to Erica because she'd gone out with him the same night he'd accepted her business deal, and she hadn't come home again until three in the morning.

Liam was pretty sure Erica thought her younger brother hadn't noticed how late she'd sneaked home from next door. He was letting her maintain that delusion. Just like he was letting her tell him that she and Brennan were only trying a relationship on for size. There were no guarantees it would stick.

Like hell it wasn't going to stick. The two of them were bonkers for each other.

Down at the other end of the table, Clint yawned behind his hand. He sat past Brennan, who was right next to Erica. Yeah, that seating arrangement right there—Erica was already considering Brennan part of the family.

Same as the last time, a guy in a uniform—in fact, it looked like the same guy—got up from a seat near the door. "All rise."

As they stood up, short little Judge Devon emerged from the door and strode in her black robes up to her seat on the dais.

For a moment, Liam felt his back stiffen. At the last hearing, this little lady had thrown terror into all of them.

Reminding himself there was nothing she could do to them now, Liam calmed himself down as he took his seat again.

Judge Devon, her face pinched, shuffled some papers on top of her high desk. "Erica Carmichael?"

"Yes, your honor." Erica stood up. Her composure was serene.

"I gave you four weeks to prove you had some financial capability," Judge Devon reminded her. "What you have accomplished?"

"My physical training company now has nine clients, far less than what would be sustainable," Erica admitted calmly. "Meanwhile, though, I've entered a contract with Diehard Sports Equipment that should bring in a larger and steadier stream of revenue."

The judge looked up from her papers to give Erica a hard regard. "You've been taking lessons."

"Your honor?"

"In talking slick. The bottom line is that you don't yet have a going business or employment."

Erica inclined her head. "No, your honor. Given four weeks and starting from scratch, I was not able to make that happen. May I add something?"

"That's what we're here for." The judge's tone was sarcastic, as was the smile she gave Erica.

But Liam's sister ignored the nastiness. "Neither Liam nor I are interested in access to our father's pension if it means separating. He's staying with me regardless of what decision you make today." Erica turned to glance down toward Liam. It was a glance that made him incredibly happy. "We're family," she said.

Regarding Erica, the judge narrowed her eyes. "Clint Carmichael," she barked.

Clint straightened in his chair. "Your honor?"

Judge Devon turned her glare on him. "What do you think of this?"

Clint's cheeks hollowed since he probably was biting the inside of them. "I say good for Erica."

The judge glared at him a moment longer as if daring him to change his mind. Then, briefly, she closed her eyes. In that short moment something happened that Liam wasn't sure later he'd really seen. Very, very fleetingly, Judge Devon smiled.

If he hadn't been watching like a hawk, he wouldn't have caught it. And the thing disappeared so quickly, he wasn't sure he actually had. In an instant, she was back to a scowling sourpuss.

With a gusty sigh, she slapped the papers in front of her. "In that case, I may as well name Erica Carmichael guardian and conservator. You'll receive the paperwork in the mail. Bailiff! Who's next?"

What? Whoa? Was that it? They'd *won*? Apparently so, for the bailiff was calling the next party.

Liam stood up in a daze. Judge Devon had ended up giving them exactly what they'd wanted—and what they should have gotten—four weeks ago.

After a moment during which Erica apparently processed the same information, she grew a big smile on her face, swiveled, and enveloped Liam in a bone-crushing hug. She promptly turned and switched her embrace to Brennan. Clint clapped Brennan on the back.

Yup, Brennan was part of the family. No doubt about it.

Almost dizzy with triumph and relief, Liam caught the judge giving them one last look as he turned to leave. She was staring straight at him, a hard, penetrating stare.

A cold chill went through Liam. Damn, it was as if the woman *knew*.

He hadn't yet done what he'd promised his father. He hadn't contacted his oldest brother, Alex.

Liam finished turning toward the door, letting his view of the judge disappear as he left the courtroom. Okay, yes, he admitted that little task was still biting his conscience. He'd sworn to his father he'd find and seek out Alex. But he wasn't going to let his reluctance to follow through ruin today. Today was too damn good.

EPILOGUE

Sin City wasn't very sinful when one didn't drink or gamble. Erica had tried explaining this to Brennan when he'd suggested the weekend in Vegas two months after the final hearing regarding Liam's guardianship.

With a suspicious sparkle in his eye, he'd replied that he could think of plenty of sin that involved neither alcohol nor gambling.

Erica had provided no further arguments against the idea. Over the past few weeks, Brennan had taught her that she enjoyed sex far more than she'd ever dreamed she could.

By eight o'clock Friday night, and only an hour since they'd arrived at the hotel, Brennan had proven correct about how much sin they could commit. Erica's whole body hummed with physical bliss as she lay on the Egyptian cotton sheets of their room fifteen stories above the Strip.

Brennan strode over from the minibar with a champagne flute filled with her favorite sparkling water. A chocolate-covered strawberry sat impaled on the rim.

Sitting up in the bed, Erica drew the covers over her naked breasts and accepted the glass cheerfully. "Fancy."

"Only the best for my best woman." He bent to kiss her cheek reverently.

After plucking the strawberry from the rim, Erica placed her lips around the fruit and gave it her sexiest bite. She enjoyed watching the heat build behind Brennan's eyes. Pretty heady that she could do that to him even after the exercise they'd just finished. "You're spoiling me," she observed and finished the strawberry.

"Oh, good." He grinned. "You noticed."

Laughing, Erica drew the pillow from her side and tossed it in his direction.

Easily deflecting the pillow, Brennan took a seat next to her on the bed. "The fact is, I have an ulterior motive for this trip."

"Oh, really?" Like she hadn't noticed. The idea of the trip to begin with, the fancy room, and then champagne flutes with chocolate-covered strawberries. Of course he had an ulterior motive.

They'd been seeing each other ever since Brennan had accepted her business proposal. The relationship hadn't been all roses and honey. They'd had their disagreements, including a few doozies. But instead of assuming each bump in the road meant a personal rejection, Erica had taken them for what they were: bumps, disagreements, challenges. Underneath it all, she'd been able to tell how much Brennan cared for her—as much as she cared for him. She'd become able to believe someone could feel love for her. Her life had become infinitely happier because of it.

"Uh-huh." He kissed her under her ear, something he undoubtedly knew turned her to mush. He took the glass of sparkling water out of her hand and set it on the table beside the bed. "I wanted to get you in a...receptive mood."

"I've already shown you how 'receptive' I am."

"Mm. Receptive to an idea I have."

"Ooh." Erica was having fun playing dumb. "Did you bring some toys?"

Brennan's garbled laugh blew against her neck. Then he stilled. "Would you be open to using some?"

With a laugh, Erica hit his shoulder.

"Is that a no?"

"We don't need toys."

"No, but they might be fun."

He had a point. "Let me think about it."

Brennan smiled at her. It was his slow, confident smile that she loved. "Seriously, you know what I really want to talk about."

"If we're going to tell our children about this later, don't you think I ought to get dressed?"

"We can do the formal thing later."

"Really? You're going to go through this again?"

"I slipped a C-note to the maître d' at the restaurant to put a diamond ring in your chocolate cake."

"How do you know I'll order chocolate cake?"

Brennan tilted his head and gave her an incredulous look.

Erica burst into more laughter. "Oh, God, I love you."

He grabbed her in a warm embrace. "And I love you. Will you marry me?"

"Kinda silly to ask. You already know the answer and you've got enough brass to plan on giving me a diamond ring in public."

Pushing Erica onto her back on the bed, Brennan covered her body with his own and showered her with kisses, light and teasing. "Will you marry me? Give me an answer."

"Yes, you big lug. I already admitted we'd tell our children about it, didn't I?"

Brennan's hand slipped down Erica's naked waist. "We're not telling them this part."

"Probably not," Erica admitted. Her breath hitched as his hand created electric tingles all over her.

"I'm about to turn 'probably not' into 'definitely not'," Brennan warned. His hand wandered into more dangerous territory.

"We'll be late for that dinner reservation, the one with the chocolate cake."

"Oh, well." Brennan covered her mouth with a hot and thoroughly carnal kiss.

"Nothing's perfect."

No, nothing was perfect. But some things came pretty darn close, Erica thought as she wrapped her arms around Brennan's muscled back.

The End

About the Author

Alyssa Kress completed her first novel at age six, an unlikely romance between a lion and a jackal. Despite earning two degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and spending nearly a decade in the construction industry, she's yet to see her feet stay firmly on the ground. She now lives in Southern California, together with her husband and two children.

You can learn more about Alyssa Kress and her other novels at <http://www.alyssakress.com>.

Other books by Alyssa Kress:

Marriage by Mistake

The Heart Heist
The Indiscreet Ladies of Green Ivy Way
Asking For It
Love and the Millionairess
Working on a Full House
Your Scheming Heart
I Gotta Feeling
The Fiancée Fiasco
If I Loved You
That'll be the Day
A Perfect Knave
Call it Love
and the collection of all 12 nonfree books:
Dangerous Men and Determined Women

[Preview of Just Friends](#)
(Book 2 of the *Home Again* Series)

Maybe some would consider it unwise to seek out a woman on the eve of his hard-won freedom from the gender, but Clint considered his quest the best idea in the world. Besides, Rosalie Missen wasn't exactly a woman. At least, she wasn't the kind a man had to watch out for.

He found a parking spot across the street from one of the few mid-rise professional buildings that graced the high desert California town of Palmwood. As a craftsman, he didn't care for the sleek, off-green monolith of reflective windows where Rosalie worked, but he smiled up the height of the cold-looking building with the sun in his heart. Today everything looked beautiful. In his pocket he'd printed out the proof of that: the judge's order granting him a status divorce.

Two-and-a-half years ago he'd been stupid enough--and horny enough--to sleep with Judy Dawson. Two weeks later she'd tearfully called with the news she was pregnant, despite their use of two different types birth control. Three days after that, and after viewing evidence of the pregnancy, Clint had been stupid--and naive--enough to ask her to marry him. He knew he didn't love her, but he also knew she desperately wanted that proposal.

What he hadn't known was exactly how big a mistake his grand gesture would be.

The stress of his failure was all over now, though. Releasing a very happy sigh, Clint crossed the street and entered through the fancy revolving glass door into the building's granite lobby.

It was after six. He hoped Rosalie would be able to leave the office, but he knew she often worked overtime and sometimes even all night, conscientious and a bit proud. As the "IT coordinator," she was actually the only person at the big development corporation where she worked who could fix the various computer issues that came up. Some might call her a nerd, but Clint called her his very best bud. He really wanted to celebrate his milestone with her.

While in the hushed elevator cab riding to the tenth floor, Clint heard his phone receive a text. Taking it out of his pocket, he smiled at the name of the sender: Tom

Gearson. Clint had met with Blaine yesterday to discuss some custom built-in cabinets Gearson wanted installed in his bedroom remodel. Clint thought Gearson had been impressed with Clint's portfolio.

Sorry. Going with another carpenter. Please don't call.

Clint frowned. Wow, he'd been sure Gearson was going to hire him. And what was this bit about "please don't call"? Had Clint given the impression he was going to start pestering the old man for the job?

Shaking his head, Clint turned off the phone and stuck it back in his pocket. You couldn't win them all, and today he'd won enough. *Divorced*. Clint grinned as the floor indicator hit the number nine.

Okay, his attorney had reminded him this was only a status divorce, giving him the ability to marry someone else should he wish. There was still the matter of property to be settled. But, come on. He and Judy hadn't had any 'property.' She was dreaming if she thought she could get her claws on his deceased father's house. In no way was that community property.

The elevator slowed at the tenth floor and the doors slid open smoothly. No receptionist manned the large desk facing the elevator beyond the big open double doors. In fact, nobody could be seen down the office halls at all. But the doors weren't locked, and the lights were all on. Clearly, at least a few employees were still working.

Clint headed down the hall on the left toward Rosalie's little closet of an office. If it were possible, his happiness quotient lifted even higher with the anticipation of seeing her. She'd understand exactly what this news meant to him. She'd supported him through the entire two years of his miserable marriage. And she would be happy to indulge him in exactly the kind of celebration he'd like. Actually, it wouldn't involve much indulgence on her part because she'd enjoy the very same type of celebration.

Rosalie's office door was open. Grinning, Clint stepped around the frame, but the little carpeted square with her desk, a filing cabinet, and two computer monitors was otherwise empty. No short, frizzy-haired bunny rabbit.

Rosalie would be horrified if she knew Clint thought of her as a round, cuddly little bunny rabbit, so he kept that image to himself. It was what he'd thought the first time he'd ever seen her, though, in his junior year of high school. As the teacher's assistant in the Sculpting I class, he'd taken on the task of helping the terribly out-of-place math nerd Rosalie figure out what to do with her virgin block of clay, the art assignment she could not understand. With her long baggy shirts and her flyaway hair, she'd looked to him then like a disgruntled little rabbit. She hadn't changed much about the baggy shirts or the flyaway hair in the intervening ten years, and the picture of her in his mind remained.

The overhead light and computer monitors were on, which meant Rosalie was somewhere in the building even if she weren't in her office. Clint paused a moment and then decided to go look for her. It was after hours and nobody would blame her for having a personal friend drop by.

Most of the doors down the hall were closed, but a few were open with the light from inside spilling out. Clint ambled toward the first such room and peered inside.

A tall, sloe-eyed woman turned from her perusal of her computer to regard him. She looked like a model, from her shiny black heels to the elegant twist of her mahogany hair. In between was a sleek body wrapped in a skirt suit that glided precisely over every slender curve of her. "Yes?" she inquired in a throaty voice.

Clint met her frank regard and felt...nothing. Not even the twinge of a sexual response to this veritable paragon. As a twenty-six-year-old man, he probably should have experienced some concern over this lack of interest. Instead, he felt profound relief, if not triumph. There wasn't a sexual impulse left in his battered soul.

This was *fantastic*. Sexual impulses were what had gotten him into the tornado his life had been for the past two-odd years. He hoped he never had another sexual impulse in his life.

He didn't have to worry about that with Rosalie. The bunny rabbit woke not a ghost of such a thing.

"I'm looking for Rosalie Missen," Clint told the paragon with the sloe eyes. "Do you happen to know where she might be?"

The siren moved her head slightly to the left. "She went down the hall to take 'an important call.' I don't know what's more important than getting my Excel spreadsheet to work when I have a deadline tomorrow, but she thought something was. Apparently." The woman half closed her eyes, as if daring Clint to disagree with her assessment of the situation.

Oh, it's the B-word lady. At least that's what Rosalie always called her when she related stories about the office. Rosalie didn't like using the actual word *bitch* because it was something her older brother had called her too often, and she was sensitive about using it on any woman, even one who did her best to make the work environment unbearable.

"I'll see if I can find her," Clint said.

The siren shrugged.

Clint continued down the hall slowly and checked the next open door he found. A young man with a crew cut did not look up from his work.

Where would Rosalie go to take a call if not her own office?

Her voice stopped him before he saw her. Rosalie had a deceptively sweet, high voice. Deceptive because the sharpest barbs could be carried on that dulcet tone if she were exercised enough to state her true opinion about something. She appeared to be talking behind some closed door--Clint wasn't sure which.

Not that he would have gone around opening doors to interrupt her private conversation. In fact, he was about to retreat down the hall back to her office to wait for her when her next words stopped him, unfortunately clear despite the closed door.

"...is an interesting, in fact, amazing opportunity. Working on website algorithms is exactly what I've trained for. The only thing that concerns me is relocating to Boston. I'm going to need to think about that. When do you need a decision?"

Clint's heart turned to stone in his chest. Relocate? To *Boston*? Hell, he hadn't even known Rosalie was looking for another job. But apparently, she hadn't only been looking, she'd found one. In Boston.

Forcefully, he drew in a breath to get his heart working again, turned on his heel, and walked quickly back the hall in the direction from which he'd come.

Rosalie had supposed she was private, slipping into the first empty office she could find. She had no idea Clint--or anyone else--could overhear her conversation.

Meanwhile, two-ton weights seemed to be hanging from his chest. His very best friend, the one on whom he'd counted all these years, particularly the last two during his marriage--was she *leaving*?

Unnerved, Clint ducked into the office of the siren with the attitude. He didn't want Rosalie seeing him out in the hall.

"Oh. Hi, again," he told the paragon, who turned with the same slow regard to look at him. "Couldn't find her, so I'll wait for her here to finish her call. Uh, if you don't mind."

She blinked lethargically. "Why should I mind? I only work here."

If she'd thought she'd scare Clint off with her sarcasm, it didn't work. He was too busy trying to process what he'd overheard. Rosalie had interviewed for a job in Boston. Without telling him. She might leave. Who knew if she'd ever get around to telling him *that*.

He bit his lip and tried to shift the painful two-ton weights in his chest. Damn, was this how Judy had felt when she'd been served with Clint's divorce papers? Utterly rejected?

Karma was a bitch, all right.