



Spit Screen

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: In the heartwarming tenth installment of the beloved Off Screen Series, Addison Blake and Emma Bronson navigate the intricate dance of family life and career ambitions. After four years of serene living in Kansas, where they've raised their three spirited children, Addison senses a restlessness growing in her wife, Emma. Though their life in the Midwest is both contented and meaningful, they miss the exhilarating buzz of working on set and the close-knit friendships left behind in Los Angeles.

Determined to reignite Emma's passion for acting, Addison pens a pilot for a comedy series, hoping it will entice Emma back to the screen. A move that would bring them closer to their friends in California. However, a visit to LA brings unexpected news from their best friends, Tamara and Christie, throwing a wrench into her plans. With Christie committed to a new show in Boston, Emma and Addison face a pivotal decision.

Ever the pragmatist, Emma proposes a bold move: shift the new show to New York, launching a fresh adventure for their family. As they prepare to uproot their lives, the couple grapples with the excitement and uncertainty of such a monumental change.

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CHAPTER ONE

addison

As a writer, I constantly flex my imagination. From tales of enchanted creatures to stories of crime and passion, I've always prided myself on having a vivid imagination. But falling in love with a TV star? That was beyond any fictional world I could have dreamed up. My encounter with Emma Bronson was unexpected and life-changing. There is something truly unique about her. She's the most genuine person I've ever met, which may surprise those who only know her as a glamorous celebrity. While Emma's physical beauty is undeniable, it's the way her sweetness and vulnerability shine through that draws people in. Her authenticity remains unwavering whether she's walking onto a set or changing a diaper. After more than a decade together, she still takes my breath away with the simplest gestures—a smile, a raised brow at me when she knows I'm holding back, or the sound of her infectious laughter at our children's antics.

From the outside, it may seem like we lead a charmed life. We're deeply in love, and our relationship means everything to us. But we have faced challenges along the way. I used to worry my presence in Emma's life would disrupt her flourishing career. She feared her fame would bring unwanted attention and criticism into my life. As with any relationship, there are moments of miscommunication and misunderstandings, but we learn from them, and I think she would agree we continue to grow stronger together. While our family is the best thing in my life, it wouldn't exist without Emma—she is my inspiration and muse, despite her protests. Without her, I never would have written *Off Screen* or experienced the indescribable happiness of building our family. Emma is the light of our family and the beat of my heart.

Recently, we received news that blindsided me and momentarily plunged my world into darkness. Following Emma's routine appointment with her gynecologist, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Despite the doctor's reassurances it could be treated, and she would fully recover, I felt like my world was crumbling. Emma remained composed and optimistic when she told me the news. It wasn't until the night before her surgery that she finally opened up to me about her fears and worries. The memory still takes my breath away.

“Em?”

“I’m sorry, Addy.”

“Sorry? What do you have to be sorry for?” I ask.

Emma shakes her head.

“Em.” I pull Emma into my arms and hold her. “Hey. Are you crying?”

“I don’t want to upset you.”

I can’t help but chuckle. Upset me? Emma has spent the last few weeks supporting me. “I hate seeing you upset, Em.”

“But I don’t want my fear to make you worry.”

I pull back and take Emma’s face in my hands. “Emma, I need you to listen to me now. Don’t say anything. Listen. Okay?”

Emma nods. “I love you more than anything in this world. You can’t ask me not to worry. Of course, I’m worried. I can’t stand seeing you in pain or sick—and I won’t lie to you. We’ve never done that. The thought of losing you scares me.” I smile at

her. “But I’m not losing you anytime soon. You’re going to be fine tomorrow—and you’ll be here to see the kids go to their proms and bring their kids home for Christmas.”

Emma chuckles through a sob.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I tell her, and I believe it.

“I love you so much, Addy.”

“I know. I love you. There isn’t anything we can’t get through.”

Emma nods, takes a deep breath, and kisses me. “Addy,” she says. “I believe we can get through whatever life hands us—I do. But this reminds me that one day, there will be something we can’t get through. One of us will leave the other. I hear you. I need you to hear me.”

I nod and fight to swallow the growing lump in my throat. I lost my mother to cancer when I was in college. Emma knows how that experience affected my life. My dad pulled away for years. I always thought his distance was because he disapproved of me being a lesbian. Grief is a bitch. He loved my mom like I love Emma. He didn’t know how to talk to me about my feelings, much less, his. And he saw my mom in me—something about seeing me made him miss her more. It surprised me to learn that he didn’t think I missed him. It’s strange how we perceive other people’s thoughts and emotions. He took the physical distance between us as a sign that I preferred to maintain emotional distance. The only thing I wanted was for my father to pull me close and comfort me.

“I believe this will all turn out fine,” Emma says. “I believe it. But I also know life can take unexpected turns. I need you to know before I go into surgery—” Emma stops speaking and closes her eyes.

“I know,” I whisper.

I take a deep breath, understanding descending on me like a massive wave breaking on the shore. I suddenly understand what Emma fears most. We have three children who are the center of our lives. I didn’t think I could love Emma more than I did when we took our marriage vows. When she told me she was pregnant with our first child, I felt emotions I didn’t know existed, and I saw the same raw feelings reflected in her eyes. Emma’s an amazing mother. I should know—I had an amazing mom. Emma is worried about our kids losing me to grief like I lost my dad for far too long.

“Em, look at me,” I say,

Emma shakes her head.

“Emma, look at me.”

Slowly, Emma’s eyes open. Tears roll over her cheeks, and I wipe them away with my thumbs.

“I don’t want to think about life without you. I know it could happen one day. But that day is alongway off—like sixty years.”

Emma laughs and cries. “I don’t think I’m Betty White.”

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“No. You’ll outlive her for sure.”

Emma laughs genuinely, even as her tears continue to fall. “Addy.”

I sigh, the weight of reality pressing on my chest. “I realize I’m a lot like my dad,” I admit. “And there’s no point in me telling you I would be fine if I lost you. We both know it would shatter me. But I promise, Em, I will always care for our kids. You never need to worry about that. Okay? I know you would do the same thing. No matter how much I might want to pack it in and let my grief consume me, I will never let the kids drown in my sadness. I promise,” I say as I continue to brush away Emma’s tears.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re the strong one in our marriage.”

“That’s not true,” Emma says. “I don’t feel particularly strong right now.”

“I know, but you are. I’d worry if you didn’t feel a little anxiety before having surgery. For the record, I believe you’re destined for a long life. I don’t have any illusions about your mortality—or mine. That’s why this has been hard for me.”

“I know.”

“There’s something else bothering you. Do you want to tell me what you don’t want to tell me?” I ask.

Emma sighs. “It’s not like I expected us to have any more children. I just?—”

“Don’t like having the option taken away from you?”

Emma nods.

“Em, being a mom is the biggest part of you.”

“You’re the biggest part of me,” she says.

I grin and shake my head. “No. I know how much you love me. Being a mom is the center of your world, Em. It makes me love you even more.” I step back and hold out my hand. “Now, come to bed and let me hold you.”

“Addy?”

“Hm?”

“I wouldn’t be anyone’s mom without you.”

I decide not to argue with Emma’s perspective. If we had never collided, she would have found someone else to build a life with and have children. I am as sure of that as I am confident of my love for her. It wouldn’t be the same family we’ve created together. And without Emma, I doubt I would ever become a mother. Maybe I would have found someone to share my lifewith, but building a family? No matter what my friends may think, having a family is something I don’t think I could do with anyone else. As we reach the bed, I pull back the covers and guide Emma to lie down. As soon as I join her under the sheets, she falls into my embrace.

“Rest,” I say.

“Addy?”

“Hm?”

Emma props herself up on an elbow to look at me. “I love you more than anything in this world,” she says.

I kiss Emma’s head, hold her close, and say a silent prayer everything will be all right. “I love you, too.”

That was six months ago. Sometimes, it feels like yesterday, and other times, it feels like light years in the past. Thankfully, Emma recovered fully and quickly from surgery. The experience has stayed with her, though. It’s made her think about life. If I had to guess, she’s contemplating what she wants from life in the future. Emma has always accepted the reality that she has a public persona, but she also strives to maintain as much privacy for our family as possible. It’s one reason we decided to move to Kansas. When we built our house, we committed to staying here while the kids were in school. If we did that, it would mean we would be here another fifteen years. Sometimes, things change. I sense a shift in Emma. There’s nothing like a health crisis to make you feel your mortality. I think Emma is ready to take on a new project. She’s accepted a few roles over the last few years—never a lead role or a series. Her roots are in television, and I know she misses it—walking onto a set each morning. But Emma is reluctant to tell me what’s on her mind. That means the ball has landed squarely in my court.

When I walk into the kitchen, Emma is sitting at the table reading a book while Noah and Hannah finish their lunch.

“Hey,” Emma says. “I thought you were working in your office?”

“I need a break.”

Emma's gaze narrows, and I force myself not to laugh. She's always been able to read me—as well as she can the book in her hands.

Hannah looks up at me. “Momma?”

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“Yes?” I reply.

“Can we go fishing?” Hannah asks.

Noah flashes a bright grin as he munches on a piece of apple, and I hear Emma giggle, knowing I’m easily swayed by grins and requests to go to the pond. “I’ll make you a deal,” I say.

Hannah frowns.

“What?” I ask.

“Vicki makes the deals,” Hannah says.

Emma turns her head to conceal her amusement. Vicki will be nine this year. She’s always been the most vivacious and precocious of our children. And she loves to “wheel and deal.” I think our friend, Jeff, taught her those words.

“Well, I think your sister might enjoy a chance to go to the pond, too,” I tell Hannah. “So, I’ll make you a deal. You and Noah need to pick up the rec room. Then, you can get your fishing poles and the tacklebox ready to go into the car. Get Vicki’s pole, too. We can all surprise her at school and head to the pond. Okay?”

Hannah nods enthusiastically.

“Good,” I tell her. “Would you mind if I borrow Mom for a minute?”

“Borrow me? What is this Blockbuster Video?” Emma asks playfully.

“You’re dating yourself, Em. And that would be a rental.”

Emma raises an eyebrow at me.

I shrug. “Hey, don’t look at me. I made the full purchase years ago.”

Emma’s laughter fills the kitchen, and I chuckle at the confused expressions on our kids’ faces.

“You guys are weird,” Hannah says.

Emma shakes her head. “Please tell me I’m not being led to unearth worms for this fishing excursion.”

“Nah. Your dad has some. I’ll stop there before we go to the pond,” I say. “He’ll probably decide to join us.”

Emma rolls her eyes and takes my hand. She calls her father my enabler. In other words, Tom Bronson enables my love for spending time in nature—and getting dirty.

“Finish your lunch,” Emma tells the kids, letting me lead her from the room. “Addy? What’s going on?” she asks me.

“It’s nothing dire,” I reply.

“Uh-huh.”

“How would you feel about taking a trip with me next week?”

Another raise of Emma's brow makes me chuckle.

"I thought we might visit Tam and Christie," I explain.

"Without the kids?" Emma asks.

I nod.

"Okay. Out with it. What's going on?"

"I want to run an idea by all of you."

"A project?" Emma asks.

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“Maybe.”

“And you want to go to LA to talk to them? Addy, our house is bigger, and neither Tam nor Christie is on a set right now. Why don’t you invite them here?”

Here’s something to know about Emma; she makes sense. Even when the world feels chaotic and senseless, Emma has a way of putting things in perspective. I never considered asking Tam and Christie to come to Kansas.

“Unless there’s some reason you want to go to California,” Emma says.

I sigh. There is, but I don’t want to push toward the end zone when I haven’t even gotten the ball in play yet. “No. Your idea makes sense. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it.”

Emma’s eyes search mine for a moment, and she nods. “You were hoping for some time away from the kids, weren’t you? I know we haven’t spent any time alone since before my surgery.”

“Em.”

Emma smiles. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“A deal, huh?”

“Mm. Interested?”

“What are your terms?” I ask playfully.

“Why don’t you invite Tam and Christie here for Memorial Day weekend? That’s the week after next. Invite Jeff and Sandra, too.”

“Emma, that’s a full house.”

Emma shrugs. “And? You miss them all. So do I. We can look to take a trip together when school ends—just the two of us.”

I nod. “I would love to spend some time alone with you.”

“Me too,” she says. “But I think right now, a visit with our friends is overdue—long overdue.”

I study Emma as she smiles at me. I frequently spend time with Tam in LA. We started a new production company when we settled in Kansas. Jeff was still busy with our second television show, *On Screen*. I sold him my shares in our production company and formed a new one with Emma and Tamara. It’s been a successful venture, just as Emma predicted. Tam handles things in Los Angeles while I visit every two weeks for four days to attend meetings. Those weeks are never easy for me. I hate being apart from Emma and the kids. Thankfully, I haven’t had to extend my stay often.

While we have yet to launch a series, we’ve successfully produced TV movies, short films, and a feature film, and we couldn’t have done it without Tam. Each of us has a unique skill set. Tam’s a terrific producer on set, but her greatest strength is knowing how to pitch a project and make people see our vision—both the people funding it and the people creating it. Meanwhile, I develop ideas and write treatments and scripts while Emma guides us in choosing which projects to pursue. People in the entertainment industry respect Emma and enjoy working with her. She’s not just a

closer; she's also the person I trust most with my ideas. Emma knows how to be supportive while bringing out the hidden potential in my stories. In fact, she even wrote an episode for *On Screen* during its last season when Jeff and his team were struggling to find the right way to close the series. Emma's acting experience enables her to write characters' voices and expose emotions in ways that even the best writers sometimes struggle to create. Out of our group, she is the most experienced and level-headed. We make a great team, and I hope we continue to work together for many years. But there are days I miss working with Jeff. I enjoyed working with someone who is a writer first. Something in Emma's expression tells me she thinks it's time I reach out to Jeff about working together again.

"You think it's time Jeff and I worked together again," I say.

"I don't know. I think you both miss working together."

She's right. Again. "Em, you know it will be chaos with them all here?"

"I'm comfortable with organized chaos. Besides, it's family. And we haven't done the best job of making the time to spend with everyone lately."

"Everyone?"

"Addy, Tam and Christie are our family. So are Jeff and Sandra. Even my mom has asked when Tam plans to visit again."

My lips curl into a smile. Tamara and I have been best friends since our first year of college. She's more like a sister to me than a friend. What's even funnier is how she and Emma have formed a close bond over the years, almost like sisters themselves. Tam looks up to Emma. More importantly, she looks to Emma for guidance. Personally, Tam has always been guided by her emotions. Occasionally, that leads to impulsive actions, not reckless ones, but she sometimes acts without fully considering

the consequences. Oddly, her emotions can also make her become frozen with indecision from overanalyzing everything. Emma is a keen listener. She doesn't offer unsolicited advice, and she's always gentle when she does. That's something Tam needs. I recognized how much Tam loved Emma early in our relationship. Believe me, I understand. It took me longer to realize how much Tam means to Emma.

Emma's a nurturer. I've known many empathetic people in my life. Emma is incredibly kind. But she's also forthright. Like I said, I had a terrific Mom. And I see flashes of my mother in the way Emma interacts with our kids. She can discipline them by raising her brow. Hell, she can disciplinethat way. She seldom raises her voice, and I've never seen her raise a hand. She exudes a quiet confidence that's both alluring and comforting, drawing others toward her. It's easy to understand why Tam gravitates to Emma as a friend and a mentor.

To Emma, Tam is as much a part of our family as anyone else. One reason is Tam's protectiveness towards me, which Emma quickly learned in the early days of our relationship. But it goes beyond that. Tam's capacity for love runs deep, whether it be for a friend, a lover, her children, or even a project. She puts her all into everything she cares about. I've often considered the phrase, "she would walk through the fires of hell for those she loved," was written with Tamara in mind. Emma has been burned by friends and lovers in the past. Having a friend like Tamara means the world to her.

"Are you sure you want to entertain the masses?" I ask Emma.

Emma laughs. "What's the difference between having my brothers and their families here?"

"Uh, Em? As soon as your family finds out we're having company, they'll descend on us, too."

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Emma shrugs.

“It’s a lot of people,” I remind her.

A lot of people might be an understatement. I take a moment to perform some math in my head. Emma has two brothers, both of whom have two kids. Tam and Christie have a son named Daniel, who is a month younger than Hannah. Jeff and Sandra have a son named Brody, who is not quite a year older than Vicki, and a daughter named Bailey, who is the same age as Hannah and Daniel. Add that to our three, throw in Emma’s folks, and we’ll have thirty-two people in our home! My jaw must be hanging open because Emma’s brow is raised, and she’s smirking at me.

“Just realizing how much our family has grown?” Emma asks.

“Em—”

“I’m sure you’re right. Everyone will want the chance to catch up. And God knows, the kids will want a chance to play together. It’s a holiday meant for barbeques and get-togethers,” Emma says. “Isn’t that why we moved here? To have space from our public life and space for our family?”

“Are you sure you are up to this?” I ask.

“Up to it? I feel great.”

I nod.

Emma smiles. “I know I’ve struggled a little the last few months to accept everything. I told you I never expected to have more children. But growing our family has been the most amazing part of my life, Addy. I guess a little part of me thought—maybe—maybe we would decide to try for one more. That’s even more reason I want everyone here.”

“You’re the boss.”

“If only.”

“Okay, most days, Vicki is the boss,” I admit.

Emma laughs. “She does take pride in being the older sister. She misses Tam, Addy, and she misses Brody.”

“I know.”

“I miss them all, too.”

Sometimes, when you love someone deeply, it’s hard to see them objectively. It’s like wearing rose-colored glasses that make everything appear perfect. But after living with Emma for so many years, I’ve learned to see her flaws and worries more clearly. We have a deep understanding of each other and can sense when something is bothering the other. I’m unsure if she’s reluctant to tell me what she feels or if she hasn’t figured out what she wants to say.

As Noah becomes more independent, Emma grows increasingly restless. We’re both thankful to have her family living nearby because it allows our children to have a close relationship with their grandparents. But our family extends beyond the borders of Kansas. As she talks about the coming holiday, I realize Emma longs for more than the busy atmosphere of a film set. I sense a change on our horizon. Maybe

having everyone in one place will give us the clarity to determine what we should do or where we should go. Perhaps it will provide me with the courage to broach the topic with Emma.

I lean close to Emma and kiss her cheek. “Do you want to make the calls?” I ask.

“I’ll make the calls. One condition.”

“Which is?”

“Bring dinner home after you go fishing.”

“What if we don’t catch anything?”

Emma laughs. “I have no desire to cook anything from the pond. You can do that with Dad. Pizza, Addy. Or you and Vicki can make macaroni and cheese for dinner.”

“Okay.”

“Good,” Emma says, placing a kiss on my lips. “And, Addy?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t make Vicki bait all the hooks,” Emma says as she walks away.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

I can’t help but chuckle at my children’s amusement with my aversion to baiting a hook. As we sit by the pond, Vicki hands me a wriggling worm and asks if I need help. Memories of being taken fishing and hunting as a child flood back. I recall the feeling of unease in my stomach when it came time to kill our catch. I was much

more content observing the deer grazing on the outskirts of the forest or watching the fish swim in the river than I was taking part in their demise. My father would reason if I could eat a burger or chicken without flinching, I should have no issue with hunting and fishing. But even then, I couldn't shake off my discomfort with taking a life—even of the wriggling worm.

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Vicki has spent countless afternoons at the pond with her grandfather. She takes pride in her ability to hook a worm and enjoys seeing me squirm at the sight. Hannah, on the other hand, has no interest in fishing. She prefers searching for frogs and turtles on the shore, gathering flowers, or collecting shiny rocks. And then there's Noah, only three years old and captivated by every creature he encounters—whether they have fur, feathers, legs, or scales—it doesn't matter to him. He considers them all his best friends.

My mind wanders to Emma and the simplicity of our life together here. Vicki understands her mother is a celebrity, although she still believes Disney princesses are more famous. She recently asked why Emma wasn't in Star Wars. It was hard for me not to laugh when Vicki declared Emma would be "the most famous" if she played a princess. Vicki has developed a fondness for Princess Leia thanks to Emma's brother Jackson, though she's equally enamored with Han Solo. I told Emma her star would almost certainly rise with Vicki if she carried a blaster on screen or piloted a spaceship. Emma gave her standard response, "Write it, and we'll talk."

Hannah and Noah have led relatively sheltered lives away from the spotlight of Emma's career. People here know their mom as Emmie, not Emma Bronson Blake or an Emmy award-winning actress. If we were to move back to Los Angeles, our kids would inevitably have more exposure to the world of Hollywood and make-believe. A major project like a television show would bring even more attention to Emma, and I know she worries about navigating that with our children. The projects she's taken on in recent years have been fulfilling but also allowed her to remain largely out of the limelight. However, the project I have in mind would put Emma squarely back in the spotlight—if I can get it off the ground. I'm not sure how she'll feel about that possibility.

“Addy?”

I turn to my father-in-law with a smile. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I know worms on hooks aren’t you’re thing,” Tom teases me.

I chuckle.

“Something tells me it’s not the worms on your mind,” he says.

“Not the worms—this is, though.”

“This?”

“Being here,” I say. “Just being here,” I whisper.

Tom nods. “Let’s sit on the rock and watch the kids.”

I follow him a few feet away from the water’s edge and sit beside him on a large rock. Emma calls it the frog rock. It doesn’t look anything like a frog to me. I guess it did to her when she was Hannah’s age.

“You know, everyone will understand if you decide to go back to California,” Tom says.

My surprise must show because he chuckles.

“Come on, Addy. You and Emma didn’t believe you could hide here forever, did you?”

“I don’t think we’re hiding,” I reply.

“What would you call it?”

“Finding normalcy, I guess.”

“Normal is different for everyone,” Tom says.

I chuckle. My father-in-law is a plain-spoken man whose words hold more wisdom than the ones I’ve read in many philosophy books.

“We’ll miss you,” he tells me.

“I don’t know if we are going anywhere, Tom.”

“No? I think we all know it’s inevitable. Emmie thinks she has to choose, Addy. She’s always been that way. It’s why she left here and only came home for the holidays and special occasions until she met you. You reminded her there’s more to life than auditions, magazine covers, and award shows.”

I shake my head. “No. Emma has always understood that.”

Tom tilts his head curiously.

“That’s why she stayed away—if I had to guess. It always makes her feel torn. I don’t think Em is hiding from her career. She misses it. I feel it. I think we all do.” I sigh. “But she isn’t lying when she says the kids mean more to her than her career—this—being with family is the most important thing in her world. I think she worries about what the kids might be exposed to if we move back. And I worry, too.”

“Nothing anyone says about either of you will change how the kids see you.”

“Maybe not now,” I say. “That isn’t what worries me, though.”

“So? What is it?”

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“It is simpler here,” I tell him.

“You mean safer.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever lived in a city. Seems to me there are more problems because there are more people,” Tom says.

Not for the first time, I’m struck by his wisdom. “True.”

“There will be challenges no matter where you live,” he continues. “I guess the question is where you can both be happy.”

“I think where the kids will be happy is the biggest consideration for us both,” I say.

“I’m sure that’s true. The kids will be happy, Addison, if you and Emma are happy. Don’t make that mistake.”

I tip my head.

“Don’t think you’re putting them first by denying yourselves what makes you happy. Not that anyplace will be perfect, or you’ll ever be happy at every moment.”

True.

“But you can’t put your passions aside. Sherry and me? We loved it here. It wasn’t

always a picnic. Believe me. Being so close to our parents came with its fair share of stress. And being where everyone has known you since before you were born might seem like some kind of idyllic fantasy. It has more ups than downs. But it also comes with its baggage.”

I sigh heavily. Everything Tom says is true. It’s part of the reason Emma is restless. She is Emmie Bronson, but she’s also Emma Bronson Blake.

“You’ll figure it out,” Tom says.

“I hope so.”

“You will. Isn’t that why you invited everyone here for Memorial Day?”

“That was Em’s idea.”

“Mm.”

“Tom?”

“Yep?”

“Sometimes, I wish we could be in two places at once.”

Tom laughs. “Don’t we all, Addy? Don’t we all.”

CHAPTER TWO

emma

A WEEK LATER

It's often hard for me to believe Addy and I have been together for more than a decade. I suppose it shouldn't be. It's strange. The other day, a friend asked if the thought of being forty caused me anxiety. My reply was simple. No. After my cancer diagnosis, turning forty feels like a gift, not a curse. I was fortunate. I also know the experience left its mark on both me and Addy. I think the experience affected Addy more deeply than she wants to let on to anyone—me most of all. It's made us both take stock of our lives and our livelihoods—something I realize we too often avoid discussing. We decided before Noah was born to center our lives here in Kansas, and I believe our decision has worked out better than we'd hoped. Until now.

Addy handed me a new project to review. I sense she's hoping for my support as more than a producing partner. She left early this morning for Los Angeles after receiving a call from Tamara. It was a little odd. Whenever Tamara has personal matters to discuss, she usually confides in me first. It isn't like Tam to ask Addy to fly back to LA as soon as possible. Whatever Tamara wants to discuss, I doubt it's related to any of the projects we have in development. I can't help but wonder what's going on. A familiar ringtone sounding from my phone tells me I might get an answer sooner than I expected.

“Hi, Chris.”

“Em. How are things over the rainbow?” Christie asks me.

“I'm still looking for the yellow brick road,” I tell her.

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“Mm. How is everyone there?”

“Okay,” I say. “Enough with the pleasantries. You’ll see everyone who lives here in a week. What’s going on?”

Christie sighs. “I know Tam wanted to call you. She feels she needs to tell Addy this news first.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing is wrong.”

“Is Tam pregnant?” I ask.

“No.” Christie sighs again. “Em, I got an offer last week.”

“That’s great. Isn’t it?”

“It is. It’s for a new James Reynolds’ police procedural set in Boston.”

“That is great.”

“Em, it’s for the lead.”

I take a deep breath and flop onto the sofa. James Reynolds is one of the biggest creators/producers in network television. He has more than half a dozen hit shows running on a major network. Every show he’s launched in the last decade has enjoyed

a good run. The shortest was five seasons. Christie's news is great. It also means she'll need to relocate to the East Coast. Now, I understand why Tam wanted to talk to Addy in person before Memorial Day weekend.

"Em?"

"Does Tam want to leave the production company?" I ask.

"No. But she'll understand if it's what you and Addy need her to do."

I'm at a loss for words.

"Emma?"

"I'm sorry. I'm trying to process."

"I have to say, I didn't expect this reaction. I knew you'd be?"

"I'm not upset at all," I explain. "It's not that."

"It's something."

"Addy gave me a new project to look at today," I tell Christie.

"And you think it's something you'll need Tam to get greenlighted?"

I groan. "Tam is a huge asset with every project."

"But?" Christie asks.

"I think Addy is hoping I'll sign on."

“Do you mean as an actor?”

“Yes.”

“Em, you’ve worked since you moved to Kansas. I’m sure you guys can make the schedule work. Features?—”

“It’s not a film.”

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“Oh shit,” Christie says. “It’s a series?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think Addison wants to move back to LA?”

“I think we both miss home.”

“You are home, Em.”

I chuckle uncomfortably. “We are, and I love it here. We all do. Lately, I feel like Dorothy in Oz instead of Emmie in Kansas.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. It’s nice to be Emmie. But there aren’t people here who I can talk to about?—”

“About what makes you tick,” Christie guesses.

“What makes me tick beyond the kids.”

“So, is it Addy who wants to move?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. I chuckle again. “Noah will be in preschool in the fall, Chris. Hecango full days. And to be honest, I think he should. The girls will both be in school full-time. He loves me, but he’s happiest with other children. What do I do

with my days?”

“Irony, isn’t it?” Christie asks.

I laugh. It is ironic. When we came to Kansas, Tam and Sandra had both just learned they were pregnant. They both imagined us raising our kids like cousins—one big family. We’ve done our best to remain close—to keep our kids close, but it’s not the same as living a car ride away from each other. I’m confident Addy’s thoughts run along the same line as mine. We’re both contemplating coming back together, and Tam and Christie are about to move across the country.

“I suppose it is,” I admit. “I hope you realize I’m happy for you?”

“I know,” Christie replies. “You’ll figure it out, Emma. You and Addy always do.”

“I hope so.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Are you worried Addy won’t want to move now that Tam and I need to relocate?”

“I don’t know.”

“I mean, you could occupy the house again while we’re in Boston.”

“At this rate, we should make that house into a commune,” I say.

Christie laughs. “I’m not sure that’s a great idea.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Communal living? Given the obsession for Kool-Aid our wives and kids have, I’m not sure that’s the best idea.”

I burst out laughing. Christie and I have been friends for twenty years. She gets me, and I get her. And that goes far beyond the common ground we share as actors.

“You can see it, can’t you?” Christie asks. “Tam sitting in front of the pool with big sunglasses. Addison is passing the Kool-Aid around.”

The Jim Jones reference is wholly inappropriate and exactly my brand of humor—something only those closest to me understand. “It would make a great spoof,” I say. “Like Scary Movie, only done cult style.”

Christie laughs so hard she snorts. “Who is the writer in your family?” she teases me.

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My laughing slowly subsides, and I sigh—again.

“Em? Come on; we always land on our feet—all of us. Tell me about this project Addison has dreamed up.”

“Mom? Mom!”

I flinch slightly at the decibel of Vicki’s voice. “What?”

Vicki looks at me with a mixture of concern and curiosity. “Are you sick?”

“What? No. Why do you ask that?”

“You’re quiet.”

I smile at Vicki and pat the cushion beside me, directing her to sit next to me on the couch. I tried my best to hide my fear from the kids when I learned about my cancer and the required surgery. Addison and I sat Vicki and Hannah down for a long, gentle talk to explain the situation and reassure them everything would be okay. Fortunately, Hannah is still in a stage where she trusts what we say. Vicki may project bravado, but deep down, she is incredibly sensitive, especially when it comes to my feelings. Looking back, I realize I had retreated into myself during those weeks. Not that I wanted to distance myself from my family; I needed time alone to come to terms with the reality of my diagnosis. On the other hand, Addy copes by staying busy and attempting to fix things. I prefer having space and quiet to process my thoughts and emotions.

“I’m sorry, Vicki,” I say.

“I can help.”

I feel tears gathering in my eyes. It’s bittersweet—watching your children grow. Vicki still possesses a youthful innocence, but little by little, I can see how her innocence transforms into awareness. There are days when I see a hint of the woman she will become. That might sound ridiculous to some people. Vicki will be nine in less than a month. She’s always enjoyed being with adults—both listening to our conversations and offering us her assessments. It’s been both amusing and frustrating. If there are “old souls” who walk the earth, Victoria is one of them.

“I know you can help,” I reply. “I’m not sick, sweetheart. I promise.”

Vicki frowns.

“Vicki,” I begin cautiously. “Everyone is okay. I was just reading something Momma wrote. I guess I was a little engrossed in it when you came into the room.”

I pause, giving Vicki a chance to respond. As always, she’s analyzing me, trying to read my emotions. It’s hard to predict what career path Vicki might choose. She has a natural intuition. Addy and my mother often say she reminds them of me. We both experience emotions intensely, which is one reason I love acting—it allows me to connect with other people’s feelings. But I can’t walk into a room and immediately sense another person’s emotions like Vicki can.

Vicki shakes her head. “Mom,” she says somewhat sternly. “Something is bothering you. I can tell.”

My lips curl into a genuine smile. “No, honey. I’m just trying to figure something out.”

“About what Momma wrote?”

“About what to do with what Momma wrote.”

“Is it another movie?” Vicki asks.

“No. I suppose it could be.”

“Is it for you?”

“I’m not sure. A lot of people could play the role she’s created.”

Vicki rolls her eyes. “It’s for you.”

I laugh. “Probably.”

“Don’t you want to do it?”

I sigh.

“Oh,” Vicki says.

“Oh? What’s oh mean?”

“You don’t want to leave to do it.”

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“Vicki, I would never leave you.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t want to leave here.”

“I like being home with you,” I reply.

Vicki shrugs.

“Are you sick of me being home?” I tease her.

“No. But you can leave us, you know? I mean, to work. Me and Hannah will help with Noah.”

“I know you will. Don’t worry so much about me.”

“You miss work.”

“Sometimes. But I miss you when I’m working,” I tell her.

“Yeah, but me and Hannah will be at school all day next year.”

“Did Momma or Grandma say something to you?”

“Nah. They don’t talk to me about that kind of stuff. I can just tell. You’re bored.”

Bored? I may be a bit restless. I don’t have the time to be bored. “I don’t think I could ever be bored in this family.”

Vicki looks at me, purses her lips, and then folds her arms across her chest. I raise a brow at her.

“It’s because we’d have to move, huh?”

It isn’t often my children stun me into silence. I have no idea how Vicki would reach that conclusion.

“It is,” she says.

“Vicki.”

Vicki shrugs. “Uncle Jeff moved. Amber moved.”

Amber is Vicki’s friend from school. She moved last summer to New Hampshire. They take turns calling each other on Fridays after school, and they also write and send each other photos through an email account we set up.

“That’s true,” I agree. “But this is our home.”

Vicki shrugs again.

“Vicki?”

“Don’t you ever miss our old house?”

My heart clenches. There are still moments when I wish I could go home to the house we had in Los Angeles. And sometimes, as much as I enjoy visiting Tam and Christie, it’s hard for me to walk into our old home and see their furniture. It was my first house. It was the place where Addy and I began our relationship and had our first two children. Every nook and cranny of that place holds memories for me. I

sometimes forget it's a place that also holds special memories for Vicki. I know my kids adore their grandparents, and they enjoy spending time with my brother's family, but listening to Vicki, I'm beginning to understand she misses our old life more than I realized.

"Sometimes I do miss it," I admit.

"Me too."

"You miss the pool," I say with a wink.

"Yeah. But I miss Tam and Christie the most."

"I know you do, Sprout."

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Vicki rolls her eyes.

“I haven’t called you that in a while, have I? Too old for that now?”

“Nah. I’m just glad you didn’t make it my name.”

I nod.

“No way. Did you want to name me Sprout?”

I laugh. “No. Although, I think your grandmother worried I might.”

“She’s silly.”

“She certainly can be,” I agree.

“Mom?”

“Hm?”

“Never mind.”

“No. No. Tell me,” I say.

“Just—if you ever want to move, it’s okay.”

“Vicki? Did something happen at school or?”

Another roll of Vicki's eyes precedes her reply. "Geez, Mom."

"Geez, Mom?"

"School is good," Vicki says.

"I guess I'm not sure where this is coming from."

"You and Momma like to work."

"We work."

"Yeah, but not like you used to."

"We didn't always have three kids," I remind my daughter.

"Yeah, I know. Auntie Christie still works. Auntie Sarah works, too."

Sarah is my sister-in-law. She's a fourth-grade teacher. "That's all true. I like being here with you."

"But you like working, too."

It's evident to me attempting to placate Vicki with generalities isn't going to work. She's also incredibly curious and intelligent. God help me; I never imagined this kind of heart-to-heart talk with my eight-year-old. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. "You're right," I admit. "And sometimes, I miss going to work in the morning. The thing is, if I was on a set, I would miss you."

"You'd still be with us, Mom. It just wouldn't be allday."

“True. Are you sure this is about me?”

Vicki lifts a brow at me, and I chuckle.

“What’s the story about that Momma wrote?” Vicki asks.

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“It’s about a professional single woman who ends up having custody of three young children and all the chaos that erupts in her life.”

That’s an oversimplification of Addy’s new series’ outline. I’ve told her for years she should write comedy. Addy has a wonderful ability to find humor in nearly everything. The draft of the pilot script is funny and moving—one of Addy’s finest. I haven’t read anything that excited me as much as an actor or moved me as much as a person since Addy gave me the pilot of *Off Screen* to read. The truth is I would love to play the role—I want to play it. She set the show in Los Angeles. I’m certain there was a reason for that. And it works. I’m not sure she’ll be as enthusiastic about producing a show in LA without Tamara. I massage my eyes and groan.

“Mom?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t you like it?” Vicki asks.

“I love it.”

“So? What are you trying to figure out?”

“What?”

“You said you were trying to figure something out,” Vicki reminds me. She points to the script. “Is it about that?”

“In a way, I guess it is.”

Vicki leans forward.

“I hadn’t planned to tell you this,” I say.

“You are sick.”

“No. Stop thinking the worst,” I tell my daughter. “Christie got a new job.”

“On Momma’s show?”

“No.” I giggle. “Although I’m sure once she reads it, she’ll wish it could be.” I take another deep breath. “She’s going to play a detective on a show in Boston.”

“Cool. Does she get to live there?”

Addy’s father still lives in Maine. We often fly into Boston and spend a few days before making the drive to Adam’s house. Vicki fell in love with the aquarium, and the kids all love the Museum of Science. It’s never a chore to get our kids excited about a trip to the East Coast.

“Actually, Vicki, Auntie Tam, and Auntie Christie will be living there—or somewhere close to Boston.”

“So, we get to visit them there?”

“I’m sure we will,” I reply with a half-hearted smile.

“How come you seem sad? Is it because of our old house?”

Truthfully, I haven't thought much about what might happen to the house. I doubt Christie will want to sell it right away. If anything, I imagine she and Tam will look to sell the house they've kept in Vancouver. "No," I reply honestly. "It's just a long way from here."

Vicki's face scrunches up, and she shakes her head. "We have to fly to see them just like we fly to Grandpa's."

Out of the mouth of babes. "That's true."

Vicki's gaze narrows, and she leans closer to me. "Oh."

"Oh?"

"We were gonna move back, huh?"

"What?"

"To Los Angeles," Vicki says.

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“No.”

“Do you want to move there?”

“Vicki, I promise you, Momma and I haven’t discussed moving anywhere—at all.”

“But you want to.”

“No.” I surprise myself with my candor. “The show Momma wrote takes place in LA.”

Vicki considers my information. “Does it have to?” she asks.

“Huh?”

“Does it have to happen in Los Angeles?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I suppose it could work in another city.”

Vicki gloats. “Then you could go to Boston!”

I stare at my daughter for a moment. As God is my witness, I never considered the possibility of setting the show in another city. And I certainly never entertained the notion of relocating my family anyplace besides California.

“You like it there,” Vicki says.

“I like a lot of places. I love it here.”

“You loved Los Angeles, too.”

I did. “Vicki.”

Vicki holds up a hand. “I get in, Mom.”

I can’t help myself. I chuckle and raise a brow. “What do you get?”

“You kind of want to be everywhere, huh? I mean, like where all our family lives.”

She’s got me there.

“Grandma says you can’t be with anybody all the time, but it doesn’t change how much you love them.”

“It’s not quite that simple, sweetie.”

“I think you guys should do it.”

“Do what?”

“Make another TV show,” Vicki says.

“Vicki, you love it here, and?—”

“I love you, Mom.”

Vicki’s words leave me breathless.

“Oh, no. You're not gonna cry, are you?” Vicki asks.

I sniffle back my tears and shake my head.

“Don’t get mushy,” Vicki says. “I mean, it’d be really cool if you were in Star Wars or something—imagine where we could live?”

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I know Vicki understands TV shows aren't taped in outer space—even ones about galactic empires and space travel.

“Or like a princess. Then you'd be in a castle.”

This conversation seems more age-appropriate, and I smile. “You realize we wouldn't live in a castle?”

“Yeah, but you'd work in a castle.”

“Or on a set,” I remind her.

“Yeah, one that looks like a castle!”

“Well, I'm afraid I haven't had any offers to pilot spaceships or slay dragons.”

“Maybe if you do Momma's show, someone will ask you,” Vicki says with a grin.

“Victoria, is the entire reason you want me to go back to work so you can pretend to be a princess?”

“Nooooo.”

I burst into laughter.

“No,” Vicki says. “I just think you want to.”

I sigh.

It surprises me when Vicki leans close and kisses my cheek. “You take care of everyone, Mom. You should get to have fun, too.” She leaps up from the sofa and smiles. “But if we move to Boston, I want to work in the aquarium when I’m old enough!” Vicki flashes me a grin and heads toward the kitchen.

I shake my head. “Oh, boy.” I pick up the script and flip to the first page.

INT. Emma’s Rowlands’ Car

We hear the beeping of horns as Emma sits in traffic. Her phone buzzes, and she moves to grab it, spilling the coffee in her hand all over her blazer.

I scratch my head and turn back to the synopsis of the show.

“Emma Rowland is a successful entertainment lawyer living in a swanky beachside home in Malibu. It’s not the fulfilling career she envisioned, but it keeps her busy. She spends her days and nights tirelessly preparing to assist clients with contacts and negotiations, all while actively avoiding personal relationships. Her only close friend is Kate Morrissey, her former college roommate and girlfriend (known only by Kate and her wife, Nia). Kate owns a local LGBTQ bar and restaurant called Idgie’s.

Emma’s on-again-off-again boyfriend, fellow lawyer Dennis MacMillan, wants to make their relationship permanent, but Emma continuously dodges the conversation.

A year ago, Emma’s mother, Claudia, passed away, leaving Emma feeling adrift without her anchor. Her father, Geoffrey, a successful businessman and investor, was always traveling for work. While he attended Emma’s milestone events, he was rarely home for more than a few days at a time, and she’s learned to be content with the occasional visit and weekly phone call from her father.

Emma's predictable life takes an unexpected turn when she receives the news that her father has been killed in a car accident. She travels to Florida to identify his body and meet with his attorney, only to discover a shocking secret: Geoffrey Rowland had been carrying on a ten-year affair with Jenna Maddox, a 33-year-old bartender in his favorite watering hole. Not only that but he's been married to Jenna since shortly after Emma's mother's death and has kept it all a secret from Emma.

To make matters worse, Geoffrey has three young children with Jenna: Willow (7), Meadow (4), and Geoffrey Jr. (1). With both of Jenna's parents deceased, Emma becomes the legal guardian of her siblings. Without warning, Emma's world flips upside down in ways surpassing even her wildest imagination.

Things take an interesting turn when Kate suggests Emma hire Chloe, a friend from her high school days, as a nanny. Chloe, a 35-year-old music teacher, recently moved to LA after catching her girlfriend in bed with the principal at her school back in Boston. Emma, with no other choice, reluctantly agrees to hire Chloe as a live-in nanny. Little does she realize her choice will transform everything she believes about herself and the life she wants to lead. Emma is about to face the one thing she has managed to avoid her entire adult life—becoming “Domesticated.”

“Well, she's always said she finds value in my red pen,” I muse. I grab the papers, head into Addy's office, and retrieve my trust red pen. “So, Emma, where should life take you?”

CHAPTER THREE

addison

It's rare for something to leave me speechless.

Tamara interrupts my thoughts. “Addy?”

“I’m sorry, Tam. That’s amazing news,” I reply.

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Tamara's news is fantastic. Christie is an incredibly talented actor. Underneath my shock and fear, I'm thrilled for her to land a new project. And landing a James Reynolds show is a big deal. The man seems to have the Midas touch, literally turning everything he touches into gold. Sometimes, I envy people like Jim Reynolds. He started as a television show staff writer and moved into producing. He learned the ropes of TV—what makes an audience tick and what makes a network drool over a project. I give the man credit. He's launched four police procedural shows and three medical dramas in the last fifteen years. Though I may find them redundant, every show has become wildly popular. I've met him a few times. He loved Emma's first show, *Found*, and remains a big fan of hers.

"Addy," Tamara addresses me cautiously. "We didn't expect this."

"I'm happy for Christie. Honestly. I just—Does this mean you want to leave the company?"

"What?" Tamara asks. "No. But I don't know how it will work with me on the East Coast."

"We'll figure it out," I say. My head is starting to throb, so I close my eyes, hoping to ease the ache.

"Addy? I know this isn't what any of us planned. You seem—What's going on?"

I open my eyes slowly and offer Tamara a smile. "I'm sorry, Tam. I guess I have a lot on my mind."

“Well, Christie is home with Daniel. Why don’t we hit the beach? Have a cocktail—or a dozen?”

“A dozen?”

“Hey, I know how to get an Uber and a Lyft,” Tamara says. “I don’t have a curfew, and neither do you.”

“We should go back to the house to see Chris.”

“Nah. You can see Chris later—or even tomorrow. She’ll understand. I’ll wager she already called Em.”

“Safe bet,” I agree.

“Come on. When was the last time we sat by the water and had drinks without our wives or kids in tow?”

Simple things remind me why Tamara is my best friend and also why she’s so successful at pitching projects to studios and networks. She can read a room. What I need most right now is an escape—just a few hours. I wanted to share my idea for a new show with Tam and Christie. I hoped Christie would be open to teaming up with Emma on a project. They’ve been friends since before either of them got their first acting gig. They have not worked together meaningfully because of timing constraints. As Jeff and I embarked on the spin-off to *Off Screen*, Emma decided not to be part of the project and instead recommended Christie for the co-starring role. As usual, Em’s instincts were spot-on. *Off Screen* had a successful four-year stint, and Christie received two Emmy nominations. But I know both Christie and Emma were disappointed they didn’t get to share the screen.

Domesticated differs entirely from anything I’ve created. Emma has always told me I

should write a comedy. My writing always includes comedic moments, but my projects are considered dramas. This show is a dramedy. That's how I would describe it. It has moments of tension and pain but approaches life with laughter. I think that's something we all need these days. It also has a larger cast of regular characters than my other shows. I had thought Christie would be the perfect choice to play the best friend of the show's main character, Emma. Yes, I know. I named the character after Em. The truth is, this character's life and experience are nothing like Emma's. I know my wife—and I know this is a role she would love to sink her teeth into. Collaborating with Christie and creating something together would have thrilled Emma. I'm sure of it.

"We're hitting the beach," Tamara says.

"Tam."

"No way. You have that look."

"What look?" I ask.

Tamara points at me. "That one."

I shake my head.

"The one that says, I've fallen in love with a straight girl—again."

I burst out laughing. "I think we both know I haven't fallen in love with any girls lately—straight or otherwise."

"Mm. But that's the look. The one you had when the souffle you tried to make for Emma turned into a moon crater."

“That worked out in the end,” I say.

“Okay. The one when you unwrapped the biggest box under the tree only to find it was a pooper scooper.”

I stare at Tamara for a second and burst into laughter. That happened a few years ago. Emma wrapped this giant box in the most beautiful paper I’ve ever seen and slapped a big metallic bow on it. I couldn’t wait to open it. I still remember the way her brow arched in amusement when I pulled out a pooper scooper. “King is the gift that keeps on giving, Addy,” she said. “All over the yard.”

And Emma thinks I should write comedy?

“See? I know that look,” Tamara says. “Emma’s not here to stroke your?—”

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I tip my head.

“Not that! Ew! Addy! I don’t want to think about what Emma strokes.”

I snigger. “You said it, not me.”

“My point is, she’s not here to nurse your ego or your feelings, or you’re—well—whatever it is that has you in pooper scooper mode. All I have is liquor.”

Tamara is joking—to a point. She’s always underestimated how much I rely on her for support and encouragement. When we moved to Los Angeles, spending time at the beach in Malibu or driving down Pacific Coast Highway became a staple for us. We’d search for a perfect spot to have tacos and margaritas, the warm breeze gently rustling the palm trees as we commiserated about our fledgling careers and lackluster love lives. Frustration was a constant companion for us, two naïve dreamers who couldn’t seem to overcome the roadblocks that littered our path.

Tamara has always been the one to push me out of my comfort zone. She’s the reason I crossed paths with Emma. If Tam hadn’t insisted on attending the writers’ event and dragging me along, I might never have met Emma.

“Addy?”

“Huh?”

“You disappeared for a minute.”

“Sorry. The beach sounds great.”

Tamara looks at me like I’ve grown a head, and I giggle. “

The beach was your idea,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but you usually balk at my ideas.”

Tam’s teasing me, but there is an underlying tinge of hurt to her comment. I know that. I realize I have often resisted Tam’s suggestions over the years. Whether I resist or not, her ideas almost always prove to be exactly what I need. But I also know that most people who know us view me as the more rational person, and Tam as impulsive. She can be impulsive, but Tamara has never been reckless. The older we get, the more I see what Emma has always understood about me and Tam. We balance each other. I sigh.

“Addy, if you really don’t want to go to the beach?—”

“It’s not that,” I reply. “I guess I realize how much I miss this—us being close.” I expect Tam to roll her eyes and drag me through the door. Her response takes me by surprise.

“Yeah, me, too,” Tamara says. “I wish we could move Kansas next to Boston and drag LA along.”

I nod. “I think we should call an Uber.”

Tam grins. “I’ll let Chris know we’ll be late,” she says.

“Probably a good idea.”

It's late when I finally crawl into bed to call Emma. "Hi."

"Addy?"

"Sorry, it's late."

"Did you have a good time at the beach?" Emma asks.

"How did you know I was at the beach?"

"I talked to Chris this afternoon."

"Oh," I say. "Em?"

"What, love?"

"I miss Tam."

"I know you do, Addy. I miss Tam and Christie, too."

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“You do?”

“Of course.”

I sigh.

“We’ll talk about everything when you get home,” Emma says. “Something tells me you might need to spend some quiet time tomorrow with your friends Tylenol and water.”

I chuckle. I’ve never been much of a drinker, so it doesn’t require much for me to sport a hangover. “I didn’t drink that many margaritas.” I unconsciously sigh again. “Boston? Geez, Em. My dad will see Tam more than me.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

I grumble. “I’m happy for them—for Christie. I just—it’s so far.”

“Mm. Well, Vicki reminded me today it’s only a plane ride—which is the same as it is now.”

“You told Vicki about their move?”

“I hadn’t planned to say anything to the kids. Vicki is intuitive, Addy. You know that.”

“How did she take it?” I ask.

“Better than either of us. Be prepared for her to make a compelling argument for us to move to Boston.”

I chuckle. Of all our kids, Vicki is the closest to Tamara and Christie. Tam loves Vicki as much as Vicki adores her. I think a big part of the reason Tam wanted children with Christie is because she’s so close to Vicki. Their unique connection can still surprise me. If I’m honest, Vicki reminds me a lot of Tamara. She isn’t fearless, but she is adventurous and strong-willed. Sometimes, her daring nature makes me anxious, but Vicki has always been eager to immerse herself in adventure. I recognized it when she was a baby, and Emma would take her into the pool. Vicki loved it when Emma would blow gently in her face and dunk her quickly under the water. She would push with all her might against Emma’s legs to try to break free from Emma’s grasp.

Vicki has been like that with nearly every new thing she’s tried. Believe me, she’s had more than a few skinned knees and bruised elbows, but she always gets right back up and tries again. Sherry says Emma was similar when she was a child. That doesn’t surprise me. Emma is determined and competitive. And there’s no way she would let her brothers show her up by doing something she couldn’t do. I see reflections of Emma in all our children. It leaves me wondering how Emma is feeling about Tam and Christie’s move.

“Em?”

“Get some rest, Addy. Enjoy the next few days with Tam. We’ll talk about everything when you get home.”

“Everything?”

Emma giggles. “Go to sleep, Addy.”

“I miss you, Em.”

“I miss you, too.”

“You do?”

“Always,” Emma says. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Emma tells me. “Sleep.”

“Morning,” Christie says.

“Hi, Chris.”

“Headache?” she asks.

“No. I think Tam might have one when she gets up, though.”

Christie nods, pours me a cup of coffee, and slides it across the breakfast bar. “You look like you could use that,” she says.

“I didn’t get much sleep.”

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“Want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” I reply. “I’m excited for you.”

“I know you are. But you were hoping we might all work together.”

“Did Emma say something?” I ask.

“She told me a little about the new project you’ve been developing.”

“More like outlining,” I say. “I left a rough pilot script with Em. But it’s just a concept.”

I watch as Christie brings the mug in her hands to her lips and peers at me over the edge as she sips.

“What?” I ask.

Christie slowly sets the mug on the counter and sighs. “Addison, I know you well enough to know you don’t give Emma anything to review unless it’s a project you want to develop.”

I huff.

“Or to tell her something you’re afraid to say. Emma knows that, too.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Why don’t you tell Emma what you want?” Christie asks.

“Because I’m not sure what I want.”

Christie nods.

“Chris, it’s true. I love living in Kansas.”

“But you also miss workingwithEmma. I don’t mean debating what ideas should become films, either. You miss writing for Emma—seeing Emma on a set.”

I collapse my face in my hands with a sigh.

“She misses that, too,” Christie says.

“I know.” I look back at Christie and shake my head. “Em misses being on a set. More than that, she misses being around people who understand her.”

“Addy, just because we’re moving to New England doesn’t mean you and Emma can’t come back to California. You both have loads of friends here. Jeff and Sandra would be deliriously happy if you lived closer.”

“Yeah. Maybe so. I’m not sure that would be enough to sway Emma to make that big of a move.”

“Do you realize how much she loves you?”

“What?”

“It’s a simple question, Addy. Do you realize how much Emma loves you?”

“Well, I?—”

Christie chuckles. “You know, you remind me of Tam sometimes.”

“Me?”

“Mm. She often fails to grasp that I love her as much as she loves me and that you and Emma love her as much as she loves you. Maybe you should tell Emma how you feel.”

“That’s it, Chris. I don’t know. I mean, I know how much she loves me—I do. I’m not restless. I know you and Tam both think I am. Work pulls me away. I spend more time with you and Tam than Emma has in a few years. Don’t misunderstand me. She loves being near her folks and Jackson. But I can feel it—Em’s restlessness. The kids are getting bigger—and more independent. Even Noah likes to go his own way.”

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“I think that happens when kids have older siblings.”

“Yeah. See, I didn’t have siblings. But it was Em’s life as a kid.” I sigh. “Me? I’d love to live somewhere quiet for the rest of my life.”

“But?”

“I miss Em when I’m in LA, and I miss everyone in LA when I’m in Kansas.”

“And?” Christie asks.

“I miss working with Em. I admit it.”

Christie reaches across the breakfast bar and squeezes my hand. “So, you are a little restless.”

I chuckle. “I guess I am.”

“Addy, if I had to make a bet, I would wager you’re right about Emma. She hasn’t said anything to me about wanting to move back to LA. But I know working is on her mind. We’ve always been a little different—me and Em. I don’t think I could step back as far as she has from acting. For her, it’s a difficult balancing act. She’s torn.”

“I know.”

“I’ve always admired you and Emma.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Oh, I’ve heard the way people who don’t know you talk,” Christie replies. “I realize your marriage isn’t perfect. No one’s is. Don’t tell Tam I said that.”

I laugh.

“But we both know it’s true,” Christie continues. “You and Emma have always worked well together—not only on a set or a project.” She smiles at me. “I do recall a couple of times when you weren’t communicating well at all about what you needed and wanted from each other.”

Christie and Tam saw the highs and lows of the early days of my relationship with Emma. Our first year together was filled with both incredible moments and significant frustrations. Emma hesitated to introduce me to her professional life, fearing it might overwhelm or negatively impact me. I worried our relationship could damage her career, so I also held back. By the end of that year, we were each secretly considering marriage but kept it from one another. A series of misunderstandings—or perhaps more accurately, misinterpretations—caused us both unnecessary stress and heartache. In the end, it resulted in me proposing during a heated debate about marriage—not quite the romantic moment I’d pictured.

I massage my eyes and groan. Christie is right. I need to talk to Emma and lay all my cards on the table. As much as people close to me think they understand me, they often fail to understand Emma is the center of my world. There isn’t anything or anyone I love more in my life than Em. And maybe, even after all this time, some tiny part of me fears losing her.

“Addy?”

“Sorry. You’re right,” I tell Christie. “I know I need to talk to her.”

“Mm. You’ll figure it out once you let her help,” Christies says. “Stop trying to devise a plan, Addy—or an argument. Just tell Emma what’s on your mind.”

“You know, if you ever decide to leave acting, you might consider therapy,” I say.

Christie’s eyes pop wide.

“I meant a therapist—not to see one,” I tell her.

“Well, that’s good. I spend enough on Merlot and Malbec already,” Christie says.

We both laugh.

“Thanks, Chris.”

“Advice is free—for now,” she quips.

I chuckle and lift my coffee.

“This is fantastic,” Tamara tells me.

I hadn’t planned to share everything I’ve drafted for *Domesticated* with Tam on this trip. I could tell by the tone in Emma’s voice last night that she’d read what I left her. After my talk with Christie this morning, I decided to bounce the idea off Tam.

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“Thanks,” I say. “We both know that doesn’t guarantee any deep pockets will agree.”

Tamara laughs. “There aren’t many deep pockets left in this town.”

That’s the truth as ever I heard it.

Tamara pushes the packet I gave her aside and takes a deep breath. “You were hoping Christie would sign on to this one, weren’t you?”

I shrug.

“That’s what I thought.” Tamara scratches her brow. “Pretty sure she would jump at the chance to work with Emma.”

“Yeah. I know Emma would love to work with her, too.”

“You’re not thinking of tabling this because we’re headed to Boston, are you?”
Tamara asks.

I sigh.

“Addy, no way. No way.”

“Tam, it?—”

“It’s the best I’ve seen from you since you created Off Screen.”

Before I can respond, Tamara continues.

“And you’ve written some great stuff,” Tamara says. “This is different. It feels different. You can’t set this one aside, Addy. Emma will be itching to sink her teeth into this role.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say.

“I do. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like I sprouted another head.”

I laugh.

“Don’t hold this back, Addison,” Tamara says.

“Tam, this is designed to be a traditional network show. I don’t know what I was thinking.” I flop my head into my hands.

“You weren’t thinking.”

My head pops up.

“You were feeling,” Tamara tells me. “That’s when you’re at your best, Addy. You didn’t try to think up a story. It found you. No one brings that out from you the way Emma can.”

“I know, but?—”

“You and Emma have a connection I envy.”

“Tam, you have a terrific marriage.”

“Yep. I do,” Tamara says. “And I’m not sure I would if it weren’t for you and Emma.”

“Tam.”

“Just listen for a minute. You say you never would have met Emma without me. I could say I never would have met Chris without you and Em. Neither of us knows if that’s true. Things happened the way they did, and we both found someone who will put up with us.”

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I shake my head and giggle.

“You know I’m right. They have a lot more to put up with from us than we ever will need to deal with from them.”

There’s no point in arguing. Tamara is right.

“Mm. We both know it,” Tamara says. “It took me a while to realize you knew Emma was in love with you when you wrote Off Screen.”

“No. I didn’t. I hoped.”

“Nope. You knew. You felt it. I’ll bet you were scared shitless she’d never admit how she felt. But you knew because you felt it. That’s why you wrote Off Screen, right?”

I nod. “That was a different time,” I say. “Our lives were?”

Tamara holds up a hand. “I get it, Addy. You wrote this for Emma. Maybe she’ll surprise me and she’ll tell you she wants no part of it. I think you know better than that.”

“I don’t doubt Em will want to do it. But I’m not sure she’ll be willing to do it, Tam.”

“And you think Christie’s signing on would change that?” Tamara shakes her head. “Come on, Addy. You don’t need to sweeten the deal with Emma.”

“I don’t have a deal with Emma.”

“No. You don’t. What do you want?” Tamara asks me.

“What do you mean?”

“You graduated Summa Cum Laude. This isn’t a hard question for you. What do you want, Addy?”

“I want to make the show with Em.”

“And?”

“And?”

“And do you want to move to LA to do it?” Tamara asks.

“No. Maybe.” I groan. “I did.”

Tamara flops back in her chair. “You can’t make me and Chris your reason to hold back.”

“Tam, maybe you’re right about the fact that I can sense what Emma feels. But you’re missing something about this project.”

“What am I missing?”

“It’s also about us—you, me, Chris, and Em—about our friendships.”

Tamara smiles at me. “I know, Addy.”

“You do?”

“I know you. Maybe there’s a way to make it all come together.”

I wish I could see a solution. “I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t set it on a shelf because you’ve climbed so far into your head you can see out your eyeballs.”

That did it. I burst out laughing. I often think Tam should be a writer. She offers some of the most colorful visuals I’ve ever heard.

Tamara shrugs. “Don’t do it, Addy.”

I nod. I'll try.

CHAPTER FOUR

emma

The kids are always on pins and needles when it gets close to time for Addy to come home from a trip. I heard Vicki in Hannah's room late last night. Usually, I would have intervened and sent them both to bed. But I paused when I overheard Vicki tell her little sister she thought we needed to be closer to the rest of our family. I'm confident Vicki enjoys living close to my parents, but I've underestimated how much she misses the family that surrounded her when she was little. And I'm also sure she senses Addy and I are a little lonely here. We both enjoy spending time with family. God knows, my family adores Addy. But as much as the feeling is mutual, it is still my family. Tamara was Addison's lifeline for years. She's more like a sister to Addy than a friend.

Launching Off Screen was a significant milestone for Addy, not just in her career but also for us as a couple. It brought new connections into her life, expanding her social circle. As time went on, those friendships grew deeper and stronger. Jeff and Sandra became more than friends; they became our family, even more so than some of our biological relatives.

After overhearing Vicki's conversation with Hannah, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned for hours before finally giving up and calling Sandra. As we talked, my emotions poured out, and so did hers. I've had the privilege of working with many talented actors throughout my career. Sandra and I spent countless hours together on

and off the set of Off Screen. Our characters' relationship was tumultuous yet passionate, and we had to learn to read each other's emotions to create a believable dynamic between Genevieve and Jack. We held each other on and off set through the best and worst times—through celebrations and loss. She was the first person to feel Vicki's kick when I was pregnant—something I've never told Addy. And I was the person who held her for hours when she found out she was pregnant after our co-star, Dan's death. It's amazing how physical distance doesn't affect that kind of emotional bond. Sandra knew the reason behind my call without me saying a word.

“Mom!”

The pitch to Vicki's voice is all I need to hear to know Addy is home. I wander to the back door and stand in the doorframe, watching our children run toward the car. As I watch Addy scoop up Noah and accept hugs from our daughters, I'm reminded of how fortunate we are.

“Hey,” Addy says when she reaches the porch. She sets Noah on his feet and kisses me.

“Hi.”

Addy's brow furrows. “Em? Are you okay?”

“I'm glad you're home.”

“Me, too.”

“Momma?”

Addison and I both look over at Hannah.

“Yes?” Addy asks.

“Did you stay with Aunt Tam?”

“I did,” Addy says. “You’ll see her in a week.”

“Really?” Hannah asks.

Addy looks at me, silently asking if she’s spoken out of turn. I was waiting for her to come home to tell the kids we’d have company for the long weekend.

Addison leans into my ear. “Did I let the cat out of the bag too soon?”

I chuckle. “No.” I look at three pairs of expectant eyes. “I had thought we’d share this news at dinner,” I begin. “But?—”

“Are we all going to Disney?” Vicki asks.

I force myself not to laugh. Our house is likely to feel a bit like Disneyland next weekend—animated and loud. “No,” I reply. “But Tam and Christie will be here with Daniel.”

“Really?” Vicki asks.

“Really. And Sandra and Jeff will also be here.”

“With Brody?” Vicki asks hopefully.

“And Bailey,” I say.

Hannah jumps up and down. She loves to play with Sandra and Jeff’s daughter,

Bailey.

“Okay,” I say. “I know everyone is excited. I’ll bet Momma is tired. She was up really early so she could get home today. So, why don’t you play outside for a bit while I help Momma get her things and get dinner ready?”

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Vicki grabs Noah's hand. "Okay! Come on, guys. We gotta plan for the weekend!"

Addison rolls her eyes. "She's either going to grow up to be the president or the head of a crime family."

I laugh. "Please, don't turn that into a series."

Addison turns to me, smiles, and kisses me deeply.

"Addy."

"I missed you, Em."

"Mm. I missed you, too, love. Let's get your bag and?—"

"I'll get it later," Addy says.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay. Well, you get settled, and I'll get dinner started."

"Em?"

"Hm?"

“Could this be a hot dog and mac and cheese night?”

“I thought you’d be tired of eating that after dining at Tam’s,” I say.

Addy shrugs.

“Addy?”

“The kids will be out there for hours unless we call them,” Addison says.

“True.”

“I just—I hoped we could talk.”

A familiar storm is brewing in Addison’s eyes, and I lift my hand to cup her cheek.

“Why don’t I see if Mom will feed the gremlins tonight?”

“I don’t want to?”

“Addy. They’ll be keen to tell her all their plans for the weekend. Trust me.”

Addison nods.

“Why don’t you grab a shower? I’ll meet you on the deck,” I suggest.

“Em?”

“Go on,” I tell Addison. “I’ll meet you out there.”

Addison nods again and heads for our bedroom. I take a deep breath and exhale it slowly. “Well, let’s hope I’m reading everything correctly.”

“Wine?” Addison asks when she walks onto the deck.

“I thought we could relax out here for a while,” I reply.

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“Do I need wine?”

I wink. “No, but I might.” I pour us each a glass and hand one to Addison. “How was your visit?”

“Great. I still can’t believe they’re moving to the East Coast.”

“Mm. I’m going to climb out on a limb and guess you’d hoped Christie would be interested in this new show you’ve outlined.”

“I’m that obvious, huh?” Addison asks.

“Only to me. Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“Em, I don’t want to push you into something.”

“Honey, talking isn’t pushing.” I sip my wine and set it aside. “Tell me what you want to do, Addy.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You.”

“I want to create something with you.”

“I thought we were doing that.”

“Yes, but don’t you miss it?”

“Acting?”

“Being on a show,” Addison says.

I take a deep breath and nod. “I do, but there is a lot to consider.”

“Yeah. And now the main thing that might pull us back to California won’t be there.”

“That’s true.” I watch Addison’s shoulders slump in defeat. “Addy?”

“I feel it, Em—this show could be something special.”

A smile stretches my lips. Everything Addison writes is special, but I know what she means. It’s a chance for us to create something entirely new and memorable—something different from *Off Screen* but just as magical. “Then I guess we should find a way to make it happen.”

Addison’s head pops up, and her gaze narrows.

“What did you think I would say?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think you?—”

“Addy, there are a lot of things we need to discuss—things that extend far beyond selling the concept, casting, and budget realities. If we decide to do this—to launch a new series together—it will mean changing our lives. It will mean changing our children’s lives.”

“I know. And that’s the thing. I don’t want to move our family to someplace where

we aren't close to family. I mean, Jeff and Sandra are close to LA. And we have friends there, but it's not the same as here. And I can't ask you to make a?—"

Addison is beginning to ramble. "Addy."

"What?"

"Maybe you need to change your lens."

"Huh?"

Addison is the most sensitive person I've ever met. She's incredibly resilient, but she feels everything intensely. Sometimes, it causes Addison's field of view to narrow. "You've zoomed in so close you can't see the whole picture."

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“I don’t follow, Em. Part of the reason I started writing *Domesticated* was to find a way to bring us all back together.”

“Mm-hm. And you think we can’t make it happen now because Christie will be working in Boston?”

“On a major show. Geez, Em. She’ll be taping almost half the year—on the other side of the?—”

“World?” I ask lightly. I chuckle when Addison groans. “It feels like the other side of the world,” I say. “It isn’t. I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me.”

“I’m always honest with you.”

“Maybe. You also hold back sometimes—even after all these years. I want you to tell me the truth—all of it, Addy. Okay?”

Addison nods.

“Are you willing to uproot our lives—all of our lives—to take a chance on this project?”

Addison stares at me.

“Are you, Addy? Because if we decide to do this—to move our kids, we need to commit to staying—to giving it time, even if the project tanks.”

“I know. If you’d asked me this a week ago, my answer would have been yes.”

“What changed in a week?” I ask.

“Tam and Christie. Em, if Christie had a job in LA, it would be different.”

“Because they would still be close.”

“Yes.”

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. I’m about to propose something to Addison I know she doesn’t expect. “What if they were close?”

“What are you talking about?”

I reach beside me and hand Addison the pilot script for *Domesticated*—complete with my plethora of red lines. She looks at it, flips a page, studies it for a moment, and looks back at me.

“Em?”

“Why not let Emma’s life unfold in New York?” I suggest.

“Emma. New York? You want to move our family to New York City?”

“No. But I’m confident there are places close enough to the city which would provide the kids the type of childhood we both want them to have.”

Addison stares at me.

“I love the concept,” I tell Addison. “And I know all the reasons you created it. You

know me better than anyone. I miss it, too, Addy. The kids need us—but they’re happiest with their friends at school, and we both know that will only become truer as time passes.”

“Em. New York? It’s so far from?—”

“It’s a plane ride, Addy. No matter what we decide, we will be a plane ride from someone we love. Maybe it’s time for us to settle closer to your dad.”

“Is that why you’re suggesting this?”

“No—at least, not entirely,” I reply. “Tam and Christie are family, too. The kids miss them, and God knows, Vicki misses Brody.”

“I know. But they’ll miss your parents and their cousins.”

“True. Evan will be a senior in high school next year. They’ll be missing their cousins no matter where we live.”

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“What about the house?” Addison asks.

“Well, I suppose we could sell it. I thought we’d keep it as a place for summers and visits. It would be ideal for Mom and Dad to use for company when we’re not here.”

Addison bites her lip. “I never considered moving back east.”

“I know.”

“We don’t know if anyone will be interested in the show, Em. I mean, if Christie was on board, I’m pretty sure we’d get more than a few nibbles.”

I can’t conceal my grin.

“What?” Addison asks.

“What if I told you Sandra is interested?”

Addison shakes her head.

“Bad idea? Having Sandra playing my love interest again?”

“Bad idea? Are you kidding? Em, people have been begging for that for years!”

I nod.

“You talked to Sandra?”

“As a friend—yes. Jeff is tired of producing for other people, Addy. He wants to get back to creating something—writing.”

“Jeff’s work is based in California.”

“At the moment. It doesn’t need to be,” I say.

“Do you actually think they’d consider moving?”

“The business has changed. You know that. We don’t need to be in LA. The answer is, I don’t know. I can’t promise you that Jeff and Sandra will want to move or agree to move. But I think for the right opportunity, they will. We all miss each other.”

“I know. But, Em, there’s no guarantee we can strike gold twice.”

“No. But if anyone can, it’s us. Jesus, Addy. If James Reynolds can launch one hit show after another, we ought to be able to have another commercial and critical success. Why not? Who knows? Maybe Christie will come on board, too.”

“That’d be a neat trick.”

“Not really. There are ways to make that happen. If that’s something she wants, and it matters enough to you to work with her.”

“What about you?” Addison asks. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure I want to discuss it with our friends—yes. And if we’re all on board, then yes—I’m sure.”

“And the kids?”

“The kids will be happy if they know we’re confident in our decision. And frankly, if we’re going to do this, now is a good time. In a few years, it’ll be harder for them to leave friends behind.”

“It’s a huge change, Emma.”

“Is it? It’s a new house, Addy. It’s a shift. We’ve made those before. And one day, we will make them again.”

“What about your parents?”

“They’ll understand. My parents have never tried to hold me back—to hold me here. You know that.”

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“I do. But, Em, we’ve been here a few years. This is home and your folks are used to having you close—to having the kids close. And you love it here, too—being close to your family.”

Every day, I’m reminded of the reasons I fell in love with Addison, or it could be more accurate to say that every day, littlethings make me fall in love with her all over again. I struggle to answer when people ask if it was love at first sight for us. I can’t say I knew I loved Addy the moment we met. It was more like a recognition—something shifting inside me told me not to let her walk away. Addy’s eyes had a certain allure—a mischievous glimmer mixed with genuine kindness. As we became closer, I could see in her eyes a desire for more than physical intimacy with me but also a yearning for profound, unconditional love and acceptance. The absence of her family for many years left a void in Addy’s life, and she yearned for the sense of belonging that only a family can provide.

My family welcomed Addison with open arms, and they have become a source of comfort and stability for us as a couple. But even more importantly, they provided that for Addy. Developing a relationship with my parents has helped her heal and find a renewed connection with her father. Her reluctance to leave Kansas doesn’t surprise me. But Addy also forgets families aren’t given. They’re created.

I reach over and take Addison’s hand. “I love you so much, Addy.”

“Huh?”

I can’t help but giggle. “Have I not told you I love you lately?”

“Em?”

With a sigh, I continue. “I do, Addy. I love you more than you sometimes take the time to realize. You’re so busy giving to all of us—worrying about how I feel, what the kids need, what you can do for everyone—you lose sight of how much you mean to all of us. Just listen. I love being close to our family. My parents, Jackson, Sarah, Evan, and Andrew—they’re part of our family. But, Addy. They aren’t a bigger part or even a more important part of this family than Tamara and Christie, your dad, or Jeff and Sandra. Family is so much more than what we are given. I’m blessed, and I know it. I was fortunate to be born into a nurturing family who loves me, even when we drive each other crazy. But my family was incomplete until I met you.”

“Em.”

“No. You need to listen. Our marriage is the centerpiece of my life. It’s the tether that holds our family together. Families are collections of people, relationships, and love. And that takes work to build and maintain. It’s always hard to be apart from people you love.”

“I should never have asked you to live here full time,” Addison says.

“You haven’t been listening. I wanted to make the move here every bit as much as you did, Addy.” I hold up my hand to keep Addison from interrupting me. “It took me a little longer to embrace the idea because we’d created a wonderful home and family in Los Angeles, and I was afraid moving here would alter that—that I would regret it.”

“I know.”

“But I don’t regret it—not at all. It’s been wonderful, and I’m so grateful we’ve spent these early years with our children here. I am. But home will be wherever we’re

together. Some days, I still miss walking to the pool to see you swimming laps or hearing Vicki squeal with excitement when King would jump in and then run through the mud.”

Addison laughs. “I can’t say I thought you’d miss that.”

“Those are precious memories for both of us.”

“Yeah. They are.”

“And we have those here, too. Noah’s birth, lost teeth, skinned knees, dance recitals, Christmases, and barbecues—and unexpected upheavals.”

“Em, I know this last year has been hard for you.”

“It’s had its share of challenges,” I reply. “Going through that—learning I had cancer, praying I would be healthy again—it changed my outlook.”

Addison’s eyes retreat to her lap. This is a topic she avoids whenever possible.

“Addy, look at me.” I smile when Addison’s gaze meets mine. “We got through it. Not me—we. But I think if we’re honest with each other, it was a wake-up call. It was for me. And I won’t lie to you. The thought of taking on a series again—of trying to balance raising three kids, our marriage, and the demand of leading a series feels?—”

“Overwhelming?”

“Yes. And scary. But also, exciting.”

Addison nods.

“We both feel safe here,” I tell her. “But safe is overrated, Addy. I trust you to keep me safe, and I trust us to keep our kids as safe as anyone can hope to—no matter where we go.”

“And if everyone is on board?” Addison asks.

“Then we take it one step at a time, but one deliberate step at a time.”

“And if we can’t?—”

“Addy, don’t project anything, okay? Let’s talk to everyone this weekend. Put our ideas on the table. Do you remember when you told me you would end Off Screen if that’s what it took for us to start our family—if it was what I wanted? You would step away?”

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“I would have.”

“Mm. And now it’s my turn.”

“What do you mean?”

“To step backin.”

Addison closes her eyes and nods. “I want you to be happy. I want you to be sure.”

“No one is happy all the time,” I say. “And no one can be certain what lies on the other side of a second.”

Addy opens her eyes and looks at me.

“I am certain ofyou—of us.” I move to sit on Addison’s lap and kiss her lips softly.

“It’s a fabulous idea.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Mm. It’s funny because it’s emotionally trying—and it’sreal.I’d be a fool to pass up the chance to bring it to life with you.”

“Thanks, Em.”

“I only told you the truth.”

“We should probably call the kids, huh?”

I wink. “No need. Mom said she’d keep them for the night. She’ll drop Noah off after she takes Hannah and Vicki to school in the morning.”

“Maybe we can convince them to move with us,” Addy says.

I laugh.

“I mean—the free babysitting is?—”

“Addy?”

“Hm?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Addison grins, leans close, and obliges my request.

“You know what we haven’t done in a long time?” Addison asks.

I lift a brow.

“Trivia.”

I shake my head, pull myself from Addy’s lap, and hold out my hand. Let’s see if she remembers Paul Newman brought Twilight to life long before any vampires emerged. I suppress a giggle. I love trivia.

CHAPTER FIVE

addy

For years, I've heard people reduce Emma to surface-level descriptions. There is no denying her beauty and sex appeal, but those attributes only scratch the surface of what makes her truly captivating. It's the genuine way she carries herself, radiating authenticity through every smile and word. Despite her fame, Emma remains humble and uncorrupted by conceit. Surprisingly, she doesn't see herself as sexy or beautiful when looking in the mirror. But it isn't because she's self-conscious about her appearance; it's simply not something she places importance on. In fact, she laughed off her first gray hair. A popular talk show host's joke about the lines around her eyes made me want to punch him. "Now we know what happened to Dorothy when she left OZ," he quipped, earning a loud laugh from Emma. "I guess there are no wizards or Botox in Kansas."

We met in our late twenties at the height of Emma's fame. I am continually amazed at how individuals in the public eye are devalued and reduced to objects. Too many women have experienced the emotional distress it unleashes. Treating women as dolls to be posed at will, the conventional concept of beauty is nothing short of absurd. Emma is nothing like that. She often jokes about how people would react if they saw her in her casual sweatpants, with her hair tied back, a mix of drool, paint, or mud stains on her shirt, and a clump of King's crap stuck to her foot. Those are the moments when Emma truly shines. That is until I'm reprimanded for King's mess in the yard.

Emma turns to me and cocks her head curiously. "Addy?"

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I walk to her slowly and pull her close. “I love you, Emma.”

“Addy.”

I love the playful nature of my relationship with Emma, but there are times when the depth of my feelings for her acts like the force of gravity. I’m pulled toward her—rooted in place by her. It’s unlike any other feeling I’ve experienced. Attraction and lust have always existed between us, and when those emotions take the stage, playfulness adds to our exploration. But when gravity grabs hold of me, I need something deeper—to look into Emma’s eyes and give myself to her—lose myself within her.

Emma leans into the embrace, her eyes twinkling with affection and mischief. “Afraid you’ll confuse Lassie with Rin Tin Tin again?” She teases, but her voice softens as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me closer.

As the sun sets outside, its warm glow filters through the windows, filling the room with a golden hue. It’s moments like these when time stands still, and silence echoes. I see a tear glistening in Emma’s eyes. This is the place where we find solace and completion in each other.

As we stand intertwined, I feel her sigh against my neck—a contented, heavy breath telling me more than words ever could. We both feel our connection—a shared understanding and a history that has weathered both dazzling highs and devastating lows. There’s no music, but I gently sway like a soft chorus of horns serenades us. Emma pulls back to look into my eyes, a gentle smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

“You’re a hopeless romantic, Addy,” she says.

There’s no point in denying Emma’s observation. I lean in and softly claim her lips. The kiss begins gently, our tongues exploring and communicating without words.

“I love kissing you,” Emma says.

“Still?”

“Always. Sometimes, all I want is to kiss you.”

I tip my head playfully.

“Sometimes. Not tonight,” Emma clarifies.

A smile graces my lips as I delicately unbutton her shirt. My kisses set fire to her skin as they trail up her neck and gently caress the sensitive spot behind her ear. Every touch ignites a spark between us, making my heart beat faster with desire. As Emma’s shirt falls to the floor, I hold my breath. Every time I make love with Emma, my heart overflows with a rush of emotions, making the experience feel new. Cliche or not, it’s a feeling I never want to lose.

Emma lifts my t-shirt over my head and tosses it aside; the only sounds are our heartbeats and the faint rustle of fabric. She steps back, her eyes inviting me to follow as she leads us toward the bed.

The sunlight that spills through the window fades into a subtle orange glow that dances over Emma’s skin, highlighting her curves with an ethereal light. She looks otherworldly, like a celestial being who has graced me with her presence. As she sits on the edge of the bed and pulls me towards her, I can feel the electric charge of our closeness.

“Addy,” she whispers, her voice heavy with emotion and need. Her hands find my face, pulling me down for another deep, consuming kiss.

I push her back onto the bed and tug her pants from her legs. She lifts a brow at me, and I chuckle. “Yes?” I ask.

Emma’s eyes drop to my jeans.

“Oh,” I say, jumping off the bed. I struggle to undo the button on my jeans before realizing it’s a snap. I finally unzip them, but in my haste to escape their grip, my foot gets caught in the cuff, causing me to fall back onto the bed comically. “Ugh,” I groan, trying to untangle myself from the fabric. Emma’s infectious laughter invites me to giggle despite my embarrassing predicament.

“Come here,” Emma says.

I grin and crawl back up the bed toward her. She reaches out, her hands tracing lines across my shoulders, down my arms, and finally wrapping around my neck, pulling me closer until our lips meet again.

“Not exactly Romeo, huh?”

“He’s not my type,” Emma says.

“Juliet, then,” I whisper against her lips. Her soft laughter fills me with gratitude.

Emma’s fingers tangle in my hair as she deepens the kiss. Her other hand roams down my back, sending shivers spiraling through me. My hands explore the soft curves of her body. Breaking away just enough to speak, I trail kisses along her jawline to her ear.

“On that subject, who played Juliet in the 1968 film version of Romeo and Juliet?” I ask.

Emma pulls back slightly, her eyes sparkling with mischief and desire. “Olivia Hussey,” she answers.

My brow furrows, and I huff.

Emma shakes her head with amusement. “You didn’t even know the answer, did you?”

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“I knew it was an Olivia—de Havilland, Newton-John?”

“You suck at trivia, Addy.”

I chuckle and shift my weight, gently pinning her beneath me. Being with Emma isn't like a carefully coordinated and flawless movie scene; it's about the messy, silly, beautiful reality of us.

I gently press my lips against her forehead, the tip of her nose, and then her mouth before letting them wander slowly down to her shoulder. My mouth skates across her body faintly, my breath washing across her skin until I reach her breasts. I glance at her before lowering my mouth to surround her nipple.

As Emma's body tenses in anticipation, she arches her back, playfully requesting me to tease her. I comply, my tongue drawing circles until she sighs with pleasure. My hands glide down her sides, tracing the contours of her hips before finding their place on her thighs. Emma's fingers wind in the curls of my hair, urging me closer, guiding my movements as if she were scripting our intimate dance.

The soft rustle of fabric and the whisper of skin against skin fills the room. I navigate the landscape of her body with a tender curiosity, rediscovering her every curve and hollow as if it were both the first and the thousandth time. Emma's breathing becomes shallow, her chest heaving as I continue my exploration.

I look up at her; her eyes are closed, her lips parted slightly, and a flush spreads across her cheeks. The sight fuels my desire to give pleasure as much as to receive it. I tenderly trail kisses across her stomach, each one a wordless declaration of my love

and adoration. Emma's hands reach my shoulders, steadying herself as she rides the waves of sensations I evoke.

Our bodies move in perfect synchrony, a wordless language shared between lovers who know each other's desires and boundaries. There is a profound trust here, built through years of loving each other wholly and selflessly. Each kiss and every touch are imbued with our shared history.

As my lips reach the crest of her hip, I glance up again. Emma meets my gaze, and in her eyes, I see mirrored back all my love for her—intense and soft in equal measure. I dip my head and place a line of kisses to her center, allowing the warmth of my breath to heighten her arousal.

Emma's response is instantaneous. A soft moan escapes her lips, encouraging me to explore further. I take my time, savoring the sweetness of her skin and the quiver coursing through her as I continue to explore her softness. Her hands tighten in my hair, a gentle pull that guides and pleads. Slowly, deliberately, I increase the pressure of my tongue, guided by Emma's subtle movements and the deepening breaths filling the silence between us. Her hips arch, and I raise myself to follow. I hold on to her hips, pulling her to me.

“Addy. Jesus. I need you.”

Emma breaks away with a labored breath, and her gaze locks onto mine with an intensity that both challenges and invites me. She pulls me up and flips us over with surprising quickness. Her body now hovers above mine, a playful smirk playing on her lips as she traces a finger down my chest.

“My turn,” she whispers huskily into my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

Her movements are confident as she maps the terrain she knows so well; each touch

is deliberate and assured. She worships every inch of me with her mouth, her fingertips, her body—each touch igniting a fire inside me that makes me writhe beneath her.

Emma's touch is electrifying. She captures my lips in a kiss so deep and consuming that the world around us fades into oblivion. Her lips move from mine, trailing fiery kisses down my neck and collarbone, each sending pulses of heat radiating through my veins.

“Em,” I plead for something—I'm unsure what. I want to touch her again. I want her to take me to the brink of insanity. I want to be held and released all at once. It's dizzying and intoxicating.

“What do you want, Addy?”

Before I can think of an answer, she descends my body, her hands framing my waist as her lips find their way across my abdomen, planting kisses that stir a storm within me.

“Addy? It's not a trivia question.”

I can hear the delight in Emma's voice at my frustration and desperation.

“There's no wrong answer,” she says as her head dips lower.

She pauses to look up at me with those piercing eyes that seem to see right into my soul. With a mischievous grin, she continues her descent, her tongue painting strokes of pleasure across my center.

I feel Emma's hum of satisfaction reverberate through me, sending a series of soft shudders through my core.

“Yes,” she hisses.

“God, Em. Please. I need you.”

“What do you need?”

“You, Em. I need you. I need to touch you. Please.”

A grin spreads across Emma’s face as she rises to press her lips to mine again. Her nipples brush against mine, and she deliberately teases me with the warmth of her body, pressing us together, deepening our kiss, and pulling away just when the friction builds.

“Fuck, Em.”

Emma chuckles faintly, takes my hand, and places it between her legs.

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My eyes flutter closed at the warm softness that greets my fingers. I play with her gently until her hips swirl in a desperate plea for me to fill her. I moan when he lowers herself onto my hand, her forehead falling against mine.

“Addy,” she whispers my name with reverence and urgency.

Our foreheads touch lightly as she slides further down my hand, enveloping me in her warmth. I feel the tender, rhythmic clenching that pulls at my fingers, binding us in an intimate dance of give and take. Emma’s eyes, half-lidded and heavy with desire, lock onto mine, grounding me in a moment that teeters on the edge of overwhelming.

“More,” she whispers.

Emma’s plea is barely audible over the sound of our mingled sighs. My fingers move with a gentle assertiveness, exploring the familiar yet always exhilarating contours of her. With each movement, I feel her body respond, her grip on me tightening as if she’s afraid I’ll slip away. The air between us vibrates with the electricity of our connection, each touch sparking it further alive.

Emma shifts above me, guiding my other hand to her breast. Her skin feels warm and inviting under my touch, her nipple responding eagerly as I lightly caress it with my thumb. She throws her head back in abandonment to the sensations overtaking her. In that moment, she is both completely vulnerable and immensely powerful—my lover, my wife, my everything.

“Addy, I want you. I need?—”

I know what Emma desires. She wants to touch me. I understand. Nothing makes my desire to touch her more powerful than when her hands explore me. The need to bring her pleasure is all-consuming. I love this—watching her above me, feeling the exchange of power and trust that envelops us.

“Shh. Don’t stop, Em. Please. I love watching you—feeling you like this.”

Emma’s resolve is cracking slowly. I lean forward and suck her nipple between my lips.

“Addy!”

I can’t stop now when I’m so close to seeing her lose control. I flick my tongue and nibble on her nipples, enjoying the way her body arches and moves as she grinds against my fingers.

“Touch yourself, Addy.”

I gently tease the nipple in my mouth, and Emma releases a soft moan of pleasure.

“Please.” Emma’s voice is tender, as if she is making a request, but I understand it’s a command. “Addy.” Emma’s eyes open and meet mine with a lustful gaze. “Please. I need you with me.”

I groan in protest, wanting to prolong our connection. Emma surprises me when she reaches back and strokes my center with a fingertip.

“Jesus, Em.”

“I need you, Addison.”

I lift a hand to her cheek, understanding passing between us. Our lives constantly change—even if we'd like to think life remains static. The evidence is around us every moment—in the marks on our children's growth charts that decorate the playroom walls, the tiny lines that pull the corners of Emma's eyes, and the gray hairs she sweeps behind my ears. As the sun sets on this chapter of our life, a new one dawns that is sure to be filled with unexpected challenges and thrilling possibilities.

"You have me, Emma. Always." I pull her closer, and our lips meet in a passionate kiss. Suddenly, her body trembles with ecstasy, and she cries out my name.

I refuse to release her, twirling my fingers inside her, my tongue rediscovering the contours of her mouth as she collapses into me. I sweep the hair from her eyes and smile.

Emma tries to speak, but I silence her with a gentle kiss. "You give me everything, Em."

"No. But I wish I could."

"There is nothing in the world I love more than feeling you close," I tell her. "Just feeling you against me."

Emma curls into my embrace and traces my lips with a fingertip. "Addy."

"I know," I say.

As a writer, I've spent countless hours trying to capture the indescribable feeling of love in words. I've captured the essence of falling in love—the thrilling yet uncertain journey towards an unknown destination—hopeful and terrifying. But what about staying in love? Staying in love requires gravity, the force that keeps us tethered to someone even when the thrill of falling has long faded. I still fall in love with Emma,

but it's different from when we met. I always feel the chord that connects us and holds us together. And I'm not sure there is any way to capture those feelings on a page or a screen. Still, I feel compelled to try. Maybe that's why this project means so much to me.

"What are you thinking?" Emma asks.

"How lucky I am."

"Mm." Emma turns to look at me. "It's not luck, Addy."

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“Maybe not. I know what you’re about to say.”

“Do you?” she asks.

“I think so.”

“And what am I about to say?”

I smile. “That we’ll always find our way.”

“We will,” Emma says. “But that isn’t what I was thinking.”

“No?”

“No,” she says firmly, taking a deep breath before continuing. “When we were first together, it felt like the ground shifted beneath our feet. It was like we were standing on a pile of sand, never knowing when it might give way and swallow us whole.”

I gently caress Emma’s arm as she shares her thoughts with me. I understand exactly what she means. The start of our relationship was intense and all-consuming, and not only in the bedroom. We spent countless hours learning about each other’s pasts, fears, hopes, and dreams. Being together felt like being in a private world where nothing else mattered. But whenever we stepped outside, the reality of our situation hit us hard. The lives we were leading seemed suddenly separate—almost incompatible. We had to put constant effort into nurturing our relationship and challenge ourselves to be open about our feelings. It wasn’t always easy, but we fought through the obstacles that came our way by being honest and open with each

other. In the end, we found solace in each other—our solid ground amidst the chaos of the world around us.

“It’s different now,” Emma says. “I know no matter how unsteady I might feel—no matter how the earth beneath us rumbles, you’ll keep me steady.”

I smile and kiss her lips.

Emma sighs. “In some ways, Addy, I think we’ve been hiding here. I’ve been hiding here.”

Emma’s words don’t surprise me, but I also don’t agree. “Em,” I whisper. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. We’re both private people who happen to have a public life—or, at least, a public-facing career. Don’t say anything yet. Just listen to me.”

Emma sighs.

“Finding the right balance isn’t easy for any couple or family. Let’s be honest. Fame adds a dimension to our reality most people will never need to consider. You worry about me. You worry about the kids. And I understand. More than you think I can.”

Another sigh passes Emma’s lips.

“But we all know who you are—not only me, the kids, too,” I tell her. “You’re my solid ground as much as I am yours. And we’re theirs.”

“I know,” she says. “Maybe I need to hear you say it. This project means more to you

than anything since Off Screen,” she observes.

I nod. “I guess it does,” I reply.

Emma smiles.

“It’s about finding that solid ground,” I tell her. “About the gifts life lays unexpectedly at your feet, and how frightening it can be to embrace the change that goes along with them.”

Emma leans in and kisses me.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“Do I need a reason?”

“Never.”

“I love you so much, Addy.”

“Em?”

“When I read the pilot,” Emma pauses and shakes her head. “I laughed. But I also cried.”

“Why?”

“Because I felt you in it—your wit and your wisdom. And I felt us. Not the way we fell in love or the way we’ve created our life, but the chaos that fills it—the everyday insanity and the struggle for balance. It’s funny because it’s believable. And it has heart.”

“Thanks.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I only told you the truth,” Emma says. “It made me realize I can’t avoid being who I am. For me, that means creating—being on a stage or a set. I?”

“I know,” I say. “So? Do you really think we should consider moving to the East Coast?”

Emma’s smile is bright, loving, and confident. “Yes. I do.”

“It would put us closer to my dad,” I muse.

Emma settles back into my arms and kisses my shoulder.

“You do realize you’ll have to bake a lot more cookies—even if you are working.”

“Well, make sure Emma Rowland’s kitchen has a working oven,” Emma tells me. “I’ll bake cookies while I’m at work.”

I chuckle. “Always looking for solutions.”

“Well, you know, you could learn to make the cookies yourself,” Emma suggests.

“Me? Uh—I don’t think so, Em. The last time I tried that, Vicki told me even the birds couldn’t eat them.”

I feel Emma’s light shaking against me.

“It’s not funny!”

“It’s funny,” Emma says, stretching to kiss me. “I didn’t fall in love with you for your culinary skills.”

“Yeah. It’s a good thing for all of us you have mastered the kitchen. We’d all be 1000 pounds from pizza delivery, Captain Crunch, and Hostess.”

Emma rolls her eyes and kisses my cheek. “You do have a flair for the dramatic, love.”

“Ha-ha. That’s Tam’s department.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I’m not dramatic, Emma.”

“No. Not at all.”

“Em?”

“Go to sleep, Addy.”

“Emma. Do you really think I’m dramatic?”

I feel more than hear Emma’s giggling.

“Emma?”

“Go to sleep, Addy.”

“Dramatic,” I gripe. “Writers are supposed to bedramatic. That’s how actors get work,” I mutter

Emma laughs.

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“Well, it is.”

“Mm-hm. What about actors who also write?” she challenges me.

“You are versatile.”

I’m stunned when Emma climbs on top of me. She raises a brow in the fading light and cups my breast.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Showing you my versatility,” she replies before descending my body like a cat stalking unsuspecting prey.

“Oh, dear God,” I whisper and grab the sheets.

“Let’s see if you can manage to play a role in my silent film,” Emma says.

I bite my lip and hear her chuckle. One thing is for certain: Emma has mastered love scenes. Yep. She’s versatile.

CHAPTER SIX

emma

FRIDAY

When I put my unusually hyperactive kids in the car for school this morning, I considered writing a preemptive apology letter to their teachers. Everyone was excited about Tamara and Christie's arrival. I thought it'd be better not to let the kids in on the surprise that everyone would be waiting for them when they got home from school. Hopefully, if they think they have to wait until after dinner to see everyone, they can sit still for at least a little while. Who am I kidding? I'll be lucky if I don't get a call to pick up Vicki before lunchtime. The thought makes me laugh out loud.

"It's been a while since you had a full house," my mother says.

"Mom, my house is always full."

"Oh, you always have your hands full, I know that. But you know what I mean."

I shrug. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I can tell."

I'm sure most people would think I'm crazy. Our house is about to welcome four extra adults and three more children under ten. By tomorrow, my brother and his family will be with us, too. It doesn't bother me. I enjoy having a house full of people. I will admit a softer decibel level would sometimes be welcome. The great thing about our family is everyone is hands-on. No one abdicates responsibility to help, whether wrangling hyperactive kids, manning the grill, cleaning a scraped knee, or picking up after a meal—everyone pitches in. I admit the prep is a lot of work. Mom and I have been cooking for two days. But Addy and my dad have been a tremendous help in keeping the kids occupied.

Addison peeks into the kitchen. "Hey."

"Hi, love."

“Dad and I are about to take Noah to pick up Hannah. We’ll take them to the pond until it’s time for Vicki to come home.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to be here?” Emma asked. “Dad can handle the kids.”

“Yeah, he can. But given Hannah and Vicki’s excitement, I think an extra pair of hands might help.”

I chuckle. “Probably so.”

My mom chimes in. “I’ll pick Vicki up this afternoon,” she offers. “We can meet you at our house and then you can bring the kids home.”

“Are you sure?” Addison asks.

“Unless Emma needs me to stay,” Mom says.

“No,” I reply. “I think this is the last batch of baking for the day. I plan to take a long, hot bath before the masses arrive.” I look at Addison. “Unless you would rather I go with Dad.”

“No. You stay here and spend some time with Tam and Christie.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:20 pm

“You realize Daniel will want to know where you are?” I ask Addison.

“Daniel will be enthralled with Auntie Emma like he always is.”

I grin. The way children gravitate to different adults always intrigues me. Vicki took to Tamara instantly. Daniel has been the same way with me since he was born.

“And you hate it,” Addison teases me.

I shrug. It's not a secret I delight in the kids' attention and affection. That's another trait Addy and I share. I likely would have become a teacher if I hadn't pursued acting. As much as I love my career, there will never be a role that means more to me than being a mother. I've always had this image of having a family with three children, and I feel incredibly blessed to have been granted my wish. But I would have welcomed the chance for another baby. Before my cancer diagnosis, Addy and I discussed the possibility of adding to our family. Getting pregnant at forty is not as easy as in your thirties. We were both hesitant about trying for another baby, knowing that it could be costly and potentially disappointing. While discussing my treatment options, Addy shared our conversation with my doctor. I love my doctor. She offered the possibility of postponing a total hysterectomy or attempting an egg retrieval but strongly advised the best course of action for a full recovery, with no cancer recurrence, was to proceed with the surgery. There was no debate between Addy and me. I needed to be healthy for our family—for Addy, too. Our reality and our decision about how to confront my cancer, in no small way, allowed us both to reconsider what we wanted to do with our careers. And that has led us to this weekend.

We love having a house full of family and friends and watching our children play with their cousins. That's one reason I hope everyone will be open to creating something together on the East Coast. My brothers' kids are older than our children. My nephews Andrew and Evan adore Vicki, Hannah, and Noah. But they're both preparing for college, and their lives are busy with friends and girlfriends—as it should be. Bringing our children closer to Tam, Christie, Jeff, and Sandra would give them the same opportunity I had growing up—playing, growing up with, and occasionally being annoyed by my siblings and cousins.

Addy's childhood differed dramatically from mine. She was an only child and didn't have many children who lived close to her parents. She has two cousins she still talks to frequently, but both are older. One lives in Florida, and the other is still in Maine. Addy's closest friendships only emerged once she was in college. She had friendships in school, but they didn't endure into her adulthood. While our experiences are nearly opposite, they've landed us on the same page about our family. We have always agreed on the importance of our children having long-lasting relationships.

Addison tips her head, sensing my thoughts have wandered. “Em? Are you sure you want me to go to the pond? I can come home instead.”

I shake my head. “Go on. Just don’t bring home any more tadpoles—please.”

Addy laughs. “Frogs?”

I pick up a dishtowel and throw it at Addy. “Get out of my kitchen.”

Addy chuckles and scampers from the kitchen, calling for Noah to follow her.

I shake my head again and look at my mother, “If she catches anything again, you are keeping it at your house.”

My mother laughs. “Emma?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t mean to pry.”

“But where did I disappear to?”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand.”

“It’s okay, Mom. How about a cup of coffee? I could probably use the jolt,” I say, turning to start the coffee pot.

“I never refuse coffee. You know that,” Mom says. “I have to go easy on the caffeine at home or your father will insist he gets to partake.”

I laugh.

“So don’t tell on me,” she says.

“You agree to free the tadpoles, frogs, toads, and fish Addy catches with the kids today before they make it to my house, and we have a deal.”

“Deal. I hope you realize Evan and Andrew are likely to take the kids to the pond with buckets before the weekend is over. And Noah will have everything they catch named before they make it to your yard.”

“He’s going to become a zookeeper,” I say as I place two mugs on the table and retrieve the milk from the refrigerator. All my children love animals—Noah most of all. He’s constantly bringing me tadpoles, fish, frogs, toads, and bugs. It’s a good thing Addy grew up hiking, fishing, and hunting, and I was raised with two brothers

because Noah finds some of the creepiest creatures you might imagine. And he names every one of them! The only time I've seen Addy cringe was when Noah and I found a garter snake by the pond. I'm not sure I've ever laughed as hard as I did at the shriek that came out of my wife. "Let's hope Noah doesn't find any snakes for Addy."

Mom laughs. "Emmie?"

I sigh as I retrieve the coffee pot and make my way back to the table.

"Is everything okay?" Mom asks.

I pour coffee into our cups, set the pot aside, and take a seat across from my mother. It isn't lost on me how fortunate I am. My mom isn't only kind and generous, she's honest—sometimes, brutally so. She never offers an opinion to be hurtful, and she doesn't give unsolicited advice. But if you ask my mother how she feels about anything or anyone, she will tell you the truth—even if she knows it is not what you want to hear. I detect worry pulling at her eyes.

"Everything is good, Mom, I promise."

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“You’re feeling all right?”

I had thought Addy would have the strongest reaction to the news about my cancer. She was floored and frightened, but Addison remained calm—at least she did outwardly. My mother struggled. She tried to hide it from me, but her hands trembled when I gave her the news. I know she wanted to be my greatest support, but I also understand the mere thought of losing a child is unbearable. My cousin, Rick, died when he was thirty-nine from a rare form of blood cancer. It shook our family. I think the ghosts of her experience linger for my mom.

“Mom, I’m fine. Honestly. Clean bill of health.”

Mom nods.

I reach over and take her hand. There are a few things I still haven’t told my mother. That’s unusual. But I needed time to process everything, and this was one journey I kept as private as I could, turning to Addy for support and comfort—something that has strengthened our marriage more than I might have imagined.

“I never told you this, but a few months before I found out about my cancer, Addy and I talked about having another baby.”

“Oh, Emmie.”

“It’s okay. We hadn’t decided to try.”

“But you wanted to,” Mom says.

“I would have if Addy agreed—yes.”

“Emmie. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I guess I needed to work through my new reality. I’m not even sure we would have chosen that path, Mom. Having the choice taken from me was hard—more than I thought it would be.”

“I can imagine.” Mom sips her coffee silently and then sets down her cup. “There’s something else on your mind,” she says.

“Addy wrote a pilot script for a new series.”

“Would it be presumptuous for me to assume this is something for you?”

“It is,” I reply.

“Missing California?”

“More like I’m missing a part of myself,” I say. “And we all miss Tam and Christie.”

“When do you think you’ll make the move?”

“You don’t seem surprised,” I observe.

“I’m not. I’ve wondered when you two would move back to LA.”

“Well, then, this might surprise you.”

“What?”

“If we make a move, it won’t be back to Los Angeles. It will be to the East Coast.”

Mom flops backward in her chair and stares at me.

“Told you it might surprise you.”

“Where?”

“Well, I don’t know where we would live. I think the show is likely to film in New York.” Seeing my mother’s unspoken questions, I continue. “Christie landed a part on a new series in Boston.”

“Boston?”

“Mm-hm. She’s the lead—a detective.”

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“Are you telling me Tam and Christie are moving to Boston?” Mom asks.

“To the area—yes.”

“Wow. And that’s why you want to make a show in New York?”

“It’s part of the reason. Listen, I’m not even certain it will happen, Mom. We haven’t talked to everyone yet, and we’d still have to pitch it. But I’m confident if Sandra is on board, selling it won’t be an issue.”

“Sandra? Is this a reboot of OffScreen?”

“Hardly. No. This one features a frazzled, closeted, forty-year-old, single, workaholic who finds herself taking custody of her father’s three young children—siblings she never knew existed.”

Mom’s eyebrows arch into her hairline, and she bites her lip to keep from laughing.

“I know!” I chuckle. “If you think hearing me explain it to you is funny, wait until you see it unfold.”

“It sounds to me like this is a part made for you.”

“Oh? What gave it away? It can’t be the closeted part. Frazzled?”

Mom laughs hysterically.

“I guess that answers my question,” I say, joining in the laughter.

“If anyone could create a show about the chaos of raising three kids, it’s you and Addy.”

“Mm. It’s brilliant,” I tell her. “Addy at her best.”

“Better than Off Screen?”

“Different,” I reply. “Warm, sincere, painful, funny—honest.”

“You’re excited about it,” my mom says.

“The moment I read it, I knew it was the part I’d been waiting to play.”

Mom smiles, reaches across the table, and squeezes my hand. “You have a sparkle in your eyes.”

“Do I?”

“Yes—a sparkle I’ve missed seeing this year.”

I sigh. “It hasn’t been easy.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

“And I won’t pretend I’m not terrified. The idea of leaving here—of starting something new in a place where I’ve never lived is?—”

“An adventure,” Mom says. “The best ones always come with a little nail-biting.”

“True. I hope I’m not being selfish. The kids?—”

“Emmie, you are a wonderful mother. Those kids love you and Addy and more importantly, they trust you. They’ll resent you for something—just like you harbor a few grudges with us.”

“I don’t.”

“You do. We all do—just a little. You still cringe when I suggest you wear anything pink—even nail polish. I have it on good authority the reason we never saw you wear pink onOff Screenwas the, and I quote, ‘aversion my mother caused with her obsessive pinkness,’ end quote.”

I laugh. “Addy told you that?”

“Nope.”

“Sandra?”

Mom winks at me. “I’ll hate watching you leave.”

My heart clenches and I look at my hands as they twist a napkin.

“But I will enjoy every moment of watching you take flight again.”

I look up at my mom.

“I’ve enjoyed having you close, Emmie—watching you and Addy with the kids. But you’re both meant for something other than living in rural Kansas. It’s part of you. But it’s only a part. And that’s okay. It’s time for you to fly. Don’t worry so much about the landing. You have someone who will cushion your fall, and the kids have you to catch them.”

“You’ve been expecting this, haven’t you?”

“I can’t claim I expected you to move to New York. But I know you.”

“I still worry.”

“I know you do,” Mom says. “But I think it’s time you accept who you are. To the kids, you’re Mom—you will always be Mom. They’ll be horrified by the attention you get—by hearing someone say their mother is sexy or she’s someone’s crush.”

I chuckle.

“But they’ll also be proud of you. This is their reality. They have two beautiful, talented, and famous women as parents—two women who love each other and love them more than anything. And as they grow, if you’re honest with them, they’ll come to see you as both the mom who raised them and the woman behind her. Just like you do with me. And as much as they will always be your babies, you’ll take pride in the people they become. Just like I do with you.”

“Mom.”

Mom clears her throat, takes the last sip of her coffee, and slides out of her chair.

“Are you leaving?” I ask.

“I have a few things I want to do before your wife and my husband walk through the door with three muddy kids and a bucket full of creatures,” she says, leaning down to kiss my cheek.

I laugh.

“Enjoy your bath,” Mom says.

“Mom?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Emmie.”

“I think Daniel might find a hiding place so he can stay here with Auntie Em,” Tamara says and bursts into laughter. “Your parents didn’t think that through, did they?”

I’d love to believe my parents never shared a laugh over the reality that one day I would become Auntie Em from Kansas. While I’m confident it wasn’t the reason they named me Emma, I’m also sure they’ve enjoyed more than a few jokes at my expense. “At least they didn’t name me Dorothy,” I reply.

Sandra laughs. “Good thing. I’m sure Tam would have bought you a basket instead of a bassinet if they had.”

“Nah. But I would love to see Emma try to put King in her bicycle basket,” Tamara says.

Christie smacks Tamara’s arm.

“What?” Tamara asks.

“Aunt Em?” Daniel asks.

Tamara sniggers.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Daniel?”

“When’s Auntie Addy coming home?”

“Oh, she’ll be here soon, and so will Hannah,” I tell him.

Daniel brightens.

I look over at Brody, who is quite evidently bored with the adult conversation. I can’t say I blame him. I’m sure he hoped Vicki would greet him at the door. “Brody? Why don’t you take Daniel and your sister outside for a little while? Addy will be home soon from picking up Vicki at school.”

Daniel looks at Brody hopefully.

Brody smiles at me. “Sure, Aunt Em.”

Brody beckons the two younger children to follow him outside.

The look on my face must be comical because everyone bursts into laughter. Looking at the smirk on Brody’s face, I see his father staring back at me, and my heart clenches slightly. I miss Dan. I think we all do. He was more than a co-star to me and Sandra. Dan was the love of her life and another big brother to me. I don’t mean to suggest Sandra doesn’t love Jeff. She does. And God knows, Jeff loves her. Jeff has been an amazing father to Brody. It doesn’t stop me from seeing glimpses of Dan in

the way Brody laughs and speaks.

“He sounded just like Dan,” Jeff says with a chuckle.

I watch as Sandra squeezes Jeff’s hand. I have to give Jeff a lot of credit. He’s made every effort to keep Dan alive for Brody, always pointing out things Dan liked or sharing a story about our times together. I’ve had the good fortune to work on two hit series, and both were amazing experiences. But *Off Screen* was unique. We cultivated something special on set—a closeness and kindness that extended to every person who worked with us—something you don’t often. Sandra always says I set that tone. It’s a nice compliment, but it’s hardly accurate. We all set the tone. As much as I’ve been committed to being present for my kids, there’s another reason I’ve never pursued or entertained offers for a regular role in a series. It would be difficult to find another environment like the one we had on *Off Screen*.

“Emma?” Tamara calls for my attention. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry,” I apologize.

“Okay. I’m sure you are waiting for Addy to drop whatever bomb you’ve got on us, but the suspense is killing me!” Tamara says.

“There’s no bomb,” I tell her. “And I should think you would have a clue.”

Tamara’s eyes widen. “You’re going to do it, aren’t you? Addy’s new show.”

I’d prefer to wait for Addison to talk to everyone. Knowing my kids, it’ll likely take Addy half an hour to get everyone into her car to drive the five minutes down the road from my parent’s house. I know she’ll understand. I also think she might be grateful if I broach this subject first.

“I’d like to do the show,” I reply. I catch Sandra’s grin out of the corner of my eye, telling me she’s already brought my idea up to Jeff.

“Wow. So? Back to LA, huh?” Tamara asks.

I sigh. “Actually, Tam, Addy and I think it might be better to set the show in New York.”

It’s not often anything renders Tamara silent. I think her jaw may have dropped through my floor.

“New York?” Christie asks.

I nod. “I expected to talk to all of you about this tonight when Addy was here, and the kids were asleep, and after everyone had a few glasses of wine.”

“Okay?” Christie asks. “There’s more to this, isn’t there?”

“Maybe. That depends on everyone here,” I reply. I look to Sandra for encouragement and receive a wink.

“I know Addy told you she’d hoped to bring Christie and me together on the screen—finally.”

“I would have loved to work together,” Christie says.

“I know. Me too.” I take a deep breath. “There’s a lot to consider, and more to work through.”

A chorus of squeals and screams filters into our living room from the yard. It shouldn’t, but it surprises me when I feel Addy’s hand on my shoulders. She leans

down and kisses my cheek.

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“I guess Em let you in our plans,” Addison says.

I reach up and take Addy’s hand in mine.

“I hope we can talk about it this weekend,” Addy says. “It’s not the reason we asked you to come. The reason we invited you here this weekend is the same reason we want to launch this show. We miss you—all of you.”

I squeeze Addison’s hand.

“Well, I’m game,” Jeff says.

“To move across the country?” Addison asks.

Sandra smiles at me and lifts her gaze to Addison. “Addy, I would go anywhere for the chance to work with Emma again.”

“And I feel the same way,” Jeff says. “Look. We’ve brought some great stories to life as a team.”

“Jeff, you’ve had enormous success without me. You both have,” Addison says.

Addison's words are genuine, not just empty phrases. Jeff was a producer on my first show, *Found*. That’s how we met. He was also responsible for getting *Off Screen* picked up, and he has been part of launching two successful shows on streaming services. Sandra has also made a name for herself, having played a recurring role in a popular sci-fi series and a significant role in a superhero

blockbuster last year. They don't need our help to find work. They've proven themselves in the industry. The truth is we could all have successful careers without working together. We all entered this business because we love it—it's our passion and something that brings us joy and fulfillment. Success looks different for everyone. While winning awards and negotiating lucrative contracts is gratifying, money and fame don't drive any of us. Once you've experienced waking up early every day because you can't wait to get to set and do what you love, it's hard to settle for anything less.

“Maybe so,” Jeff says. “We’ve all been fortunate, Addy—all of us. But it hasn’t been the same with you and Em.”

“Believe me, there’s nothing I want more than for everyone in this room to be part of this project,” Addison says. “I know you might think I wrote it for Em. I did, but it’s more than that. It’s about discovering and creating a family—blending the parts of your family you inherit with the ones you want to share your life.”

I squeeze Addy’s hand again. “I know there’s a lot to work out—and even more for everyone to consider,” I say. “Even if this doesn’t work out, I think we should set our sights on working together again.” I look at Christie. “And getting to work together finally.”

“Hey, you know I’m on board. If you can find a way to make this work with my shooting schedule and contractual obligations, I’m in,” Christie says.

“Just one thing,” Sandra chimes. “Addy shared the nuts and bolts of this with me. How do you think an audience will feel about the three of us in this together? I mean, some people were attached to me and Emma as an on-screen couple, and some were attached to me and Christie.”

Jeff laughs. “It’s gold, honey,” he says. “Trust me on this one. It’s gold.”

“Mom!”

“Well, that lasted longer than I expected,” I joke. “We’re in here!” I call out to Vicki.

Vicki walks into the room and shakes her head.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Can we go to the pond?”

I hear Addison snigger.

“Hannah and Noah already went to the pond today,” I reply.

“Yeah, but me and Brody didn’t. And Daniel wants to see the frogs.”

“What do you say, Addy?” Jeff asks.

“Sure,” Addison replies.

“Count me in,” Tamara says. “I heard Noah found a snake. Addyhatessnakes.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Addison says.

“Noah!” Vicki calls out.

Noah runs into the room, and I giggle. I’m sure all the kids have been waiting in the kitchen for Vicki’s signal.

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Noah offers the room a shy grin and moves in front of my legs.

“Auntie Tam was curious about the snake you found,” I tell him.

Noah turns to Tamara and holds his arms apart. “He wasbig.”

I have to hold back a laugh. The snake was about a foot long, hardly big. Big enough to scare the hell out of Addy, though. I tilt my head to look at her and lose all hope of containing myself. The look of utter horror on her face sends me into a fit of laughter. “It wasn’tthatbig,” I manage to say.

“It was huge!” Addy says.

I double over in the chair.

“It was cute,” Vicki says.

“It was a snake!” Addison argues. “It’s not funny, Emma. Snakesbite.”

Addison makes me giggle. I’m tempted to remind her she’s caught a few things over the years thatbite,from spiders to turtles. Most recently, she cornered an opossum who wandered into our garage. Rather than simply opening the garage door for the little guy to go back outside, Addy designed an elaborate yet harmless trap with one of my mother’s old cat carriers. She argued she should let him go somewhere away from the cars that come and go. I gently reminded her the opossum likely lived close to the house and found his way inside when she came home late and forgot to close the garage. Addy shrugged and grinned. She wanted Noah to be able to see the

opossum up close. If it weren't for King, she probably would have tried to convince me Oscar, the opossum, needed a new home and set out with my father to build him a little opossum condominium. Sometimes, Addy is the biggest kid in my house. It's one reason I love her so much. I swear Noah gets his zookeeper gene from Addy, minus his fascination with snakes.

"Wasn't it a garter snake? That's what Em told me," Tamara says.

"Snake, Tam. Abigsnake," Addison says.

Addy is stunned when I leave my chair and pull her into my arms for a kiss.

"Em?"

"You are adorable sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Addison asks.

Tamara groans. "Oh, my God. You two have been together for over a decade; shouldn't you be more like Archie and Edith by now?"

Addy looks at me lovingly as she addresses Tamara. "I think it's more like a sequel—Hannah in the Middle, maybe?" she offers.

I chuckle. "Just—please—leave the wild animals in the wild."

Addy winks and kisses my cheek. "All right, Meathead, let's get going," she tells Tamara.

Christie and I exchange an amused glance as Tamara grumbles and follows Addison to the kitchen.

Noah looks up at me curiously. “Mommy?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Does Auntie Tam have meat in her head?” Noah asks innocently.

The room bursts into laughter as I pick Noah up and hug him. “No, honey. It’s just Momma’s silly way of telling Auntie Tam she loves her. You can help Tam find some frogs at the pond, okay?”

Noah kisses my cheek. “Okay, Meathead.”

I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help it. Addy will have some explaining to do to Noah about why calling people a meathead is not a great idea. For now, I’m content to accept his innocent endearment. I lower him back to the floor, lean down, and whisper into his ear. “Meathead is a special thing between Momma and Tam, okay?” I tell him.

“But I love you,” he whispers to me.

“And I love you. And do you know what I love more than anything?”

Noah shakes his head.

“Being your Mommy,” I tell him.

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Noah grins. “Okay, Mommy.”

I watch as Vicki takes Noah’s hand, my heart swelling at the sight. Despite her bravado, Vicki is an attentive and gentle big sister.

“Come on, Noah,” Vicki says. “We get a whole weekend with our family.”

I catch Addy’s expression and smile. Listening to our children erases any shred of doubt I’ve carried about pursuing this move.

“We’ll see you in a bit,” Addison promises.

“Emma?” Christie calls to me.

I turn and offer my friends a smile.

“Are you sure you and Addy want to leave here?” Christie asks.

“I’m sure I want to be closer to both of you—if we can make it happen,” I reply.

“Your family is here,” Christie says.

Sandra smiles at me knowingly.

“Only part of our family,” I say. “No matter where we go, we’ll miss someone, and someone will miss us. It isn’t only me and Addy who miss you.”

“No kidding,” Sandra says. “Brody has loads of friends, but he never stops talking about Vicki.”

I take a deep breath. “You know,” I begin. “When Addy and I met, I considered walking away from acting completely.”

Christie doesn’t look surprised, but Sandra appears shocked.

“It’s true,” I say. “Before Addy and I admitted how we felt, I knew I loved her. I was here in Kansas when I learned *Found* was canceled. She’d given me the draft of the pilot for *Off Screen*. It was brilliant. I kept reading it, and I couldn’t deny it any longer—how much I loved her. But I thought it would be selfish of me to bring her into my world. I worried about the attention she’d get because of me, and I feared the blowback from our relationship might hurt her chances of launching a project. After talking to my mom, I decided to fly back to LA and tell Addy I loved her and would give anything to be with her. I’d give up my career if she asked. And I was prepared to walk away from it.”

My mind wanders back to the first time I told Addy I loved her—the first time we made love.

“But the moment I saw her, the moment she looked at me, I knew I would never need to walk away from acting. She was right. Everyone deserves a life out of the spotlight. It wasn’t easy—in fact, sometimes, it still isn’t. I wish I could claim hearing nasty things people say about her or our family doesn’t hurt. It does. But it doesn’t cling to us.” I sigh. “I love being here—we both do, but I think I also wanted to believe I could separate Emma from Emmie—that somehow keeping my family here would erase the unkindness fame can invite. Even if I quit—never returned to a stage or a set, there would be chatter—old or new. I don’t know if we’ll ever strike a perfect balance,” I confess. “But I know we’ve missed you. And God help me, I don’t want to walk away from my career. I don’t need the spotlight, but I also know it’s

likely to shine on all of us again.”

Christie’s known me the longest of any of our friends—almost as long as Addy has known Tam.

“Well,” Christie says, “There isn’t anyone I’d rather share the stage, screen, or spotlight with than the two of you.”

“Same,” Sandra agrees.

I smile. “What do you say we seal it with some wine?”

“Lead on,” Christie says.

“Um, Em?” Sandra asks.

“Yeah?”

“You don’t really think they might bring back a snake, do you?” Sandra asks.

Christie and I look at each other and laugh, knowing they’ll come back with something creepy, crawly, or slimy.

“Em?” Sandra asks again.

“Don’t worry,” Christie says. “Tam talks a good game. Anything slipperier than a frog, and she’ll run with Addy for the hills.”

I laugh. “And that’s alongrun,” I say.

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Sandra shivers. “Frogs?”

I wink at Sandra and continue to laugh. I’ll have to ask Addy to add a frog into one of her scenes. I can’t wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

addy

JUNE3rd

My mom used to tell me time passed more quickly with each year. I don’t think I understood what she meant until I had kids. How is Vicki turning nine today? Nine! It can’t be nine years ago that I heard her cry for the first time. I thought that day would be thebestday of my life. And it was. But I’ve had a lot ofbestdays, more than most people get. They all share one thing in common: Emma. The first time I kissed Emma, the first day on the set ofOff Screen, our wedding day, the night Emma and I both won an Emmy, the day she told me she was pregnant with Vicki, and watching Hannah and Noah born—those were all the best day of my life in some way. But there was something truly magical about the day Vicki was born. Becoming someone’s parent—watching Emma hold Vicki—nothing could have prepared me for what it felt like.

“Addy?”

I turn and sigh.

Emma smiles brightly at me. “She’s nine, honey. You’re not about to walk her down the aisle.”

I groan.

Emma walks to me and puts her arms around my neck. “It has gone by fast, hasn’t it?”

“Pretty soon, she’ll want posters of boy bands on her wall instead of princesses and animals.”

Emma grins, her eyes lighting with affection. “Boy bands?” She kisses me. “You know, she might prefer girl bands.”

I roll my eyes.

Emma laughs. “I think you have a little time, love.”

“That’s just it, Em. We have a littletime. It just keeps going faster. It feels like the other day she wanted to sit in my lap.”

“Addy,” Emma says. “Vicki will always be your little girl, and you will always be her person. Don’t look at me like that. Vicki loves me—she loves us all. You’re her person. I don’t think there’s a force on Earth that could change how Vicki looks at you.” Emma cups my face. “You feel the winds of change. A lot is changing. But it’s going to be wonderful, Addy.”

Emma’s gentle touch soothes me. She knows me better than anyone else does. While I’m excited for our future, change always makes me feel uneasy.

The other day, Emma received a call from her friend Ben Landon, a film director

known for his successful romantic comedies. He wanted to talk to her about his upcoming movie, which has been generating a lot of buzz. It's based on a popular novel and was set to star Monica Lewis and Bryce Cannon. Monica, who starred in a sitcom for eight seasons, has since become one of the biggest names in Hollywood. Unfortunately for Ben, Monica recently broke her leg in a horseback riding accident. He asked Emma if she would be interested in taking over the role. At first, Emma hesitated, but I could tell how much she wanted to say yes. Emma worked with Bryce when we first got together, and they've remained friends ever since. The movie they made was a huge commercial success, which sparked talk of them reuniting on screen. They've tried to find a project, but the timing never seemed to work out until now. The last time someone approached Emma with an opportunity to work with Bryce, we had just learned she was pregnant with Noah. This is a terrific opportunity for Emma, and the part is perfect for her.

She's right—things are changing for us. In two weeks, Emma will leave for Connecticut to begin filming. I'll stay in Kansas until Vicki and Hannah finish school, and then we will join her there. I'd like to think my convincing arguments ultimately persuaded Emma to accept the role, but I believe it was a call from Bryce that sealed the deal. He told Emma that his friend had a home near their filming location that would be available for rent during the summer months—a three-bedroom house by a lake. Knowing she could have the kids close while she worked convinced Emma to take on the project.

“What are you thinking about?” Emma asks.

“You're right.”

Emma grins. “Am I?”

“You don't have to gloat.”

A chuckle passes through Emma's lips. She leans in and kisses me. "It will be wonderful," she says. "It will also get hard and stressful, and we'll have our share of bumps. I know that. But I feel it, Addy."

I nod.

"This is right for us—for our family."

I feel the power of Emma's confidence course through me. She's right—again. This film with Bryce dropped into her lap out of nowhere. Everything seemed to align perfectly. Spending the summer in Connecticut will also give us an opportunity to find a house. Maybe the reason I feel a little nervous is that I want to make this move so badly. It's hard for me to believe it, but I'm more excited about the prospect of launching *Domesticated* than I was *Off Screen*.

Emma senses what I'm thinking. And I think she feels similarly. Sometimes the ghosts of my past creep into my head. I was so excited to start a new adventure when I left for college—scared but hopeful. I looked forward to sharing every part of my journey with my mom. Losing her not long after I left home devastated me. It also created a sense of fear in me of disaster swooping in just when everything seems to be going my way. More than anyone, Emma has helped me navigate those worries. She accepts that we never know what will greet us in the next minute. It's not that Emma doesn't have fears, but she possesses a deep faith—not religion—faith. She puts her trust in me, our marriage, family, friends, and herself. Me? I know I should have more faith in myself. I have faith in her and that our family can endure anything. She would say we've given faith to each other. I do know my love for Emma and our children is bigger than any fear could ever be. Emma has a wonderful way of looking at life.

"Change is inevitable, Addy. It might not always be a happy occasion, but we can always find purpose in it."

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How could I not love Emma? Yes. Our lives are changing again. One thing I am confident about is launching the new show.

Jeff hit the ground running with my pilot for Domesticated. He's developed a terrific pitch deck, and he's already gotten positive feedback—without any formal meetings. The announcement that Emma was taking over Monica's role in this new movie has garnered a lot of excitement. It's like the universe is telling us this is what is meant to happen, and we need to make the leap. The last time I felt an impending change this powerfully was the day Emma spilled her coffee on me.

“Addy?”

“You are right. I feel it, too.”

“I know,” Emma says.

“I was thinking about the best day of my life when you walked in.”

“Oh?”

“Mm. I was thinking how many of those I've had since I met you.”

“Addy.”

“It's true, Em. And I know you're right; things will get messy, too.” I look into Emma's eyes, and the ground beneath me shifts—or maybe it's something inside me clicking firmly into place. I kiss her softly and chuckle.

“What?” she asks.

“It’s a good thing we both love coffee.”

Emma’s roar of laughter filters through the house.

“Ahhheemmm,” Vicki clears her throat.

“Yes?” Emma asks.

“Why are you guys kissing inmyroom?”

Emma winks at me and turns to our daughter.

“Mom! No way. No!”

“Come on,” Emma runs after Vicki. “Come here. I’ll give you a big birthday kiss!”

“Mom!”

I walk into the hallway and shake my head.

“Momma!” Noah calls out through a fit of giggles.

“Save us!” Hannah yells.

Emma must have them all cornered.

“Mom!” Vicki groans, but the delight underneath her protest is evident.

Nine-years-old. I turn back and look at Vicki’s room again. Something tells me we’ll

watch the pictures on the walls change in a different house. I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath.

“Momma!”

I guess it’s time for me to save them—or Emma.

TWO WEEKS LATER

It’s silly. Emma and I have spent weeks apart many times. It never gets easier. I hate kissing her goodbye.

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“I’ll see you in a couple of weeks,” Emma says.

I sigh. “I’m pathetic.”

“No. I hate being apart from you and the kids.”

“I know.”

“But think about the welcome you’ll get in two weeks,” she says.

“Maybe I should see if your mom will come with us to Connecticut,” I say.

“Why?”

“I could meet you in your trailer.”

Emma shakes her head affectionately. “Hoping to slip in between scenes?”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Addison!”

“You said it, not me.”

“You are such a teenage boy sometimes.”

“Em, I think when it comes to you, most people’s inner teenage boy comes out.”

Emma laughs. “You’re in love.”

“Completely. I’ll miss you, Em.”

“I’ll miss you, too. I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Emma?”

Emma holds a finger up to tell her dad to give her a minute. She steps into my arms and kisses me soundly. “Thank you,” she says.

“Why are you thanking me?”

“I think you know. For giving me so many of the best days of my life.”

Emma’s words bring a smile to my lips. I kiss her goodbye and open her car door.

“See you soon,” she says.

I close the door when she slips into her seat, step back, and wave as her dad pulls out of our driveway. Two weeks?

THE NEXT WEEK

Vicki’s forehead wrinkles as she focuses on the baking tray. I join her at the counter, examining the burnt lumps of what should have been cookies. “How come your mom’s cookies always turn out perfect?” I ask, trying not to sound defeated.

Vicki lets out a sigh and shrugs. “I think you left them in too long.”

“But the recipe said ten minutes!” I protest.

She shakes her head. “I dunno. Maybe we should buy some instead.”

My heart sinks at the thought. “No way. I promised to make cookies for the bake sale on the last day of school.”

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“Mom was supposed to make them,” Vicki reminds me. “But she’s not here. Just buy some from the store.”

I stare sadly at the burnt cookies on the counter, feeling defeated. “It’s like that stupid souffle all over again.”

Vicki gives me a confused look. “Huh?”

“Forget it,” I grumble.

“Why don’t you call Grandma?” Vicki suggests with a mischievous glint in her eye. “She makes the best cookies.”

I pick up one of the chocolate chip cookies and try to break it in half, but it’s harder than a rock. Frustrated, I press harder, but it doesn’t budge. Vicki bursts into uproarious laughter, doubling over and holding her sides as tears of amusement stream down her face.

“What on earth is going on in my kitchen?”

I spin around to see Emma standing there with a confused expression.

“Em?”

“Last I checked,” she says as she places her bag on the floor. “Nice to see you, too.”

“Mom! Thank God!” Vicki exclaims.

I grumble under my breath again.

Emma arches a brow at me. “Do I even want to ask?”

“Mom tried to make cookies,” Vicki explains with a smirk.

Emma steps closer and peers over my shoulder at the failed baking attempt on the counter. “I see.”

“Can you make them?” Vicki asks Emma.

“Well, I could if you called Grandma and asked her to bring me some cookie sheets.”

“Okay,” Vicki agrees.

I shake my head and mutter a few curses under my breath.

“It’s no big deal,” Vicki tries to comfort me. “You do other stuff.” She looks up at Emma and smiles. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Mm, happy to save your bake sale, Vicki,” Emma says with a chuckle.

“Me too,” Vicki says as she hugs Emma before leaving the kitchen.

Emma turns back to me and wraps her arms around my neck, kissing me softly.

“Mm,” she hums against my lips. “You sampled the cookie dough.”

“Yeah, if it wasn’t for fear of salmonella, I would have sent a bowl of that to the bake sale instead.”

“Why didn’t you ask Mom to bake?” Emma asks.

I let out a heavy sigh. “Because it always happens like this when I try to do something in the kitchen.”

“Honey, it’s just cookies.”

“No, it’s not,” I say, feeling frustrated.

Emma tries to calm me down. “Okay?”

“When I’m not here, you handle everything the kids need just fine,” I remind her.

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“That’s not true, Addy.”

“Oh yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I suck. This bake sale is a big deal to Vicki. I can’t bake to save my life.”

“Also not true. Remember when you made banana bread a few weeks ago, and everyone loved it? And how many things were you juggling when you tried to do this?”

“A few,” I admit, feeling a little embarrassed.

Emma raises an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, fine. A lot,” I confess. “My cookies never come out right.”

“You haven’t even attempted to bake cookies in ten years,” Emma reminds me. “And you know how it goes. You expect them to burn, so they do.”

“I didn’t manifest the Cookie Massacre, Em,” I say, finally finding a hint of humor in my predicament.

“See? It’s not that bad.”

“I’m glad you’re home. I can’t believe you’re home. Don’t tell me you came just to

save the bake sale?”

“No, but I’m happy to help,” Emma replies.

“I thought we planned to be together in Connecticut this weekend?”

“We will be together in Connecticut this weekend, and we’ll be making the trip as a family.” Emma smiles. “Addy, this isn’t only Vicki’s last day of school for the year. It’s her last day of school in Kansas for the foreseeable future. I would never miss something so important to one of our kids unless it was an emergency. Never.”

“You’re up to something.”

“No,” Emma says. “I did hear from someone last night, though.”

“Oh?”

“You won’t believe me when I tell you.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Don Bellson.”

“Bellson called you?”

Emma nods and I can see a grin beginning to curl her lips.

“What about Don?” Don Bellson worked for the studio, which opted Off Screen. He was a serious pain in my ass at times, but I have to admit, he had great instincts, and most of his ideas improved the show. He accepted a position last year at one of the largest streaming networks that produces original content. I can only think of two

reasons he would call Emma.

“You know he’s a Senior VP at?—”

“I know. What did he want?”

“He wants to fundDomesticated.”

I sit shell-shocked.

“Addy?”

“Domesticatedisn’t really their market, is it?”

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“He thinks it is their market. And he also thinks it will give you a little more freedom with the show.”

Don Bellson and the word freedom in the same sentence makes me chuckle.

“Addy, he was sincere. It’s a different ballgame these days than it was eleven years ago.”

“I know. Do you really think he wants to work with me again?”

“Different dynamic, love. We have to bring our A-game. It’s a season-to-season renewal, and I think he’s looking at 8 to 12 hour-long episodes, not 20 to 22.”

I lean against the counter. “Seriously?”

Emma nods.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Holy shit! Jeff will freak!”

Emma laughs. “He’s going to call you tomorrow.”

“Me? Why not Jeff?”

“Because, Addy, Don has always respected you. You came up with this idea. More than that, he likes you.”

I howl. “He likes you.”

“Yes,” Emma concedes. “But he’s always liked you, Addy. Believe me.”

“You think we should take an offer.”

“I think Don can be a son of a bitch at times,” Emma said. “But he knows the business and doesn’t bet on a project unless he intends to go all-in on it. He’ll help make the show better. I believe that—so do you.”

“And?”

“And I like the idea of limited seasons. It opens a door for Christie. And, Addy? It would be best for our family, too. If you can get an agreement signed, I think you should—yes.”

“Don Bellson,” I muse.

“Mm.”

Suddenly, I feel 100 pounds lighter. “It’s going to happen,” I say.

Emma smiles. She believes it, too.

“I guess that means we’re really moving,” I say.

“I guess so.”

“How do you feel about making this move?”

“It feels a little like when I found out we were having Vicki,” Emma says.

“How so?”

“Exciting, overwhelming, and scary as hell,” she replies.

I laugh.

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“But I know it’ll amazing. I know it.”

I pull Emma to me and kiss her. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Everything, Em.”

Emma caresses my cheek and looks back at the cookie debacle. “I’m just sorry I wasn’t here in time to save them.” She looks back at me with a smirk, and I laugh.

“Aw, what the hell. We’ll keep them.”

“Keep the cookies?” she asks.

“Sure. I’ll have them delivered to Bellson when he pisses me off. At least he won’t get food poisoning. Dentures, maybe.”

Emma silences me with a kiss. “I love you,” she says.

“I love you too, Em. More than anything.”

epilogue: vicki’s view

SIX MONTHS LATER

Things have changed a lot in our family since I turned nine. Like everything. Living

in a new place means answering a lot of questions about my parents. Mom got a part in a movie. It was one of those sappy ones. She was all excited, though, because she got to work with her friend Bryce again. I asked her who would name their kid Bryce Cannon and she laughed. Then she told me that Bryce wasn't so bad. Momma always said she'd name a boy Cornelius. Mom must have threatened to stop making her cookies or something when Noah was born. I told Mom at least Momma didn't choose Yukon. She didn't seem to understand why I said that. She doesn't pay attention to cartoons. Momma loves Rudolph, and she always giggles at Yukon Cornelius. When I explained what I was saying, Mom laughed. She told me that Momma also likes musicals, and then she sat me down to watch Hello, Dolly!

I love watching musicals with Mom. She always sings to them. I told her I think she should play Dolly. She laughed at that, too. I don't know why. She'll be working in New York soon. She could be on Broadway! She can sing and she can dance. She said I have more confidence in her than any Broadway producer. I don't know what she means. I think she'd be great as Dolly. One thing I do know, Momma won't be writing a musical for my mom to star in. She can barely play chopsticks on the piano! When I said that, Mom laughed even harder. She seems to laugh a lot lately. I think she's happy living in our new house. I am, too. I think Hannah was a little sad about leaving Kansas until we got to Connecticut. That's where Mom's filmed her movie. We got to stay in a house on a lake all summer! Auntie Tam and Daniel came and stayed for a few weeks while Momma was in California and Mom was filming. It was awesome! We got to swim every day—unless there was a thunderstorm. King doesn't like those too much, but he loved swimming in the lake with us.

We liked staying at the house so much that Mom and Momma found us a new house on a lake. It's in a town called Brookfield. It's not right on the lake but we can walk there. And Momma said we might get a pool. Mom raised her eyebrow when she heard the word pool, but I think she'll say yes. She loves to swim as much as she likes to sing. And besides, this house has the biggest kitchen I've ever seen! She could probably bake cookies for the whole town! I won't suggest that, though. I'll

keep my orders small—like for my class.

Grandma came to stay with us this week. She stayed in my parents' room. But our new house has something called an in-law apartment. Grandma and Grandpa used it when they visited a few months ago. It even has its own kitchen, so when Grandma and Grandpa are here, she can bake cookies without using Mom's kitchen. Sandra and Jeff stayed there a few weeks ago while they did some house hunting. I hope they move close to us. Tam and Christie found a house in Connecticut, too. It takes a couple of hours to get there, but we don't have to get on a plane! It's really neat and really old. Momma said it's like 200 years old. Noah was excited because it had a pond in the backyard. I told Auntie Tam I'm gonna look for ghosts while Noah looks for frogs. Momma rolled her eyes at me. I know Tam will go ghost hunting with me. She loves all that stuff. Mom heard us and told me I'd better not give Hannah and Noah nightmares.

My moms will be home today. They had some things to do back in California. I was a little jealous because they got to stay in our old house, but Mom said we'd spend our spring vacation there with Tam and Christie. I'll bet that's when they are putting in our pool!

Mom was on a few TV shows with Bryce last week because her new movie is coming out soon. Grandma lets me watch some of the shows Mom is on. Mom talked a lot about the new series she's making with Momma. And I even got to watch them together on one show. Momma said the new show won't start filming until the summer. That way, Mom will be home with us most of the time while we're in school this year. That's probably a good thing because the first year is important. Our new school has a lot of bake sales and events. I love Momma, but she should stick to writing and leave baking to the experts—like Mom and Grandma.

Mom had to leave for Connecticut right after my birthday party in June. I don't know how it all happened. But I guess the lady who was supposed to be in the movie with

Bryce got sick or something, and they asked Mom to take over for her. Momma stayed home with us in Kansas that week. Mom surprised us and came in time for our last day of school. It was a good thing, too, because I needed to bring cookies with me. Momma tried to make them, but they were—well, hard—kind of like the bricks on our new patio. I don't think Mom minded making cookies when she got home, but she did say she might hold a funeral for her baking sheets. I don't think she did, though.

The other night, Grandma let us all watch Mom present an award on TV. I've seen my parents dressed up and going to events loads of times. Hannah and Noah haven't, though—not that they remember. And I don't think Noah has ever seen them on TV. It is kind of weird seeing them all dressed up and hearing people yell their names. They stopped to talk to some guy about Mom's new movie, and he said Mom is sexier now than when she starred in *Off Screen*—that was the first TV show Momma wrote. Momma said, “Emma gets sexier by the day.” I think Mom blushed. I told Grandma it was gross. She laughed.

“You're very lucky,” Grandma said. “You have two beautiful moms who love you more than anything.”

“Yeah, but it's still weird,” I told her.

“I know. It is a little strange to see them that way, isn't it?” she replied.

“How come everyone is taking their picture?” Hannah asked.

Grandma looked at the TV and smiled. “Your parents are special people, Hannah.”

“Cause Mom is in movies?” Hannah asked.

“To a lot of people, that's what makes them special,” Grandma said. “But no. They're

special because they make people feel happy, and as many times as people tell them they're special, they still feel and act like any other mom."

"Yeah," I said. "Like making us clean our rooms. Mom's famous, right? Aren't famous people supposed to pay people to do that sort of stuff?"

Grandma burst out laughing. "I'm sure some do," she said. Then her eyes got all teary.

"Grandma, why are you crying?" Hannah asked.

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“I’m not. I’m just very proud of your mothers.”

“Cause they’re famous?” Hannah asked.

“No.” Grandma sighed and told us all to sit on the couch with her. “You’ll hear a lot of things about your parents,” she said. “Some things you hear will be nice and some will be?—”

“Mean?” I ask.

“Some,” Grandma said. “And some things will make you squirm—like hearing someone call your mom sexy.”

“Weird,” I grumbled.

Grandma chuckles. “You need to always remember those people don’t know your parents. They feel like they know them, but they don’t see your moms when they wake up in the morning to get you ready for school. When they go to work, they pretend to be someone else.”

“Like when Auntie Sandra was a superhero?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” Grandma said.

“But they aren’t making a movie right now,” I reminded Grandma.

“No.”

I lifted my hands. Sometimes, adults make no sense.

Grandma giggled some more. “No, Vicki. When you see them out there dressed up on a red carpet or talking to someone on TV, that’s part of their job. And it’s part of who they’ve become. It might beweirdfor you, but your parents are talented, beautiful women who many people admire. That will never be a bigger part of them than being your moms. Believe me.”

I’ve been thinking about what Grandma said. Mom has talked to us about what she does when she goes to work and what Momma does at her office. But Grandma has never said anything about it until last night. Itiskind of weird seeing them on TV. When I was little, people sometimes came up to my mom to ask her for a picture or for her to sign something. Stuff like that didn’t happen much when we lived in Kansas. Something tells me we’d all better get used to it.

Hannah came into my room last night. I miss Mom and Momma, but I like having Grandma here. Hannah misses Mom—a lot. There’s an art show at our school tonight, and Hannah was worried Mom would miss it. I’m not supposed to know our parents are coming home today. I heard Grandma tell Grandpaon the phone our parents were coming as a surprise. I didn’t tell Hannah. I think she was upset because the art show at school is for the little kids. I don’t know what she made, but Hannahreallywants Mom and Momma to see it.

“Hello—anyone home?”

“Mom!” Hannah yells through the house.

Oh boy, this is gonna getloud.

“Mommy!” Noah screams. Man, that kid has lungs. That’s what Auntie Tam says. He’s a lot like Daniel. Daniel isloud, too. Maybe it’s a boy thing. I don’t know.

I take my time walking into the kitchen. Momma puts Noah down and looks at me.

“Hi,” I say.

Mom and Momma look at each other, and Mom laughs. She’s already figured out that I knew they were coming home. I don’t know how she does that. She has a thing—like she’s psychic or something. Maybe me and Tam should take Mom ghost hunting.

Hannah tugs Mom’s hand. “You can come to school now,” she says.

“To school?” Mom asks. “Do I need a lesson?”

“No! To see my picture,” Hannah says.

“Oh, that’s right.” Mom picks Hannah up and kisses her. “I forgot we live with a famous artist.”

Hannah giggles.

“Can I have a cookie?” Noah asks.

Geez. That kid can eat! His stomach is as big as his lungs!

“Did Grandma make cookies?” Mom asks.

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“I did,” Grandma says from behind me.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Girls,” Grandma says. “How about we let your moms get their coats off and put their bags away? I’ll get you each a cookie.”

“Before dinner?” Hannah asks, still holding on to Mom.

“One,” Grandma says.

“You don’t want to spoil your appetite for pizza,” Momma says.

“We get to have pizza?” Hannah asks.

“We do—to celebrate your first art show,” Mom says. “So, one cookie. We’ll head out for pizza before we go to the school.”

Hannah hugs Mom and then runs to the kitchen table.

“I need to finish my homework,” I tell the room.

“Don’t you want a cookie?” Grandma asks.

“Nah. I’m not hungry.” I can see Mom looking at me curiously. She thinks I’m upset. I’m not upset. But I had a plan. And now, I don’t know how I’m gonna make it happen. I need to think about it.

I go upstairs to my room and close the door. I would call Auntie Tam, but the phone is in the kitchen, and everyone is in there. There's a knock on my door. Mom opens it slightly and peers inside.

"You can come in, Mom."

Mom makes her way to my bed and sits on the edge. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

"I just have homework."

Mom stares at me. I giggle. She reads minds. I know it. Then I huff. "Okay. Here's the thing, Mom."

Mom's eyebrow raises.

"I sort of had a plan," I tell her.

"A plan?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to tell me about this plan?"

"Well, I sort of asked Auntie Tam if she would call and order pizza for dinner."

I have to say, Mom doesn't usually look shocked. She looks like she really did see a ghost. I made Tam promise to keep it a secret. I guess she did.

"Are you telling me you asked Tam to have pizza sent to our house?" Mom asks.

“Yeah. I promised I’d give her my birthday money when she came here next week. Hannah was really sad last night because she thought you wouldn’t be here for her art show. And I know you were supposed to stay at our old house till tomorrow, but I heard Grandma tell Grandpa you’d be here today. I wanted to surprise everyone.”

I could be wrong, but I think Mom is about to cry.

“Vicki, that’s incredibly thoughtful.”

I shrug; here’s the thing about my parents: they never miss the stuff that matters. Like this summer when Mom had to leave to start filming with Bryce. She was supposed to be gone for our last day of school. And it was abigdeal to both me and Hannah. I got an award for my grades and my citizenship, and Hannah graduated from preschool. Mom and Momma explained it was one of those things out of their control. I think Momma almost fell over when Mom walked through the door. It was kind of funny. Momma had burned another batch of cookies. I swear, she should just buy Oreos.

It’s not like I try to hear what the adults talk about. Well, okay, sometimes I do. But most of the time, they’re louder than they think. When we got home from the awards assembly on our last day of school, I heard Mom say she told the director of her movie she would only do it if she could be home for our assembly. My parents always show up. They drive me nuts sometimes, but they give up a lot of things. I know they do. Mom gave up acting for a long time to be with us. I mean, she’s gone away a couple of times, but never for long. Buying a pizza isn’t a big deal. And Hannah is my little sister. This art thing is a big deal for her.

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“It’s no big deal,” I say.

Mom pulls me close and kisses my cheek. “It is a big deal. That money was for you to spend on something you want. That’s a lot to give up.”

“You give up stuff all the time for us,” I tell her. Oh boy, now she’s crying. “Mom,” I groan.

Mom laughs.

Momma steps into the room. “Hey. Everything okay?”

I shrug again.

“Vicki was planning to order pizza for us for dinner with her birthday money.”

Momma smiles. “Is that right?”

She called Auntie Tam. I’d bet my book report on it!

“That’s very generous,” Momma says.

I shrug and hear Mom giggle.

“You don’t need to spend your birthday money on our dinner,” Momma says.

“It’s my birthday money,” I tell her. “You said I should use it for something special.”

Mom looks at Momma and lifts her brow.

“I did,” Momma says. “Okay. Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

I nod.

“All right—if you’re sure, I will let you help pay for dinner.”

“Really?” I ask.

Momma smiles at me. “Really.” She looks back at Mom. “I’m going to hop in the shower.”

“I’ll be right there,” Mom says. She turns back to me. “I’m proud of you, Vicki.”

“It’s just pizza.”

“No, it isn’t,” she says. “You remind me so much of your momma right now.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” Mom kisses me on the cheek again. “I love you, Victoria.”

It’s just pizza. Why does she need to get all mushy?

Mom laughs. “Someday, Vicki, you’ll be sitting with your daughter or son, telling them how much you love them, and they’ll squirm like you put a worm in their pants, too.”

“Mom! Gross!”

Mom laughs harder and gets up to leave my room.

“Mom?”

Mom turns. “Hm?”

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“I love you, too,” I mumble.

Mom winks at me. “I know, Vicki.”

I’m glad when Mom closes my door. Sometimes, I wish I was more like Hannah. She’s always with Mom. I spend more time with Momma whenever everyone is home. But I always know my mom is here. People love my mom. I know they do. They don’t love her more than me.

Another knock on my door. Geez! I said I loved her!

“Come in,” I say.

“Vicki?”

Hannah and Noah are standing at my door.

“I thought you were having cookies?” I ask.

Hannah reaches into her pocket and pulls out a chocolate chip cookie.

“Don’t be sad, Vicki,” Noah says.

I roll my eyes. “Come in here,” I tell them. “Close the door before Grandma realizes you stole another cookie.”

Hannah giggles.

“I’m not sad,” I promise.

Hannah hands me the cookie.

“Thanks,” I say. I break it into three pieces, and Noah grins.

“Come on, we can sit on my bed and play a game until it’s time to leave.”

“Really?” Hannah asks.

Something tells me she’s about to suggest Candyland. God, I hate that game.

“Candyland!” Hannah says.

I knew it. “Okay. Get Candyland.”

My moms can be so weird. They giggled on the way to the pizza place more than Noah does when he finds a worm. It was weird. Then they made mushy eyes at each other while we ate dinner. I’m glad we’re at school now. Maybe they’ll act like normal parents again.

Hannah grabs both of our moms’ hands and pulls them towards some pictures on the wall. “Look!” she says.

I hold Noah’s hand and stand beside Momma. Wow. Hannah is only five, and she can draw better than me. Most of the stuff at this show looks like blobs and stick figures. Hannah’s picture kind of looks like Mom and Momma. Momma is holding a fishing pole—I think that’s what it is. Mom is making cookies. I’m not sure if Mom is making cookies at the pond or if the pond is supposed to be in our kitchen. Noah would love a pond in the kitchen.

“It’s beautiful, Hannah,” Mom says.

Hannah looks up at our parents and grins.

A voice behind us makes everyone turn. “Hello.”

“Oh, Mrs. Morrison,” Mom says.

“I didn’t think I’d see you,” Hannah’s teacher says.

“I wouldn’t miss Hannah’s big night.”

“I’m glad to see you all here,” Mrs. Morrison says. She looks at me. “Hannah tells me you’ve been reading to her.”

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“It’s no big deal,” I say.

“What have you been reading?” Momma asks.

I sigh. “Noah likes the Grover story,” I reply.

“Vicki makes voices like Mom does,” Hannah tells everyone.

Great. Can’t I have any secrets?

“Does she?” Mom asks.

“Yep.”

Noah grins. “Like Grover,” he says. “He’s a monster.” Noah makes claws with his hands and growls.

Momma turns her head. She’s laughing. I know she is. Mom is probably praying Noah doesn’t bring Grover home in a bucket.

“Well, it seems creativity runs in the Blake family,” Mrs. Morrison says.

“So, it would seem,” Mom agrees.

“I know Hannah’s been excited to show you her hard work. I hope to see you again soon,” Hannah’s teacher says before she heads off to talk to some other parents.

I don't think I've ever seen Hannah smile so much as she leans against Mom.

"Excuse me."

I look up to see a woman holding a little boy's hand.

"Hi," Mom says.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Luke is in Hannah's class."

Hannah blushes. Oh, no way! Hannah has a crush on him! Luke waves to Hannah. It's kind of cute.

"Don't be silly," Mom says. She extends her hand. "Emma. This is my wife, Addy."

Now, the woman blushes. Oh, boy. Does she have a crush on Mom?

"Yes, I know," Luke's mom says. "Rachel," she introduces herself.

"Nice to meet you," Momma replies.

And there it is! Rachel's face looks like a plum. No way! I think she has a crush on Momma! Mom grins. She thinks so, too.

"Vicki!"

I spin around. Leo. Leo sits two desks away from me in class. "Hi, Leo," I say.

"Hi."

"How come you're here?" I ask.

Leo points in the distance. “My little brother is in first grade.”

I nod.

Momma clears her throat. “Do you want to introduce us to your friend?”

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“Oh. Right. Sure. Leo,” I say. “These are my parents. This is Leo. He’s in my class.”

“Hello, Leo.”

Leo looks at my mom. “Hi. You’re Vicki’s mom?”

Mom smiles. “I think so,” she teases him.

“Cool. My dad likes you. That’s what my mom says.”

I want to smack my head.

Momma bites her lip to keep from laughing.

“Everyone likes my mom,” Hannah says.

She doesn’t get it. I get it.

“Oh—I’m sorry,” a woman says. This must be Leo’s mom. She looks terrified or embarrassed. Maybe both.

“Leo.” She says it like Mom says my name when she wants me to be quiet.

Mom holds out her hand. “Emma,” she introduces herself.

“Oh, yes. Um. Linda—Leo’s mom. He talks about Vicki all the time.”

I look at Leo. I wonder if he likes me the way his dad likes Mom. Weird.

“I am sorry to bother you,” Leo’s Mom says.

“Please,” Mom says. “Don’t be sorry.”

“I’m sure the last thing you want is people bothering you, Ms. Bronson.”

I watch Mom take a deep breath. “Linda,” she says. “It’s Emma. Just Emma.” She looks down at Leo. “Or Mrs. Blake.”

“Please don’t worry about talking to us,” Momma says. They’ve been through this before. I can tell.

Leo’s mom nods. “It’s—we’ve never had anyone who’s?”

“Famous?” I ask.

Everyone looks at me.

“What?” I ask. “We all know you’re famous, Mom. Geez.”

Mom chuckles.

I look at Leo’s mother. “Don’t worry,” I tell her. “Momma will probably burn cookies for a bake sale, and Mom forgot it was her day once for carpool last year.”

“Vicki!” Momma says. She’s not mad, though. I know because she starts laughing, and so does Mom.

“And now, you have the real exposé,” Mom says.

They all start laughing. I don't know why that's funny. Parents can be so weird.

"Did you see the cool Lego rocket?" Leo asks me.

I shake my head.

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“Mr. Danforth made it!”

Mr. Danforth is a fifth-grade teacher. All the kids think he’s cool. He was like an engineer or an astronaut or something. I don’t know. That’s what I heard. I think he helped build a real rocket.

“Want to go see it?” Leo asks.

I look at my parents.

“Go ahead,” Momma says. “We’ll catch up.”

I look back at my parents when we reach the other side of the gym. They’re laughing with a group of people. Noah is spinning around, and Hannah is clinging to Mom. It feels likehome.

“Your moms are nice,” Leo says.

I turn to him and smile. “They’re okay,” I say. I look back, and Momma smiles at me. I won’t tell anyone this, but they’re alot better than okay. They’re the best, and no matter how many people love them, they’re mine.

The End