

throwing stones

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chapter one

As the woman approaches me, I can tell it's about to happen yet again.

She's a classic suburban stay-at-home, with a dark brown ponytail, yoga pants, and running shoes that match her tank top. Her head is tilted in a way that seems to say *that's-so-sweet*, and her smile is soft, like she's already decided she likes me.

She's terrifying.

"Hi!" She looks from me to Owen, who's racing up a ladder on the kindergarten playground. "My son, Jackson, talks about Owen all the time. Owen, Owen, Owen."

My attempt at a smile feels weak as I brace for what I know is coming. "Owen talks about Jackson too."

Why did I tell Owen it was okay for him to play for a few minutes before we went home? I should have rushed him right to the car . . .

"I'm Lacey." Lacey holds out a hand.

Nerves claw at my chest as we shake. "Abbie."

Lacey shields her eyes from the mid-afternoon sun with a hand. Creases fan out from her eyes when she smiles, appropriate to her age. Mid-thirties, probably? She casts her gaze toward the playground again where the boys race across the bridge, an older girl in pink running after them. "And that's my daughter, Jillian, bossing them around. Poor Jackson. It's like he has three parents instead of just two."

"There are worse things," I say. Like only having one.

"Jackson has been asking me if Owen can come over. If I give

you my cell number, could you pass it on to Owen's parents?"

There it is. My breathing hitches for just a second. It doesn't do me or Owen any favors if I'm snotty. "Actually, I *am* Owen's mother. And he would love to come over sometime, I'm sure."

Lacey winces. "My apologies. Of course he's your son. I don't know why I didn't see that. Your hair is the exact same color."

I know why she didn't see it, but I don't say so. Sometimes I do, just to make people uncomfortable. But Lacey seems nice.

I wave away her apology. "It's fine." *Happens all the time.*

Lacey hands me a card with her phone number and email address on it. "You're lucky to look so young. I had to start dying my hair in my mid-twenties."

Do I tell her I just turned twenty over the summer? There's no delicate way to spring that on people, I've found. I've learned to avert my eyes because otherwise you can see them doing the math in their heads. *If that's how old you are, that means you had Owen when you were just fifteen . . .*

Poor Owen, stuck with the mom who doesn't fit with the others. What will the PTA think of me when I show up for that meeting next week?

I tuck Lacey's number in the back pocket of my cut-offs. "I'll take a look at our calendar and call you. We just got Owen's soccer schedule, so I need to check that first."

"Jackson's playing this fall too! I hope they're on the same team."

Baffling. Usually mothers shy away from me, huddling their kids under their wings. Am I actually going to make a friend here? I had better jet before I ruin things. "Time to go, Owen!"

He makes a pouty, *C'mon, Mom*, kind of face at me, but he crosses the playground without a protest. I feel like I passed some kind of test.

Jackson and Jillian trot alongside him, and Lacey calls to her kids, “Owen’s mom and I were just talking about finding a time for a playdate. How does that sound, Jackson?”

He takes a wild leap in the air and pumps his fist. “Yay!”

Owen leans his sweat-damp head against my hip and reaches for my hand. I pat his back. “Tell your friends bye.”

He looks to his shoes. “Bye.”

“Look them in the eyes, Owen.”

I know it takes a lot of courage for him to raise his head and whisper, “Bye.”

Meeting new adults is the hardest for him. It’s been this way ever since that afternoon when two people he didn’t know—his father and his grandmother—ripped him from my arms.

Lacey crouches in front of him. “Bye, Owen. Maybe you could bring your mom to our playdate too, okay?”

Owen presses deeper against me. “Okay.” His fist has formed into a sucking thumb, but he keeps it at his side. Good boy.

Lacey’s gaze hangs on him a moment before she stands. “Nice meeting you, Abbie. Thanks for being gracious in the face of my faux pas.”

Words leave me. Because I’m not gracious. I’m snarky and bitter and defensive. “It was fine,” I finally manage to say. And the next words come out without my permission. “I’m twenty. It happens a lot.”

If Lacey feels surprised, she doesn’t show it. “Even still. I of all people should know better.”

And the way she says it makes me wonder if she’s not as typical of a suburban stay-at-home as I assumed.

We say our goodbyes, and I tuck my arm around Owen’s shoulders as we cross the playground toward the car. “Did you have a good day at school?”

“Yep. Did *you* have a good day at school?” He covers his mouth while he giggles.

This has been his joke for the first few weeks of kindergarten. He’s so proud to be going to school, just like mommy does.

But today the joke grates on me, and it’s hard for me to smile. I open his car door for him. “This is the best part of my day.”

“Mine too, Mama,” he says as he scrambles into the Camry.

I buckle into the driver’s seat and crank the A/C. As I pull out of my spot, I survey the minivans and SUVs surrounding me. You would think I’d be used to it by now, living in this world that I’m too young for, but the recognition of it can still knock me off-balance. That dangerous question—*what if?*—bubbles to the surface of my thoughts, but I make it go away. It’s pointless to think like that.

* * *

“Abbie!” From the bottom of the stairs, my sister somehow manages to groan and yell my name at the same time. “We’re gonna be late!”

I flip my textbook page. “I’m coming!”

“You said that five minutes ago.” Skylar does nothing to hide the irritation in her voice. She sounds so much like mom, I feel like a kid again.

I slide a foot into my flip-flop as I skim several more sentences. “This time I really am!”

From downstairs, I hear the muffled voices of Skylar and Owen. Then Owen yells, “Mommy? Where are my light-up shoes?”

“Don’t you want your nice shoes?” Skylar says. “To go with your nice shirt?”

“No. I want my light-up ones.” The *duh* is implied at the end of his sentence.

“Hey, Owen, let’s wear your nice shoes tonight, okay?” I call as I uncap a highlighter. “It’s a special night for Aunt Skylar.”

As are many nights.

Owen thunders up the stairs to his room, retrieves his black loafers, and runs back downstairs. And during this, I manage to read another two paragraphs.

“Oh, pal, you look so handsome,” Skylar says in the soft-hearted voice she only uses with Owen. Louder she adds, “And I bet your mother looks beautiful.”

I groan, mark my spot in the book, and clomp downstairs.

Skylar, who’s wearing a black dress and heels that mark her as a recent grad of the Fashion Institute in New York, appraises my tank top and jeans. Or maybe it’s the ponytail and no-makeup that has her giving me that disapproving look. “Abbie . . .”

“Don’t start with me. I pulled out something nice for Owen to wear, didn’t I?”

“And you couldn’t do the same for yourself while you were at it? Those are your fat jeans.”

If it weren’t for Owen standing here in the foyer, I would be tempted to do some serious yelling.

“I’m aware which jeans they are, and it’s just the Rosses,” I say in a measured voice. “They’ve seen me in worse than this. Like maternity clothes when I was fifteen.”

Skylar takes a deep breath, clearly trying to keep her tone under control as well. “We’ll probably be taking pictures and stuff tonight. You’re the maid of honor.”

“Yes, at your *wedding*. Which isn’t for another two weeks. Tonight I’m your sister who needs to study for an English exam tomorrow but who is going to a family dinner. For you.”

Skylar glances at Owen and bites her lower lip. “Which I appreciate. I just would suggest that you go upstairs and put on, like, that orange silk dress or something.”

Gosh, she’s bossy. I can’t wait for her to get married and get out of my hair.

“I’m not. Changing. My clothes.” I take Owen’s hand and stalk out the front door.

* * *

During the three-minute drive to the Rosses’s house, I make a show of being in a good mood. I crank Owen’s favorite rock song and sing loud with him. He rewards me with giggles and shining eyes all the way.

Skylar is silent. I don’t get why she thinks tonight should merit me wearing a dress. We’ve known the Ross family since we were in high school. Skylar and Connor had a total “We hate each other. No, wait. We love each other.” relationship throughout their senior year but finally got their act together, dated through college, and are in the homestretch of their engagement.

There have been plenty of family dinners in the last five years, but tonight’s holds a special weight. It’s the last one before wedding festivities get underway. As Skylar pulls up into the driveway, next to Mom’s car, it dawns on me that the next time we get together at the Rosses for dinner, Skylar will be arriving with Connor, not Owen and me.

Skylar doesn’t seem to be feeling nostalgic, though. She pulls a tube of lip gloss from her purse, as if she even needs makeup, and swabs it on. With her nails and hair gleaming, I suddenly feel ridiculous in my tank and “fat jeans.” I bite my lower lip. I can’t ask for lip gloss when I was snotty with her barely five minutes

ago about not needing to dress up. Me and my big mouth, anyway.

I get out of the car and help Owen, who, in his enthusiasm, has managed to tangle himself in his seatbelt. Amy and Brian Ross have been like grandparents to him. Owen races up the walkway, charges through the front door, and yells, “We’re here!”

I used to feel the same joy when I walked into this house. When I was pregnant with Owen, this place was like a sanctuary. But of course I was also dating—

Chris seems to materialize in the doorway and my feet stop moving. What’s he doing here? He’s supposed to be at school. He’s never here for our family dinners.

He looks at me with those dark eyes of his, a cautious smile quirking his mouth. His auburn hair is longer than when I saw him at the pool this summer, but otherwise he looks just like I remembered.

I smile back. “Hi! I didn’t expect to see you tonight!”

The perkiness bubbles out of me, reminiscent of my freshman cheerleading days. I had to take a break my sophomore year once I started showing, and it just didn’t hold the same appeal once I was, like, raising a child and stuff.

“I don’t have classes on Fridays this semester, so I was able to come out when I was done this afternoon.” Chris’s voice has always been the same deep, even keel. I love it.

“Great!” I chirp.

When Chris and I were together, we seemed like a strange couple to many. My best friend, Jenna, had gone so far as to call Chris “cute but boring.” But I had needed someone like Chris. Stable and logical. Responsible and moral.

Skylar comes up the walkway. “Hey, Chris.”

She glances over her shoulder and throws me a meaningful

look. *Now do you understand?*

As if my orange dress could make any difference in my situation with Chris.

Inside, she gives Chris a brief hug before continuing on in search of Connor. Chris closes the front door, and then it's just me and him in the foyer. With five kids, the Rosses' house is rarely quiet, but it certainly is right now.

Chris tucks his hands in his pockets. "How are you, Abbie?"

"Good!" More fake enthusiasm. "Owen started kindergarten, and he loves it."

"He's gotten really tall."

"Yeah, he doesn't get that from me." The ghost of Lance—Owen's father—sends a chill through me, and I sweep it away. "How's school going? How many classes are you taking? Do you have lots of homework?"

Chris studies me. He once told me I talk a lot when I'm nervous. "Fine. I have seventeen hours this semester, and so far it's manageable."

"Good. That's good. I'm glad."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I just have two classes. And it's just community college."

Owen tears into the entryway, with four-year-old Amelia Ross on his heels. "Mom! Amelia just got a trampoline! Can we go jump on it, please?"

"We'll be out there with them," Connor says, and I look up to see my almost-brother-in-law holding hands with my sister.

I straighten the back of Owen's collar. "Of course. Just stay away from the pool, Owen."

"Okay!"

He dashes off, Amelia beside him. She holds up the long skirt of her dress so she can run faster. With four big brothers, she's

part princess, part warrior.

The silence between me and Chris returns. In his collegiate T-shirt and flip-flops, he looks very All American College boy. That normal mix of longing and regret I feel in his presence is so acute, my eyes blur.

I step away. “I’m gonna go see if your mom needs help with dinner.”

“Wait.” Chris catches my arm and holds me there, close enough that I can see he shaved this morning and nicked a spot along his jawline. “We need to talk.”

“Okay.” The word comes out as a whisper.

He releases my arm. “I’ve tried being really patient, but I’m not sure it’s working. And I just can’t keep doing this.”

My heart seems to pound in my ears. “Doing what?”

“Being so cautious around you. We’re twenty years old, Abbie. Too old to be acting like little kids.”

Anger flares to life within me. “Was I acting like a kid?”

“We’re about to be brother- and sister-in-law. I’m tired of it being weird between us because I made a mistake when we were sixteen.”

I roll my eyes. “You were right to break up with me. If I’d had any decency, I would’ve done it myself. Or wouldn’t have dated you in the first place when I knew . . .” I shake my head. “If you’re still worrying about me, stop. I’m fine. Like I said when you went away to school—you need to live your life.”

His gaze slides around my face. “That’s what you want? For me to live my life?”

I open my mouth to say yes, only to be interrupted before I can.

“This is important, Abbie. Is that what you want?”

My words are measured, just like his. “You were there for me

in my darkest days, and that means more than I can express.” I swallow. “But don’t waste time regretting what happened with us. Live your life.”

* * *

Chris’s and my relationship was never perfect or easy, not for me. Because when we met and he was clearly interested, I didn’t tell him what I already knew. That I was pregnant from my last boyfriend. Chris was so kind and sweet—and I was so selfish—that I couldn’t pass him up.

We were together through my pregnancy and Owen’s birth. I kept waiting for Chris to run and hide—what teenage guy would put up with their girlfriend nursing another guy’s baby?—but he didn’t. He did the opposite.

He would cradle Owen close as he talked to me about our future, about the three of us being a family. And watching him hold my son, watching him coo in his ear as he changed a diaper, I knew he would do it. He would give up his carefree life to take care of me and Owen. And I felt guilty for wanting that when there was no way it could be best for Chris.

Had Owen been his, had our joint error in judgment created this beautiful and broken situation, it would have been different. But it wasn’t. It was *my* error in judgment and *my* choice. And I didn’t want Chris—the type of guy who asked permission before kissing me the first time—to be burdened with a baby before he even graduated high school.

A few months after Owen was born, Chris told me I was acting different, that I was walling him out. I chalked it up to being in summer school and having a newborn, but I knew he was right. Skylar once said she thought I did it out of self-defense.

So many of my friends had walked away from me after Owen became a reality, and I was preparing myself for the day Chris left me too.

Which he did. After a cold and stilted evening around the house with Owen, I told Chris I loved him, that I would see him later, and he told me he thought we shouldn't see each other anymore.

He attempted to get back together with me once, but by then I knew. Chris deserved better than a girlfriend with stretch marks on her hips. A girl who had to find a babysitter before she could go out on a date. A girl who could only be out of the house for so long before she had to nurse her baby.

It was hard, but it was right.

And I have to tell myself that now as I watch him play tag with Owen and Amelia in the waning sunlight. Amelia shrieks—part terror, part delight—as her big brother swings her over his shoulder.

“You doing okay, Abbie?”

I look up into the kind, weary face of Amy Ross. “Yep.”

Beyond her, my parents are still seated around the patio table with Brian, sipping wine and munching on finger foods.

Amy takes a seat beside me on the porch swing and turns her gaze to where her two kids play with mine. “I won't pretend to understand everything that's happened between you and Chris over the years, but still I know this must be challenging for you.”

Fear pulses to life in my chest. What's she talking about? I force my voice to come out calm and even. “Yeah, well, it's a complicated situation.”

Amy's nod holds sympathy. “He has such a sensitive soul, Chris does. Always has.”

I love that about him. “That's true.”

“He was beating himself up about telling you tonight. I reminded him that you’re a strong woman, and that it’s been five years. More than, actually.”

The fear in my chest spreads throughout my other limbs, and I’m incapable of moving. I let silence fall between us as I work through Amy’s words, the possible meanings, and how to make it all clear. Logic isn’t a strength of mine; it’s all I can do to not release a panicked *what are you talking about?*

Amy’s sigh is loud. She takes a long drink of her wine as she watches Chris allow himself to be tackled by the little ones. “I’m actually nervous about meeting her next week, if you can believe that. It’s silly, but we haven’t really had to do this yet. Connor and Skylar were so young when they met, and Chris never showed a preference for anyone but you. So this will be new territory for us as well.”

Oh God, Oh God. It is what I feared.

“I’m sure she’ll be nice, though,” Amy says with feigned confidence. “The poor girl can’t help that her parents named her Dixie.”

Fabulous. I can see her already. Curvy with big blond hair, a gleaming smile, and time to make herself look beautiful in the mornings. Mascara, eyeliner, coordinating jewelry, the whole nine yards.

No sweat pants. No ugly past. And, most importantly, no kindergartener.

chapter two

I smooth Owen's copper hair back from his forehead, lingering despite the test I need to study for.

"Mom?" he murmurs into his pillow. "You know Ryder in my class? He has a twin brother."

"That's pretty neat."

"I wish I had a twin."

"Do they look like each other, or are they like me and Aunt Skylar?"

"They look alike. Today at lunch I thought I sat by Ryder, but it turned out to be his twin."

"As you get to know them better, I bet you'll be able to tell them apart."

"Yeah. Like Uncle Connor and Uncle Chris. They look alike, but I can tell the difference."

"Difference," I murmur absently. "And Chris isn't your uncle, just Connor. Or he will be after the wedding."

In the gray shadows, I catch Owen's frown. "Why isn't Chris my uncle?"

"He just isn't."

"What is he then?"

"He's just your friend." I completely get his confusion. The word does seem like an inadequate description.

"What are Cameron and C.J.?"

"Also friends."

"What about Amelia?"

“Friend.”

Owen is quiet as he absorbs this. “Amelia said she’s going to marry me. Would that be okay?”

I snort a laugh. “It would be a little complicated, but technically it would be fine.”

With all the wedding excitement, Amelia has developed an obsession with the concept of marriage. Amy told me tonight she finally had to hide the flower girl dress because Amelia kept sneaking off to change into it and play “getting married.”

“Why would it be complicated?” Owen asks through a yawn.

“Because it means Skylar would be both your aunt *and* your sister.”

“Wow.” His voice is dramatically grave. “That is complicated. But I think I would like having a sister. Or a brother.”

And that’s my cue to leave. “We’ll talk about this more in the morning, Owen. Goodnight.” I press a kiss to his forehead.

“I love you.”

“Love you too, kid.”

I pull the door closed behind me, and I’m met by the sight of Skylar pacing the hallway. She twiddles the tips of her ebony hair between her fingers—worry. I roll my eyes and brace myself for a long conversation about some insignificant wedding detail that I’m forced to care about as maid of honor. Like last month when she wanted to debate if the chair bows should be lavender, gold, or some combination, for about an hour.

“What’s going on?” I did a bad job of preparing myself. Even I can hear the irritation in my voice.

But when Skylar looks at me, her expressive eyes full of emotion, I suspect this isn’t about chair bows. “Chris is here,” she whispers.

“Oh.” My troubling conversation with Amy rings in my ears.

“I bet I know why.”

Skylar bites her lower lip. “I wanted to tell you about Dixie, but he said he would.”

Jealousy wraps around my heart, and for the thousandth time, I wish it were possible to simply turn off an unsavory emotion. “It would just be nice if *one* of you had instead of making it into a big thing.”

Skylar pitches her voice low. “Abbie, you’ve got to tell him how you feel, or you’re going to lose him. It’s a miracle you haven’t already.”

I push past her. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

I thunder down the stairs without responding. A light burns in the backyard. Mom and Dad must be relaxing on the back porch, like they frequently do on nice evenings.

Chris sits on the couch in the living room, a spot he’s occupied plenty of times, but tonight he sits straight-backed instead of reclining and his fingers fidget against his knees. His gaze snaps to me as I enter the room.

I lean against the half-wall, which separates the room from the entry. “You could’ve just called, you know.”

Chris stands but doesn’t come closer. “Abbie, I can’t tell you how sorry I am that you had to hear about it from my mom.”

“I’m not crazy about it either, but you didn’t have to drive over here.”

He blinks at me a few times. “The drive takes three minutes. Can’t I even do *that* for you, Abbie?”

Ever since I talked to Amy this evening, my brain has swirled with angry barbs that I could throw at Chris. But his words knock my anger off-course. “What do you mean?”

“I mean stop telling me what I can and can’t do. I’m sick of

you trying to boss me around.”

Chris has never talked to me like this. Once when we were dating and I was in a foul mood, I had even tried to goad him into an argument because I wanted to know what he was like when he was angry. I never had found out.

“I thought you came to apologize.” My words are stiff and haughty. “Now you’re here to yell at me?”

“I’m sorry, but ever since Owen was born, you’ve been completely different with me—”

“Well, excuse me, but having a baby tends to change things.” Chris’s glare intensifies. “Let me talk.”

I cross my arms over my chest and let out a *hmmph*.

“I understand that babies change things. I don’t mean to downplay what you’ve gone through since having him. But ever since he was born, you’ve acted like I’m your son too.”

There’s no stifling the swell of laughter that rises in me. “I don’t mean to laugh, I just . . . Chris, I do *not* feel the way about you that I feel about Owen.”

“I know how you feel about me, Abbie.”

Chris’s solemn voice, his knowing gaze, sets my face on fire. I turn away.

“I’m talking about the way you *treat* me, though. Like you know best, and I shouldn’t argue. Like your opinion is the only one that matters. Like what you say is the law. And don’t roll your eyes, it’s true.”

“Fine. Give me *one* example.”

“When I drove over here tonight, and you treated me like that was a dumb thing to do.”

“Well, that *was* a . . .” Drat—that’ll just reinforce his point. I take a deep breath. “I wasn’t treating you like you were Owen. I was simply expressing how this situation wasn’t so serious that

you needed to come over.”

“But maybe I think it is serious enough. Does that matter? Because you act like my feelings are irrelevant.”

I’ve rolled my eyes before I can tell myself not to. “Of course your feelings are relevant, Chris. I didn’t intend to treat them like they weren’t.”

Chris watches me. He’s not glaring, but his gaze is still stony. “What about my feelings that I want to be with you? With Owen?” His words are thick, husky. “Are those relevant?”

My thoughts swirl to strange places. To Lance and how he whispered to me about forever. To my best friend, Jenna, who didn’t invite me to her sixteenth birthday party. To girls at youth group—sweet, good girls—who giggled behind their hands and whispered to each other as they admired Chris Ross.

And as much as I regret the truth of the situation, I’m not able to deny it the way he is. “Chris, you shouldn’t be with someone like me.”

His jaw clenches. “There you go, again. Bossing me around.”

“I want what’s best for you.”

“You want to *control* me. You want to control everything—how we interact with each other, how I feel about you, how I feel about Owen. You think that’ll make you happy, but it won’t.” He’s breathing heavy, as if angry words are a workout his body isn’t used to. “Can’t you see, Abbie, that it’s just gonna make you lonely?”

Lonely. I don’t fear loneliness. She and I have been friends since I peed on that stick six years ago. Since I started spending half my time curled in my room in the fetal position, scared out of my mind about what was growing inside me, and the other half fake laughing with my friends, trying to imitate the girl I had once been.

Briefly, I had Chris. But even then, I was in a place where he couldn't quite reach me. Where he *shouldn't*.

"If that's how you feel, then what's the deal with Dixie?" I cringe when her name comes out like I'm mocking it. But, really . . .

Chris flinches. "She's a friend from school."

"If she's just a *friend*, then why was your mom acting like it was such a big deal? Why are you showing up at my house to explain her to me?"

"Dixie wants to be more than friends and has for a while now. I'm trying." There's no apology in his voice. Just the raw facts.

I shut down my imagination, which has conjured images of what it looks like for a girl named Dixie to try to be more than friends with Chris. "If you're looking for my permission to date her, then you have it. I told you when you left for school that—"

"I don't *need* your permission. You're not my mother." Chris's teeth are clenched tight. "What I *do* need is your final answer. Is there a chance for you and me, or do I need to figure out a way to move on?"

"I . . ." I can't seem to make myself say the words *move on*. I've certainly implied them plenty, but to actually tell Chris he should move on . . . "I need time to think."

Chris shakes his head. "You've had five years and that's plenty. We're doing this or we're not. What's it gonna be?"

"You know, I'm not your mother, but you're not my father. You don't get to boss me around either."

"I'm not bossing, I'm offering you a choice. I want to be with you, but if you don't feel the same, then I'm going to move on."

"I don't like threats."

Chris takes a deep inhale and exhales slowly out his nose. "It's not a threat. I'm asking for your opinion. And you love giving

your opinion.”

“My opinion is that I want more time to think, but you rejected it.”

“Yes, I did.”

My mind flits to earlier in the evening, to Owen’s laughter as Chris chased him around the backyard. “This impacts Owen, you know.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, I can’t rashly make a decision that impacts Owen.”

Chris’s gaze hangs heavy on my face. “So that’s your answer, then. That I’m not worth the risk.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth! That’s not at all what I said.”

“But it’s what you meant.” Chris jams his hands in his pockets. He’s probably trying to look me in the eyes, but I can’t seem to meet his gaze. “Do you remember how when I left for school, I told you that if you changed your mind about us, all you had to do was say so? That my door was always open to you?”

“I remember.” And I remember the guilt that cloaked me in that moment, because I had longed to weigh him down with me and my matching set of emotional baggage. As if it could ever be good for Chris to leave for college with a girlfriend like me. How could he experience a full life that way?

Chris’s voice is quiet, resolved. “That’s not true anymore. It just hurts too much. If you change your mind, you’ll have to knock.”

chapter three

“I just can’t believe you’re going to a PTA meeting.” Mom threads a gold ribbon through the top of a wedding program. “You know what those moms are like.”

I watch my plate of pasta spin in the microwave. “I don’t. I’ve never been to a PTA meeting.”

“Anyone who isn’t just like them gets eaten alive. If you’re not willing to make your life all about fundraisers and school spirit, if you don’t want to chair a committee or help with the school carnival, then they make it clear that you don’t belong.”

Anxiety knots my stomach, and I no longer want the dinner that I take out of the microwave. “It’s just one meeting. If they start taking blood oaths, I’ll leave. Promise.”

Mom ties a smart golden bow and sets the program in a pile with the others she’s finished. “Maybe Amy will be there. Then you won’t be so lonely.”

There’s that word again. Suddenly everyone seems very concerned with my social life.

“It’s an hour long meeting, Mom. I’ll hardly have time to be lonely.”

I carry my plate of pasta upstairs where Owen is driving his collection of matchbox cars over my unmade bed.

He gives me a wary look as I enter the room. “I don’t like that pasta.”

“Good thing it’s for me, then, and not you. You’re having dinner with Grandma and Grandpa in a bit, but I have to eat now

because of my meeting.”

“Oh, right.” Owen seems to droop as he returns to his cars. “I wish you were staying home.”

“I’ll only be gone for an hour or so. I’ll be home to put you in bed.”

“Will you read to me tonight? Grandma doesn’t do the voices like you do.”

I smile. “Of course.”

Owen returns to mounding my duvet into a road block, and I shovel food in my mouth as I study for my Comparative Lit test tomorrow. But Owen’s dialogue between his cars distracts me.

“No, I don’t want to go get ice cream,” Owen says as he holds his favorite green car.

He turns to the yellow car and speaks for it. “Yes, you have to go get ice cream.”

Now the green car. “I don’t want to.”

Then the yellow car, in a shriek of a voice, “Yes, you have to!”

The cars collide and Owen has the yellow car drag away the green. “No!” Owen yells on behalf of the green car. “Don’t take me! No!”

A shudder rips through me. The memory of Owen being pulled from my arms is so near, it’s like I’m there.

“Owen, honey.” I try to keep my voice level, but it shakes. “Why don’t you have your cars get along nicely with each other? What if they decide together to go have ice cream?”

Owen blinks at me. “But, Mama.” His voice is so earnest. “That wouldn’t be real.”

* * *

“Mind if I sit here?” Lacey, Jackson’s mom, smiles down at

me. She's again dressed for a workout—stretchy yoga pants and pink running shoes that match her exercise shirt. One of those pricey ones that vows to wick away sweat and make you smell like a fresh-picked rose.

I close my textbook in an attempt to be social. “Sure.”

She slides into the seat. “You know you're pathetic when you've looked forward to a PTA meeting all afternoon. I don't know about Owen, but Jackson came home in a *mood* today.”

I chuckle. “We've had more than a few days like that since school started. He's so tired. I have to keep reminding myself that it's a big change for him.”

“That's true.” Lacey nods as if I actually said something sage. “My expectations have probably been too high. I guess since he watched Jillian go through it, I didn't expect him to struggle as much. But you're right. It's a different way of life for him.”

I'm not in the habit of doling out parenting advice. Time for a subject change. “I've never been to a PTA meeting. Anything I should know ahead of time?”

Lacey shrugs. “Not really. We'll probably just talk about the budget and stuff tonight. Nothing big.” She looks past me for a second, smiles big and waves to someone before continuing. “I never thought I'd be a PTA mom, but it's not so bad, really.”

“My mom tried to talk me out of coming tonight.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize they make me sound like I'm about fifteen years old.

But Lacey laughs. “My husband thinks it's funny too. Which I get. When we met, I was totally Miss I'm-A-Career-Woman, so to now be militant about needing to be at PTA meetings is pretty amusing, I guess.”

What kind of woman would I have been had life taken a different turn? I would've wanted kids, I think, but I was still

daydreaming about owning my own car when Owen arrived on the scene.

A tall woman in the front of the room clears her throat and smiles at us. “Welcome, Highlands Elementary parents! It’s so exciting to see familiar and new faces alike. I have the honor of being the PTA president . . .”

The reality of the moment smacks me in the face—I’m at a PTA meeting. This is for real. And PTA meetings . . . Well, they’re just for grown-ups. So whether I feel like I’m official or not, maybe it’s time that I admit this adult thing—a sedan, a kindergartner, and now a PTA meeting—is really happening.

That I’m Abigail Marie Hoyt, and I’m an adult.

* * *

After the meeting, Lacey walks out with me. Her apparent desire to be friends with me is so befuddling, I can’t resist trying to figure out what’s going on.

“It was nice knowing someone tonight,” I say. “I was nervous about coming. Usually other moms shy away from me.”

Lacey’s smile seems sad. “I know how that goes, because Jackson and Jillian aren’t my only two kids. My oldest daughter is Kristin, and she’s a freshman in college.”

I blink at her, this woman who looks like she could be on the cover of *Perfect Suburban Housewives*, were that an actual magazine. But when we met last week, hadn’t I thought there was something about her that indicated a less-than-perfect past?

“I’ve been in your shoes, Abbie. I know how scary it was for you to walk into that room tonight. I wasn’t brave enough for Kristin, and I think it’s great that you came.”

“Thank you.” The words emerge as a whisper.

Lacey fumbles with her car keys. “You don’t have to answer if

you don't want to, but is Owen's father in the picture?"

I shake my head. "I live with my parents."

"I did too for a while. Once I had a job and had saved a bit, Kristin and I moved into our own place. It was scary, and honestly, it was harder than I thought it would be, but we needed it."

"I'm in school right now." I pat my bulging bag, as if it's evidence. "Hopefully after that, I can afford a place for me and Owen."

Her gaze brims with tears. "I so remember what I felt like at your age, Abbie. I couldn't imagine finding friends or having a future that didn't involve crazy shifts and boxed mac and cheese. But you'll get there."

I run my thumb down the length of my shoulder strap and then back up. "How did you and your husband meet? What did he think about Kristin?"

Lacey's smile turns wistful. "They've always adored each other. Mark and I met at the community college. At first I wasn't real nice to him. I hadn't had the greatest experiences with men. But in time Mark proved himself to be a worthy guy." She clasps a warm hand on my shoulder. "You'll meet someone, Abbie. Maybe not today or tomorrow or the year after that, but one day you'll meet someone who loves you *and* Owen."

I swallow the emotion rising in my throat. I tell her thank you and say goodbye before I can ask the question pulsing in my head. What if—I would ask her—I already met him? And what if I don't deserve him?

chapter four

“Owen, I said stop doing that. Your hands are getting all black.”

He glares up at me from the bottom of the playground slide, where he’d been building a tower of the black rubber thingies they use to cushion the neighborhood park playground. I pretend not to notice his scowl and flip a page in my textbook.

But his mood is definitely messing with my ability to concentrate. Not that *my* mood has brightened his day either. I thought he’d appreciate getting out of the house—which has been taken over by wedding supplies, wedding food, wedding guests, and wedding talk—but he’s been even more sullen since we arrived.

I glance up and find he’s shifted to the slide that’s out of my line of vision. He apparently doesn’t realize I can still see his hands scooping the chopped tire, or whatever the black pellets are.

I open my mouth to scold him, only to be interrupted by a, “Abbie?”

I turn to find Jenna—my pre-Owen best friend—heading my way. Her fingers are linked with those of a tall, cute boy. The only kind of boy Jenna is interested in, really.

“Oh, hi!” My fake cheer grates on my ears. “What are you doing here?”

“Just taking a walk. This is Max. Max, this is Abbie.”

“Nice to meet you.” Did I brush my teeth this morning? I

know I didn't brush my hair . . .

"How have you been?" Jenna's head is cocked to the side, as if she's already sympathetic to my situation, just doesn't know why. "Where's Owen?"

"He's here. He's . . ." But I don't see his feet by the slide anymore. I stand and make myself chuckle. "He was just here a second ago. Owen?"

I lean left and right. No Owen. And he doesn't answer.

Panic wraps tight around my lungs and squeezes. Where could he have gone? It's just us here. And I only looked away for a second . . .

He must be here somewhere. There's no need to panic.

To Jenna and Max, I say with a laugh, "He loves hide and seek." And then over the playground again, "Owen, come on out, buddy! My friend, Jenna, is here."

Nothing.

"Owen?"

More nothing.

Judgment radiates off Jenna. Or maybe that's just in my head. "We need to get going anyway." She tugs at Max, and a diamond solitaire sparkles in the sunlight.

An engagement ring. Of course.

"Nice meeting you," I mumble to my shoes, and then I take off for where I last saw Owen.

Jealousy blazes through me. Engaged. Of course. Because Jenna is just That Girl. Sorority president, engaged for her senior year of college, a honeymoon in Jamaica. And there'll be kids, but not until they've been married an appropriate three to five years. And then they'll have nurseries straight out of Pottery Barn Kids catalogs, not just some basinet wedged beneath a boy band poster. Not like the mess my poor kid was born into.

I can't even be trusted to keep him safe at the neighborhood playground.

The stack of black rubber pellets on the slide is still there . . . though the pile seems to have toppled. Did Owen knock into his tower? Maybe when rushing away?

Or—ice seems to clutch my heart—when he was *dragged* away?

“Owen?” My voice is strangled with fear as I cast my gaze around. I try to not think about the busy street that I can hear through the trees, of how easy it would be for someone to hide in the brush, waiting for the right time to—

Sniffling noises reach me. Relief hits with such force, I nearly burst into tears as I run to the closest tree. Behind it, I find Owen curled so tightly, his forehead is pressed into his knees.

“Owen Joshua.” I drop beside him and pull his wiry frame into my lap. “Didn’t you hear me calling for you? That was terrifying.”

Owen wipes his eyes and clings to me. “Sorry, Mom.”

I rub my hand in circles on his back, finding comfort in the physical. The individual bones of his spine, the shudder of his breath, his hair tickling my chin. “What are you crying for, O?”

“I just got scared, is all.” His words are blubbery against my neck.

I don’t have to ask what about. It’s been two years now, but the fear of that day has never dulled in my memory.

And it seems it hasn’t for Owen either.

Lance had apparently woken up that morning feeling like he wanted to be a dad. He had called to ask if we could meet. I said yes even though my schedule was already crowded. Even though I resented how Lance always got to choose when he wanted to be involved. Even though Owen had woken up with a bark of a

cough that I knew would probably be a full-on cold by the end of the day.

We agreed to meet at the mall. I expected it to be just Lance, but instead he walked between his parents. I remember thinking he looked very young to me, despite being almost a full year older. He also looked annoyingly well rested.

Owen, like most three-year-olds, had developed clear opinions about what he did and did not want to do. And when Mr. and Mrs. Henderson tried to talk to him—“Where’s Grandma’s hug?”—Owen clung to my leg and scowled at them.

I smoothed his hair and mentally scolded myself for agreeing to this. “It’s an off day for him. He’s coming down with a cold, I think.”

“Oh, I see.” Mrs. Henderson’s voice was high and full of sugar. “You know what fixes a cold right up, Owen? Ice cream. Why don’t you come with Daddy, Grandpa, and me? We’ll get some ice cream.”

It took every mature bone in my body to not inform Mrs. Henderson that ice cream was a bad idea for a child who didn’t feel well and hadn’t touched his breakfast. This was only the fifth time they’d shown any interest in seeing Owen since he was born, and one 10:00AM dish of ice cream wasn’t going to ruin him for life. She was technically his grandmother, after all. Despite the fact that she had thought me a selfish girlfriend for not terminating the pregnancy.

But even the promise of ice cream wasn’t doing it for Owen. He sulked against me, bleary eyed, and stuck his thumb in his mouth. He needed a nap, not a forced visit with strangers.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll snap out of it.” Mrs. Henderson held out a hand for Owen to grab hold of. “Come on, Owen. Let’s go get you some ice cream. Say bye-bye to Abbie.”

But instead, he pressed against me and stretched his arms as high as he could. “Up, Mama.”

“You want up?” Mrs. Henderson again. “Grandma’s right here. She’ll pick you up.”

Owen’s spirits perked and he looked around. “Where?”

I hoisted him up in my arms, hopeful that Mrs. Henderson hadn’t heard Owen’s pleasure when he thought *my* mom was here. I focused my gaze on Lance, who thus far hadn’t said more than hello to his son. He was so much like his dad, who was just standing back and letting his wife run the show. “How are you, Lance? How’s life at Missouri?”

“Good.” He rubbed the scruff of his chin, which had the distinct look of having taken a lot of time and effort to grow. “At first college felt overwhelming. So much to do, you know. But it’s good now. You’d like it there.”

Conversation with Lance was never easy, but that comment had felt like a dart right to the heart. *I’m a little busy raising your son at the moment. We can’t all just walk away so easily.*

Owen gave a whimper in my arms, and I realized I had squeezed him too tight. I forced my arms to relax and my mouth to smile. “I don’t know how I’d do at Missouri. I’ve always been more of a Jayhawk girl.”

“Since when?” Lance smiled, but his words had an edge in them. “Since that’s where Chris Ross went?”

Another dart, only I didn’t know what to say to that one. It was almost a relief when Mrs. Henderson rubbed Owen’s back and said, “Grandma can hold you, honey. Or Grandpa too.”

Owen squeezed me tighter and said his favorite word in a flat and final tone. “No.”

Frustration smeared Mrs. Henderson’s expression.

“It’s because he’s sick,” I said. “I’m sure your kids only

wanted you when they were little and not feeling great.”

Her jaw clenched. “They may have wanted me when they were sick, but I wouldn’t have allowed them to be rude to their grandparents.”

“We should reschedule for another time.” The words came out haughty, but there wasn’t much I could do about that considering all my energy was going into not screaming at her. How dare she act as though she were a grandparent in any sense besides the title. “He’s not feeling well and you won’t be able to enjoy your time together.”

“He just needs to be doing something besides standing here. Let’s get ice cream. Right, Owen? Tell Abbie you want to get ice cream.”

Abbie. Not even Mom.

Owen said a loud, “No,” that unleashed a string of coughs, the same phlegmy bark that had been with him ever since he woke up that morning.

“That cough sounds bad.” Mr. Henderson put a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “Poor kid probably just wants to sleep.”

“Ice cream is good for sore throats. Abbie, why don’t you go get some shopping done? Wouldn’t it be nice to have a few minutes to yourself? And when you’re done, you could just meet us down in the food court.”

I bent my head toward his ear. “Owen? You want ice cream? We can go get some if you want.”

Owen’s answer was hot against my neck. “I want you.”

“I’ll come too.”

“Don’t you want to come with Daddy to get ice cream?” Mrs. Henderson cooed. “You don’t get to see him too much.”

Owen flicked at one of the buttons on my shirt. “Mama calls my grandpa Daddy.”

“Such a smart boy.” Mrs. Henderson’s voice couldn’t possibly get any stickier. “Yes, that’s your mother’s dad. And this is *your* daddy right here.” She patted Lance’s shoulder. “He’s *my* baby. Which makes me your grandma.”

Owen shifted to peek at Lance, who smiled broadly. “Hey, buddy. What’s your favorite kind of ice cream? Mine’s chocolate chip. You like chocolate chip?”

All three of them watched Owen with expectant smiles. He stuck a thumb in his mouth and hid against my shoulder again.

Their smiles drained away.

“You should try to break him of thumb sucking,” Mr. Henderson suggested in a gentle voice. “I see lots of kids at my practice with problems from that.”

“I’m trying, sir, but it’s tricky.”

“Have you tried putting Band-Aids on his thumbs? That works for some kids.”

“I did once and he took them off. They were all lined up on the edge of his bed the next morning.”

Mr. Henderson chuckled and gave Owen a tender look. “One mother had success with limiting her child to only sucking his thumb at night. Have you tried that?”

“I have. And he’s normally pretty good.”

Except when he’s stressed.

“Owen, how about if Abbie—Mom.” Mrs. Henderson laughed, as if it was a humorous error. “What if she comes with us to ice cream, but you let me or daddy carry you? Your mom’s arms are probably pretty tired.”

They were, but she’d never hear me say so. “How’s that sound, Owen?” I asked him. “Would that be okay?”

“No.”

“I would be there with you.”

“No.”

Mrs. Henderson arched her eyebrows at me. “You give him an awful lot of power, don’t you?” She laughed as if her appraisal of my parenting was some kind of joke.

Mr. Henderson’s cell phone burst into a tune vaguely recognizable as a classic rock song. “Speaking of the office . . .” His chuckle was forced as he walked away.

His wife glared at his retreating back, then shifted her frustration to me and Owen. The look she gave me was clear. *Do something.*

“Look,” I said in what I imagined to be a mom-to-mom kind of voice. “This isn’t how I wanted it to go either, but he’s not feeling well and he has a hard time with people he doesn’t see very often.”

“I’m his grandmother.”

I looked to Lance, hoping for help.

Lance shrugged. “We just want to take him for some ice cream. It doesn’t have to be so tough.”

I shifted Owen’s weight, and doing so nearly pushed out the laugh bubbling in my chest. How was it possible that I made my sweet, strong-willed son with a pushover like Lance Henderson?

“If you guys want to go get ice cream, that’s fine. Let’s stop arguing and just go.”

But I barely took a step when Mrs. Henderson’s hand landed on my shoulder. “I think Lance should carry Owen.”

Owen’s legs clenched tighter around my waist and his arms nearly choked me. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You get to carry him all the time. I never do.” Lance’s smile was broad, as if attempting to be charming. “Come here, buddy. Let Daddy give you a piggy back ride.”

My heart kicked into high speed when Mrs. Henderson’s

hand cupped Owen's cheek, trying to encourage him to look at her. "Owen, your dad is talking to you."

I knew I needed to relax or I would freak Owen out. "He said he doesn't want that," I said in the calmest voice I could manage. "Now, we can either go get ice cream like—"

"Here, Owen. I'll hand you to daddy." Mrs. Henderson's arm had somehow snaked between me and Owen. She tugged at him. Gently, but that hardly mattered.

"Mrs. Henderson, I do *not* think—"

And then Lance was on the other side, tugging Owen toward *him*. "Mom, I got him. It's fine."

"No," Owen said in a voice I knew well. The pre-tantrum voice. I had heard it a lot in the last few months. Like at dinner when I insisted he eat the rest of his lasagna, or the week before when Amelia was over and I made him share his trucks.

"It's *not* fine. Look, you two, this is crazy—"

Owen sat back as a cough overcame him. His movement was so abrupt, I barely kept my balance. The only reason I stayed on my feet was Lance's grip on my arm.

And that's how he lifted Owen away from me.

"No!" My calm façade melted away as Owen's slightly-too-big shoe came off in my hand.

Owen screeched, contorting his body to the right and left as he reached for me. He wasn't calling my name, just screaming.

Lance attempted to soothe. He bounced Owen on his hip like he was an infant or something. My mind was so full of Owen—that I needed to get to *Owen*, that this was so scary for *Owen*, that I had endangered *Owen*—that I didn't even realize at first I couldn't get to him because Mrs. Henderson held me back. She must have been talking the whole time, but it was hours before I processed her words. Stuff about Lance being Owen's father, that

he just wanted to hold him, that I needed to be calm and help out.

I can only imagine what the casual mall-goer thought that morning when they saw us. I don't even know how long this went on. In my head Owen's wails lasted forever, but maybe it was only a few seconds.

What I do know is Owen's wailing and contorting stopped suddenly. And then his head went back and he sprayed a beautifully juicy sneeze right in Lance's face.

Lance spat out a curse, practically dropped Owen to the ground, and wiped at his face with his shirt tail. I broke free of Mrs. Henderson, who in her surprise must have released me. Owen sprinted for me, lopsided in his one shoe, and the mix of relief and terror on his face has replayed in my mind countless times.

When he was safe in my arms again, I whirled to Mrs. Henderson and Lance. I didn't know what I was going to say until the words were out of my mouth. "You made a choice." Owen cried loudly in my left ear, and I had no idea how loud I was talking. "Three years ago, you made a choice, and I made a choice. And we both have to live with them." And then I glared at Lance. "If you want a role in his life, then I advise you to lawyer up and make a case. But I'm not putting up with you smiling at me as you force what you want whenever you want it. Not again."

And then I marched Owen out of the mall and consequently out of their lives.

We never heard from them after that, but they certainly left their mark. The thought pains me as I look at Owen, two years older now, cowering behind a tree because of Jenna. Or maybe because of her fiancé, who, now that I consider it, looks a bit like Lance. Good-looking in that nondescript kind of way. Like a Ken doll.

Owen remains tightly curled in my lap as I cuddle him close. “It’s good to be cautious around strangers.”

“What does cautious mean?” he asks between snuffles.

“It’s like careful. And I like that you’re careful.” I tilt my head so I fill his vision. “But you know I’m gonna take care of you. Right, Owen?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll always take care of you.”

“Okay, Mom.” Owen wipes his nose with his narrow wrist. “But who takes care of you?”

I pinch his side, where he’s ticklish. “*You* take care of me, silly.”

His smile is faint. “And God too, right?” He’s not in the mood to tease, this serious boy of mine.

“Yes. God too. He takes care of all of us. Very good care.”

“But why don’t you have somebody else? Like how Skylar has Connor to take care of her. Or Grandma has Grandpa.”

I try to keep my face neutral, to keep my smile wide. “It just didn’t work out that way, Owen.”

His frown deepens. “Why not?”

“God’s plan is different for everyone.”

Owen doesn’t seem particularly satisfied by that response. And I don’t blame him. If I’m being honest, I’m not sure how satisfied I am with it either.

chapter five

Skylar sucks in a deep breath when I emerge from our bathroom into her bedroom. “Oh, Abbie.”

I do a mock runway walk toward her and the two other bridesmaids, Jodi and Heather. “Not bad, right?”

“You look stunning.” Skylar’s designer’s eye skims the gold dress. “I just knew the color would do great stuff with your hair.”

“I can’t believe you’ve had a baby.” Heather, who’s ten years older than us and has two little ones of her own, shakes her head. “You’re so tiny.”

Skylar pauses assessing my skirt to give Heather a chastising look. “Like you have room to complain. You lost your pregnancy weight in about two days.”

“Not with Lily. I *still* have jeans I can’t fit into.”

“Yet another reason why adoption is cool,” Jodi says without looking up from her phone. “I get to keep my waistline *and* avoid all that painful, pushing-a-child-out-of-my-body stuff.”

“You really think Eli would be okay with not having his own kids? I know Connor isn’t. He’s hoping we get pregnant on our honeymoon, like his parents did. And I’m hoping a puppy will placate him for a couple years.” Skylar tilts her head at my skirt and smooths a nonexistent wrinkle. “Heather, do you see anything we need to fix?”

Heather stands to inspect my flawless dress. She was one of our youth coaches in high school and taught Skylar how to sew.

They declare my dress perfect, but I linger. I feel pretty in it and don't want to change quite yet.

I scrape a cucumber through dill dip. "Thanks for not making me wear something with a bum bow."

"Sure." Skylar watches me lift the cucumber. She looks like she wants to grab it out of my hand before I drip something on my dress.

I take my time getting it to my mouth.

Jodi glances up from her phone. "I had to wear a dress that looked like a brown napkin when I was in my cousin's wedding. Anything would've been an improvement from that, but this dress rocks."

Jodi and Heather are wearing lavender dresses, but Skylar made each unique for our style and body types. She's awesome like that. The realization makes me pop the cucumber in my mouth.

Heather grins at my sister. "So, just one more day, Skylar Hoyt. This time tomorrow we'll be getting you all ready for pictures."

Skylar presses a hand to her stomach and smiles widely. "Hard to believe, isn't it?" When she smiles like that, she looks like a fashion *model* instead of a designer. Life isn't fair.

Jodi glances at the clock on her phone. "Girl, we should get going or you'll be late to your own rehearsal dinner."

I groan. "I don't want to change out of my dress."

"Which reminds me . . ." Skylar looks at Heather and Jodi. "Can I have a couple minutes with my sister?"

They grin—clearly in the know—and leave.

Skylar smiles at me, and she suddenly seems very adult. Maybe it's how she's done her bangs differently, or the confident shine of her eyes. Or maybe it's just the knowledge that tomorrow

she'll become a married woman. Still my sister of course, but she'll belong more to Connor than me.

"I have something for you," Skylar says as she turns away.

I take the brief window of privacy to blink rapidly and wipe under my eyes for any stray tears.

She pulls open her closet doors. "Don't get too excited, though. It's not that big of a deal."

I put the lid on the dip for when we carry it downstairs. "I'm keeping my expectations low."

From the back of her closet, Skylar whips out a coffee-colored dress that makes a lovely swishing noise as it moves. She holds it up so I can see the sweetheart neckline and cap sleeves.

"I made this last semester. The brown made me think of you, for some reason. I have that brown Anthropologie dress that you're always stealing, and I just thought . . ." Skylar shrugs, and I notice her chin trembles. "Well, with my closet no longer being quite so convenient. I just . . ."

I can't remember the last time I saw my sister cry. My own tears return.

"I know you don't wear a lot of dresses, but the pattern for this one just made me think of you." Skylar wipes her eyes in a practiced, careful way so she doesn't smudge her eye makeup. "And I wanted you to have something for tonight that made you feel beautiful. Because you *are* beautiful, and I love you so much, and I'm so glad you're my maid of honor."

She's all-out crying through that last sentence. I wrap my arms around her and cry against her shoulder. I don't deserve a surprise custom-made dress for the rehearsal dinner. I've been a shamefully begrudging maid of honor.

"Oh, Skylar, why'd you do that? I've been so *rotten* to you." I desperately want to rewind and do it all again. To be the kind of

maid of honor she deserves. When will I ever learn that I *have* to do things right the first time? That redos don't happen.

"Abbie, don't be so hard on yourself." Skylar smooths my hair, and my mind wanders to a night long ago. When my belly was swollen and aching as Owen started to make his way into the world, and I came to Skylar because I knew she would take care of me. Skylar intimidates a lot of people, but on the inside, she's a total cream puff.

"I've been so jealous." The confession pours out of me. "So jealous and so scared."

Skylar holds me at arm's length and frowns into my face.

"About what?"

"I just know things will be different." I wipe at my eyes and my hand comes away black with mascara. "Don't get me wrong, I'm so happy for you that you're getting married, and no one could be better for you than Connor. But I'll be even more alone now."

Fresh tears choke my words as Skylar pulls me against her once again. "Shh, Abbie. Don't talk like that."

"And now I'm ruining your night with my pity party."

"You're not ruining anything except your makeup, which we can fix." When my tears are quieter, she adds, "I'm scared about this too, if it helps. I love Connor, of course, but there'll be a lot of change. You're not alone, Abbie."

I snort, but it's not worth arguing about because the constant loneliness of my life is impossible to explain to others. How could my sister understand the isolation of being twenty years old and having a kindergartener? Of staying home at night while others my age go out on dates or to movies? Of watching my friends go off to universities when I weighed preschool options and junior college? Of knowing more about what's on Nick Junior than I do

MTV?

I would never undo Owen. But my sister is mistaken—I'm very alone.

“Don't snort at me like that. I have something to say to you.” Skylar's voice is brusque, her manners all-business as she removes my new brown dress from the hanger. “And I'm the bride, so I get to do stuff like this. There's a boy who will be there tonight who has been in love with you since you were fifteen and pregnant. Do *not* roll your eyes at me. I know a lot has—and hasn't—happened between you two, but there's no sense in denying that he loves you. And”—Skylar rushes on when my mouth opens—“I know you love him too.”

I consider saying I don't, but both of us would know it's a lie. “It's not fair to him, though. Not with Owen in the picture. Not with who I am.”

“Abigail Marie.” Skylar fixes me with a fierce look. “When will you stop throwing stones at yourself long enough to notice that nobody else is?”

I blink at her. “I'm not—”

“You are! You act like for the rest of your life, you have to walk around with Teenage Mom printed on your forehead, and that's just not true. The only one still struggling to forgive you for what happened is *you*. Now turn around; I'm going to help you get changed because we needed to leave two minutes ago.” She tugs down my zipper.

“You just don't understand,” I say as I pull on the brown dress. “Chris has done everything right. Why should he have to get stuck with someone like me?”

When the dress is over my head, I find Skylar back in my line of vision giving me a serious Big Sister look. “Chris isn't perfect, you know. And he wouldn't consider it being *stuck* with you. He

loves you, he loves Owen. Why are you making this so difficult?”

“I . . .” But her question lodges in my heart, and I can’t manufacture a decent answer. “I don’t know.” Why *am* I making this so difficult? “This way feels safer, somehow.”

The words confuse me as they slide around in my brain. Safer? Is that really what this is about? Is it possible I’m not looking out for Chris so much as I am trying to protect myself?

Skylar doesn’t seem confused though. She seems pleased with me. As if that was the answer she had wanted. “Of course it does. If you keep him at arm’s length, that means he’s not close enough to hurt you again. More control, less vulnerability. I’ve been there. With Connor, actually. But you know what I’ve decided?”

I’m not sure I want to know.

“Loving someone—and being loved by someone— isn’t safe at all. But it’s worth the risk for the right people.” She extends a pair of her earrings to me. “Connor’s right for me. And Chris is right for you.”

I fumble with the earrings as her words knock around inside my brain. “But Chris said last week that the door isn’t open for me anymore. That I’ll have to knock.”

Skylar’s mouth quirks in a half-smile. “Then what are you waiting for? Knock, little sister.”

* * *

“Why am I called the ring bearer?” Owen’s gaze follows Amelia, who skips around us, tossing pretend flower petals. “Shouldn’t I be called a pillow bearer?”

I sink my fingers in his copper hair. “In some weddings, the ring bearer carries rings on the pillow. But you’re just carrying a pillow because your aunt is a control freak.”

“You’re not talking bad about my almost-wife, are you?”

I turn and grin at Connor. “It’s my prerogative as her sister. *I* can complain about her, but I better not hear you doing it.”

“What would there be to complain about?” He holds out his fist for Owen to give him a bump. “You’re looking sharp, my man.”

Owen crashes his knuckles into Connor’s. “Where’s Chris?”

“Out front.”

“Doing what?”

“Talking on the phone.”

Connor avoids looking at me when he says it, I’m sure of it. Chris must be talking to Dixie. I run the pendant on my necklace up the chain and down as Skylar’s words come back to me—*knock, little sister*. But how can I when Dixie will be here?

“I’m gonna go find him. Here, Mom.” Owen shoves the pillow into my hands and takes off for the door.

I glance at Connor. Beyond him, my mom fusses with the greenery wrapped around the *chuppah*. My father stands beside her, dutifully holding a box that appears to be full of silk flowers and other items vital to her wedding and event planning business.

“This all came together really nice,” I say because I feel like I need to say something to Connor.

“Totally my doing.” Connor puffs out his chest. “Skylar was all ‘let’s make the chair bows gold,’ and I was like, ‘No, honey, purple is the way to go.’”

I grin. “You didn’t just say purple did you? Because—”

“Obviously, I meant lavender. Don’t you think I know my own wedding colors, Abbie?”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“Smart girl.”

My gaze follows Amelia as she dances in circles around the younger two of her big brothers. Cameron hardly looks like himself without his baseball hat, and C.J. has again loosened his tie. It's funny to think that when I met the Ross family, C.J. was the same age Owen is now, and Cameron was just two years older.

“You doing okay?”

I blink and find Connor studying me.

“Never better,” I chirp.

“You looked like you were far away.”

“Oh. I was just noticing C.J. and thinking about when I first met him, how he was Owen's age. And now I drop Owen off at the same school as him.”

Connor turns to look at his brothers too. “It seems long ago, doesn't it? A lot has changed.” His gaze catches on Skylar, who's filling Amelia's basket with silk flower petals. “But a lot hasn't.”

“Like you being crazy about my sister.”

Connor chuckles. “Yeah, she had me at that sneering look of hers that somehow asked without words ‘why do you always wear sweatpants?’”

I can't hold in the laugh. “You *do* wear sweatpants a lot.”

“Everyone needs a signature item. Skylar's always saying that.”

“I don't think she means items that are lined with fleece.”

Connor grins at me. “By God's grace, she loves me anyway. And I'm a lucky man for it.” He claps me on the shoulder and strides toward my sister.

By God's grace, she loves me anyway.

The phrase seems to reverberate in my soul, like a song's bass sometimes does in my chest. Maybe it's normal to feel like others shouldn't love you, or like you're somehow less-than. Maybe

everyone has times when they feel unworthy to be loved by the people in their lives.

Chris's laughter awakens me from my thoughts. He walks across the sanctuary, handsome in a collegiate kind of way with his cargo shorts and long-sleeve University of Kansas T-shirt. Owen is the cause for the laughter. He's chattering away as he gazes up at the man he loves so much. The man he—I notice for the first time—resembles.

The air whooshes from my lungs. *By God's grace.*

Chris spots me. "Abbie." His gaze travels the length of my Skylar-approved dress and back up. "You look . . . nice."

I can barely look him in the eyes. "Thanks."

He tugs at the hem of his T-shirt. "I didn't know we were supposed to dress up or I—"

"Don't worry about it. I just did this for Skylar."

"Still." Chris rubs the back of his neck. "I wish Connor would've told me."

Owen's hand wiggles into mine. I smile down at him to find he's holding Chris's as well. As he looks up at us, his face beams like last Christmas when Mom and Dad surprised us with a trip to Disney World. I risk a glance at Chris and find him looking at me the same way he always has—with love.

I'm twenty years old with stretch marks and a five-year-old dependent. My moods vary between cranky, really cranky, and stubborn. And between school and Owen, my daily life feels too busy for basics like mascara or shaving my legs.

Yet still, he looks at me with love. What other explanation is there but the one my brother-in-law offered? By God's grace, Chris loves me anyway.

Amelia skips through our half circle, her basket clutched in her left hand. "Aunt Skylar gave me petals to practice with!" She

throws a fistful of lavender petals in the air and they rain down on us.

“Lemme do some!” Owen calls as he chases after her.

Through the shower of petals, I watch Chris as he watches the kids, his mouth open with a rare belly laugh. He loves me. And I love him. And it’s time to do something about it.

* * *

Much to my disappointment, Dixie is very cool. And not in that somewhat abrasive way where you think a person is cool . . . but you also wish they would take a break from being cool for about five minutes and act like a normal human being. No, the only thing annoying about Dixie is the way she looks at Chris. And I really can’t fault her for that.

I slosh ravioli onto my plate and stalk back to my seat between Skylar and Owen. If only I were one of those girls who, when upset, couldn’t eat a bite. Unfortunately this is my third time through the line, and I’ve already hoarded two of the desserts.

For being named Dixie, she’s a very normal looking girl. Cute, but normal. Dark brown eyes and hair, medium skin, medium height. Not the bosomy blonde chick I had pictured when Amy first brought her up to me. She smiles and laughs a lot. That is, when she’s not sharing interesting stories from the health clinic she volunteers at or her recent mission trip to Haiti.

And I really wanted to hate her.

Yet another way I’m inferior, because I’m sure Dixie doesn’t think like that when she goes into social situations. If she does, and if she came into tonight wanting to dislike me, I’m certainly aiding her in accomplishing her goal. *That Abbie friend of yours*

sure scowls a lot, I imagine her saying to Chris later. *But I suppose her life has been very difficult, being a teen mother and all*, Dixie would add with compassion.

I jump when Amy Ross places a hand on my shoulder.

“Didn’t mean to startle you, dear. Are you done eating? The caterers wondered if they could shut down the buffet.”

I don’t need to glance around the room to know that I’m the last one eating dinner. Everyone else at my table finished their dessert long ago and now chats over coffee and iced tea. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“I want to make sure you’ve eaten enough.”

Yes, I’ve eaten enough that it’ll be a miracle if my bridesmaid dress zips up tomorrow afternoon. “I’m good. Thanks, Amy.”

Amy squeezes my shoulder and lowers her voice. “You’re doing great, hon.” She discretely flicks her gaze to Dixie, who is having a solemn conversation with Amelia about Disney princesses, and then Amy strolls back to the caterer.

“I like Cinderella’s sparkly blue dress,” Amelia is saying as I tune in. She’s spinning in circles as she talks. “And I would like to wear glass shoes, I think. But purple is my favorite and Rapunzel’s dress is purple. She’s like a super hero, my Aunt Abbie says.”

“Well, I agree with Aunt Abbie.” Dixie smiles at me in a kindhearted way.

I try to return the gesture, but I’m not sure I succeed.

“Owen’s favorite princess is Jasmine.” Amelia bumps into Dixie’s chair. “He likes that she has a tiger.”

Dixie turns her smile to my son and the knot in my stomach turns to ice. “Have you seen a real tiger before, Owen?”

I glance at Chris, who’s watching me with a tense expression. I’m sure he’s noticed I’ve filled my plate three times. That’s never

a good sign with me.

“At the zoo,” Owen says around a mouthful of brownie.

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth, Owen,” I murmur.

He blinks up at me and says with confusion, “But you just did.”

Drat, he’s right. My face heats and my ears ring with the future conversation between Dixie and Chris. *Her son has very poor table manners, which he clearly gets from her. Of course—she would again add compassionately—she had him when she was just a child herself. I’m sure it’s been difficult.*

Brian Ross’s voice booms across the gathering of extended family. “If we could have everyone’s attention for just a moment?” He gestures for Amy to come stand by him. “Get your champagne, honey.”

Across the table, Dixie whispers to Chris, “Your parents are so sweet.”

I tell myself to not look at them. I don’t want to see her gazing at Chris like he’s the greatest guy in the world. Which, of course, he is.

Brian fits one arm around Amy’s waist and holds up his flute with the other. “Amy and I are thrilled you all are here to celebrate with us and the Hoyt family. Ever since Skylar and Connor met in high school, we had a suspicion that this day would come.” He grins at my sister and Connor, who are snuggled together at the head of the table. “We couldn’t be happier that tomorrow we officially get to claim Skylar as our daughter.”

“How cute are they?” Dixie, again, whispers.

I can’t resist looking this time. My legs want to push back from the table when I see the wistful way she’s watching my sister and Connor. It couldn’t be more obvious that she wants this for

herself. That she wants to be cuddled against Chris as Brian extends a glass of champagne to toast his soon-to-be-daughter, Dixie.

And why shouldn't it happen for her? Chris obviously likes her enough to have her as his date for the wedding. Why shouldn't she think this will be her in a couple years?

After the toast, Brian prays for Skylar and Connor, my parents, me, Chris, the bridesmaids, the groomsmen, Amelia, Owen, the pastor, and so on until I'm pretty sure he's going to include those who printed the invitations and the postal workers who delivered them. But he cuts himself off after mentioning the videographer and the evening's activities resume.

Amelia and Owen scamper off to play, Skylar and Connor drift away to mingle with the guests, and the room comes alive with chatter and cheer. Before long, I'm alone at the table pushing my cold pasta around my plate as I watch—but try not to watch—Chris introduce Dixie to his extended family.

After a few minutes of that, I pitch my plate and slink away to the privacy of the sanctuary. The room, draped with tulle and brimming with unlit candles, seems to be filled with anticipation. Programs are arranged on each seat. The chair bows have been tied and retied to perfection.

The only thing that's wrong with the room is me.

I sink to the spot on the stage where I'll stand tomorrow as Skylar and Connor pledge to love each other forever. And Chris will stand across from me, watching them as well.

Chris and I should have had a similar story. Dating through high school and college, a year-long engagement, and a dream wedding with the perfect white dress right here on this stage. And then after a few years, we should have made Owen together and brought him home to our shoebox of a house.

And yet . . . and yet I can't imagine not having Owen. The idea sickens me, Owen not being here in the world. Even if it means giving up Chris, I could never wish away the result of my relationship with Lance.

"What are you doing, Abbie?"

Chris's voice emits a startled yelp from me. I cover my heart. "I didn't hear you come in."

He scuffs the sole of his shoe along the carpet and his face is drawn in a sullen expression. "You're not sitting here pouting, are you?"

His abrasive tone turns my manner cold. "I just needed a minute. Is that all right with you?"

"You had a chance, you know. A lot of them. It's not fair to get bent out of shape because I'm doing what you asked and living my life."

I scowl at him. Bent out of shape? Like I'm a kid angry over having to share a favorite toy. "Then don't stay and watch. Go back to the party."

Chris's face flickers with something. "That's really what it is? It really is about Dixie?"

"Of course it's about Dixie. What else would it be about?" I can only imagine what my face looks like by now. Waterproof mascara would have been a good idea.

Chris shoves his hands in his pockets. Studies me. "Abigail Hoyt, do you still love me?"

I watch my toes flex and unflex. "I just don't think it's fair to you that—"

"Do you still love me?"

I take a deep breath. "I've never wanted you to feel an obligation to—"

"Do you still love me?" he says right over the top of my

words.

The truth breaks out of me in an exasperated rush: “Yes, I still love you!”

Chris comes closer, though he still stands a few feet away. “And do you love me enough to get over this weird fixation you have about the fairness of our situation?”

I think about Skylar’s words to me earlier, that I’m the only one who still struggles to forgive myself for what happened. That I’m the only one still throwing stones. I make myself look Chris in the eye. “I want to.”

“Because I love Owen too, you know. And you just wouldn’t be you without him.”

My eyes slide closed. *By God’s grace*. Chris doesn’t love me *despite* my situation but because of it.

Chris’s fingers brush against my cheek, and I open my eyes to find him crouched in front of me. “Can we please give this another shot?”

I lean into his hand. “Owen would be thrilled.”

A corner of Chris’s mouth lifts. “Great, but what about his mother?”

“Yeah, she would be too.”

Chris gazes at me for a moment, and then groans. “Abigail Hoyt, why’d you have to come to your senses on the *one* night in my life that I’m with another girl?”

“I’m a mysterious creature.”

He runs the pad of his thumb along my cheekbone. “You like to think that, but you’re not. Not to me, anyway.” He sighs and glances at the door. “I’ll be back as soon as possible . . . but I don’t know how much I can really rush through goodbyes with Dixie.”

“I understand.”

After one more lingering look, he leaves.

I draw my knees to my chest as best I can in my dress and bask in what just happened. I'm torn between wanting to yell it out for everyone to hear and wanting to stay right where I am to savor the private knowledge that Chris and I will finally be together. Life won't be perfect, but it will be a beautiful adventure from here on out.

I'm lying on my back, gazing up at the *chuppah* and imagining me and Chris in front of it a year from now. And that's when I hear a sound I would recognize anywhere.

My son is screaming.

chapter six

I sprint through the sanctuary door toward the big room where we ate dinner. In the fifteen seconds it took me to get here, my mind has come up with approximately five hundred reasons why my son would be using *that* scream. I assume it'll be apparent once I lay eyes on him, but it's not.

Others in the room have resumed conversation—or maybe conversation never stopped—and Owen is curled in my father's lap, sobbing. Dad has a big hand clutched on Owen's back and rocks him as best as the folding chair allows. Amelia stands nearby and watches with wide, dark eyes. Were the two of them fighting over something . . . ? They've squabbled plenty, but I've never heard Owen scream like that because of Amelia.

"Owen," I call as I jog to him. I had no idea I could move so fast in three-inch heels. "What's wrong?"

He reaches for me, his expression so broken, so reminiscent of That Day, that I know exactly what he means when he blubbers, "That man! I saw that man!"

I clutch him close and his legs and arms wrap around me, squeeze me tight. "It's gonna be okay," I murmur in his ear, even though fear streaks through me. "You're safe. You're with me."

Dad's face is creased with concern. "What's going on, Abbie? He just started screaming out of nowhere."

I try to mouth *Lance* but by Dad's expression, it's clear he doesn't understand.

Amelia rubs Owen's leg, a frown on her bow of a mouth. Even

Amelia's touch makes Owen wince against me.

"I'll take him outside to help him calm down," I say with fake cheer.

Amelia's face lights up with the mention of outside. "I'll come too."

"Amelia, let's stay in here, honey." Dad steers her away, toward the dessert table. "Owen will be back, but he needs his mom right now."

Owen trembles against me as I carry him out the back door. Drat—catering van. I veer right to duck to the back parking lot. Only before I've turned the corner, yelling reaches my ears.

"Was that your plan this whole time, Christopher Ross?" Dixie's voice isn't nearly so sweet as it was during dinner, not that I blame her. "To have Abbie finally see you moving on so she'd get jealous? I can't believe you *used* me! I never would've thought that you . . ."

I pivot on my heel. I'll have to pass the catering van on my way to the front lot, but—

Lance.

He stands there on the sidewalk, staring at me and Owen, and I can't seem to move even though every fiber in my body screams to *run*.

He pulls off his black hat, the one the caterers wore tonight, and I notice the cuff of his sleeve bears a stain that's the same distinct orange-red as the sauce of the penne and meatballs.

I take a deep breath. I'm safe here, I remind myself. I can scream and Chris will come running. I open my mouth to say hello, to tell Owen to say hi to his dad, but Lance speaks first.

"I'm sorry, Miss." His voice is rough, graveled. "I seem to have upset your son."

My knees quake beneath Owen's weight and the strain of it

all. *My* son?

Lance takes in a deep breath. “I’m with the caterer. I was just clearing away dishes and . . . and I startled your son somehow.”

Against my shoulder, Owen’s head twists. He wants a peek at this man who claims to be a stranger.

“Well.” I swallow. “Thank you.”

Lance looks at Owen. He kneads his hat in his hands. “I’m sorry to have scared you, buddy.”

Owen’s mouth moves against my neck. “It’s okay.”

Lance’s gaze slips back to me. He opens his mouth, then closes it. His Adam’s apple bobs. “I’m sorry.”

Words of forgiveness swell within me, but they battle with words of anger as I remember what happened to make Owen clutch me with such fear.

A hand brushes my back, and I find Chris has materialized. His jawline is hard, his gaze steel, as he takes in Lance. “Come here, O.” Chris eases Owen from my arms, which quiver with fatigue.

“I want Mama,” Owen’s words are full of tears, but he relaxes against Chris anyway.

“Mama needs to have a conversation. She’ll join us inside in a minute.” He cuts a glare to Lance. “In *one* minute.”

Lance averts his gaze as Chris carries Owen inside. When the door swings closed, Lance jams his hat back on his head. “When I saw the Ross-Hoyt rehearsal dinner on the schedule, I figured this is what I’d find. Congratulations.”

I hold up my left hand, free of jewelry. “It’s Skylar and Connor.”

Lance glances at the door Chris and Owen disappeared through. “*This* time.”

“I’m going back inside to enjoy my sister’s night, so if you

have anything else you want to say, I suggest you say it now.”

Lance’s gaze drops to the ground, and he shoves his hands deep in his pockets. I’m about to give up on him and walk inside, but then he looks up. And the look in his eyes spears me. “I hate what happened that day. I think about it all the time. What I should’ve done differently and how I should’ve listened to you for once.”

When he tucks his hair behind his ears, there’s a tremor in his hand. “But I need you to know that what happened changed me. Because you were right. We made our choices. And it wasn’t fair for me to act like what I chose when he was born didn’t matter.”

Part of me wants to say something to put Lance at ease. About how he was so young when I got pregnant, and that we wouldn’t have been good together anyway. But I find I can’t make my mouth form the words. I don’t feel them.

So I say what I *do* feel. “Thanks for apologizing. It means a lot. And thanks for now—for not telling Owen who you are.”

Lance’s smile is timid, and I expect him to ask about getting together sometime. Or maybe about sharing custody in light of his regret for what happened. Instead he just says, “Bye, Abbie. Good luck to you.”

Then Lance goes his way, and I go mine.

* * *

The next afternoon, my eyes drip with tears as the taillights of Skylar and Connor’s car fade in the distance. I lean against Chris, whose arm is looped around my waist.

“They’re only going to be gone a couple weeks, you know.” Chris’s words are warm in my ear. The combination of his

nearness and the heady scent of the rose petals we threw at the new Mr. and Mrs. Ross makes me a touch dizzy.

“I know.” I wipe at my eyes, trying to not smudge my professionally done makeup. “But things will be different.”

“Don’t you think some changes are good?”

I smile up at him. “Very.”

Chris lowers his head to mine and my heart flutters with anticipation, but C.J.’s groan interrupts us.

“We just got rid of Skylar and Connor and all their smooching. Now we have to deal with *yours*?”

“Watch it, Curtis Joseph.” I level a mock glare at him. “I’m in charge of the next Highlands Elementary ice cream social, you know.”

He rolls his eyes before ambling back inside the church.

The day has been a wonderful blur of makeup brushes, hairspray, and uncomfortable shoes. I didn’t screw up my reading, and though I was teary when Skylar appeared in all her bridal glory, I recovered quickly and didn’t destroy my makeup. And the best part was how all afternoon, Skylar and Connor gazed at each other with the bewildered joy you hope to see when two people you love are getting married.

But now they’re gone. Off to catch a flight to Auckland, New Zealand for what sounds like the best honeymoon ever. Chris and I won’t get to go anywhere nearly that cool, I would guess. As much as I love Chris, I couldn’t leave Owen for two weeks.

Chris’s thumb smooths the skin of my brow. “What are you thinking about?”

Heat rises to my cheeks as I try to say in an off-hand voice, “Our honeymoon.”

“I would have hoped the thought of our honeymoon would make you look happier than that.”

“Oh.” I laugh. “Sorry. I was thinking about New Zealand and all the cool stuff Skylar and Connor will be doing. We won’t be able to do that.”

Chris cocks his head, a question.

I glance to be sure that we’re alone out here in the parking lot. “Because I wouldn’t want to leave Owen for so long.”

“Oh. Well, if we want to go someplace like that, he could just come with us.” Chris shrugs as if this is no big deal.

“You would be okay with that?”

“Yeah, why not?” Chris wraps his arms around my waist. “Let me ask you—do you view Owen as a hardship or a privilege?”

“Well, a privilege, but—”

“Do you feel you *have* to spend time with him or like you *get* to spend time with him?”

“That I get to. But he’s—”

“Then why’s it hard to for you to accept that I feel that way about him too? He’s not a burden to me, Abbie. He’s not an obstacle. He’s someone I *get* to take care of, not someone I *have* to.”

How could I have allowed myself to almost lose this guy? “And you would really be okay with my five-year-old son coming along on our honeymoon?”

“*Our* five-year-old son, Abbie. Remember?”

Tears swell again. *Our* son. No one has ever said that about Owen before. Even with Lance and me, we always referred to Owen as “my” son, like if we didn’t stake out our territory, the other person would try to take too much ownership.

But Owen will be ours. Chris’s and mine.

When I say, “I love you,” the words feel insufficient.

He cups my face in his hands and presses his mouth to mine. I haven’t been kissed in over five years, but my body has no

problem remembering. My arms curl around his neck and my heart flutters in my chest, as if desperate to get closer to him.

Chris rests his forehead against mine and exhales a sigh that sounds like contentment. “I love you too.”

“Thanks for waiting for me. I’ve tried to get my act together, but I still have a long way to go. Just a warning.”

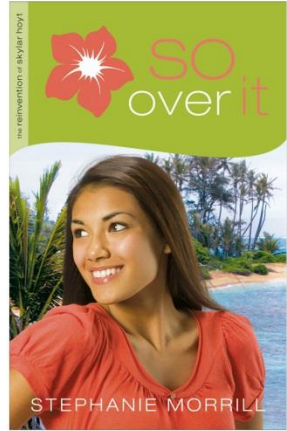
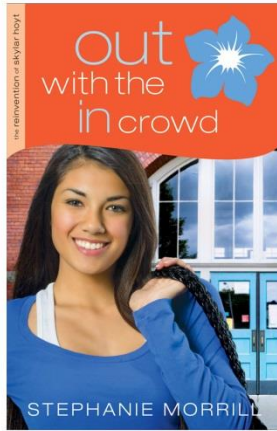
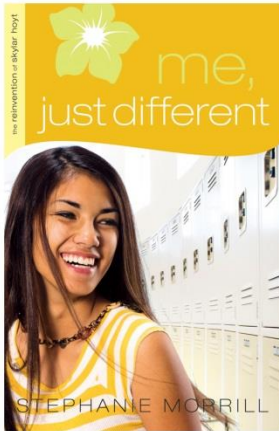
Chris tries to tuck the curly tendril of bangs behind my ear, but the hairstylist sprayed it so much that it keeps springing back. Chris laughs. “Really, I just want you to be you, and to let me be with you. That’s all.”

Tension I hadn’t noticed before seems to release between my shoulders, but his words shouldn’t surprise me. Because Chris has never asked me to be something else. Not more logical or less pregnant. Not more cautious or less outspoken. All he ever asked was that I be the way I am.

“Okay.” I slip my hand into his as we stroll back to the church doors. “I’m pretty sure I can do that.”

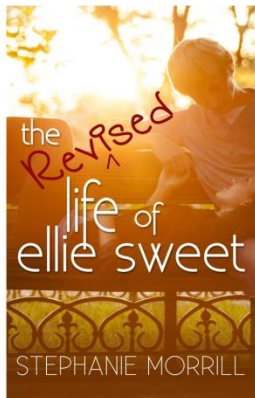
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