



The Widower's Nanny

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: A Single Dad. A Sassy Nanny. A Forbidden Kiss.

My new boss, Preston, is not thrilled I'm here.

If it weren't for his mom hiring me, I wouldn't be here at all.

He's grumpy with a tough exterior.

But his sweet daughter, Lilly, makes his stubbornness all worth it.

While stuck in a cabin on a stormy day—lines blur between employee and companion.

Preston's walls crumble, revealing his true heart.

And I'm falling fast.

The touch of his hand ignites a spark.

Our secrets spill under stormy skies.

But I'm at a crossroads, torn between a safe path and a future I didn't know I wanted.

Whichever direction I choose, I see heartbreak.

The Widower's Nanny only contains sweet kisses and is free from profanity. This standalone novel promises a satisfying conclusion (no cliffhangers) and a heartwarming happily ever after.

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Rachel

I arrive at Preston Michaelson's country estate and am amazed. His mother, Bea, who hired me, called it his "little country home." The little home has two stories, a garage with six doors, a pool with a pool house bigger than my old apartment, and I believe I can see tennis courts beyond the pool. The guesthouse, which will be my new home, sits on the other side of the garage. It's a beautiful cottage surrounded by flower beds and a bright green lawn.

Bea comes out the front door as I park outside the white fence surrounding the equally manicured front yard, with its own overflowing flower beds. An adorable blonde girl runs through the door after Bea, passes her by, and comes up to the fence.

She waves and gives me a smile with a missing front tooth. "Hi."

I smile at her. "Hi. You must be Lilly."

She nods. "Are you my new nanny?"

"Yes, I'm Rachel. It's very nice to meet you, Lilly."

Bea comes up behind her granddaughter and pats her head. "She's been very anxious to meet you." Bea opens the gate. "Come in. Let me show you around."

Bea hired me after an interview and an extensive vetting process. I hadn't met Mr.

Michaelson yet.

She spends the next hour giving me a tour of the house and the grounds, and she tells me the property has been in the family for years. She and her late husband had only used it as a getaway spot. But three years ago, Preston had decided to move there. She'd come along to help him with Lilly.

I meet Laura, the cook, and Mrs. Cartwright, the housekeeper. Laura is friendly and welcoming, but she seems a little distracted and perhaps accident-prone, with her three bandaged fingers.

Mrs. Cartwright, on the other hand, is a bit stern, and I feel like she considers me a nuisance she'll have to deal with. We then go out to meet Benjy, the groundskeeper, who also maintains the pool and the tennis courts. He is very nice, and he is obviously enamored with Lilly. When he asks her if she wants to help him feed the koi in the pond, she runs off with him.

Bea watches them for a moment with a touch of sadness in her eyes.

I touch her arm. "You're going to miss her, aren't you?"

"More than you know." She sighs and turns toward the guesthouse. "But it can't be helped. They say the country air is good for your health. But in my case, it hasn't been."

"I'm sorry. I hope it's nothing serious."

"Nothing time in the city can't cure."

I follow her to the guesthouse. As we follow the path to the front door, I can smell all the wonderful flowers. I've never been a live-in nanny before, so I don't know quite

what to expect. When we go inside, I am even more impressed. It is warm and inviting with cozy furniture, a kitchen in the corner, and a separate bedroom with a bath.

I smile at Bea. “This is wonderful.”

“I’m glad someone will finally get a chance to enjoy it. I had Mrs. Cartwright do a thorough cleaning, and she’ll do a weekly cleaning on whatever day you arrange with her.”

“Thank you. I’m sure she has better things to do. I can keep it up myself.” I look around the spotless room.

“I’m afraid Mrs. Cartwright will insist. She’s quite particular about how things are done. I hope you’re okay with that. She’s a bit difficult, but she’s been with the family for years.”

Has everyone been with the family for years? I guess that is a good sign.

“Not a problem. I’ll set up a day and time that works for her.”

Lilly returns from the koi pond with Benjy. For the next few hours, Bea, Lilly, and I spend time together, and when it seems Bea feels we’d be fine left alone, she prepares to leave. I can tell it is difficult for her. And after she said goodbye to Lilly, I walk her to her car.

She dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief. “As you can see, my granddaughter is a charmer. She won’t give you too much trouble. But she’s adventurous and fearless so keep a close eye on her.”

“I will.”

Back in control of her emotions, she stashes the handkerchief in her purse. “My son will be here around six.” She is quiet for a moment. “I need to tell you that he’s not too keen on the idea of a nanny. He’s very upset that I had to pass the job onto someone else.”

“I’m sure. I hope I can win him over.”

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She laughs. “That will be quite a task.” She gets into her car. “Good luck, Rachel.”

Good luck?

I watch her drive away while I consider what that might mean, then I go find Lilly. She is in the kitchen with Laura, helping her make cookies.

Lilly smiles at me while she stirs a large ceramic bowl with a big wooden spoon. She is wearing an apron with the words “Cook’s Helper” embroidered on it. “We’re making chocolate chip cookies.”

“Yum. My favorite.” I tell her.

Laura goes to the stove to pull out a sheet of cookies and lets out a yipe. She sets the cookie sheet on the stovetop and runs her hand under some cold water.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh yes, I’m fine.” She examines her new burn, then smiles at me as she dries her hands. “I’ve got the little miss for a while if you want to go make yourself at home and get a feel for the place. There’s a lot to take in.”

“Thank you. I think I’ll do that.”

I wander around the yard, checking out the many flower beds and trying to identify the flowers. Everything on the property seems to be in pristine shape. It is lovely, and I am excited to be here. This is going to be a great change of pace for me. I loved the

family I worked for in the city, but I love being in the country. It reminds me of the summers I would spend riding horses with my grandma and grandpa, although this is much bigger than their cozy farmhouse.

Lilly seems like an angel. Everyone is friendly, except for Mrs. Cartwright. But apparently, her grumpy nature isn't just for me. The last hurdle will be Mr. Michaelson. Bea had wished me good luck. I guess I'll see soon enough what she meant by that.

When I hear a noise coming from behind the house, I peek around the corner. There is a man there with his back to me. He is holding a big box, and he isn't anyone I've been introduced to. He doesn't look like a delivery man; even if he was, he wouldn't be delivering to the back porch. I look at the pile of firewood next to me and pick up a piece, then approach him from behind. Just in case.

"Excuse me?"

He turns around and nearly drops the box. "Who are you?"

I am briefly taken aback by the tall man with dark hair and gray eyes. He can't possibly be there to cause trouble. "I'd like to ask you the same question. What are you doing on the Michaelson's back porch?"

He sets the box down and studies me for a moment. "You mean my back porch?"

Oh no. "Your back porch?"

"Why don't you put the weapon down, Miss...?"

I look at the piece of firewood in my hands, then set it down. "Sorry."

He folds his arms across his chest. “Who are you?”

“I’m Rachel Flynn. If this is your porch, then you’re Mr. Michaelson, and I’m your new nanny. I’m also really sorry about the firewood and I hope you don’t fire me. This is my first day...and we’re in the country...and, well, I thought maybe you were an intruder.”

He scowls at me. “I look like an intruder to you?”

I shrug. “Well, not now.”

“And just what were you planning on doing with the firewood? If I were an intruder, I highly doubt that would stop me. More than likely, it’d just annoy me.”

“I was just...” I take a breath. “Can we start over?”

The box he set down moves, and we both look at it. He opens the top and pulls out a fluffy, white puppy.

“I’m Preston Michaelson.” He holds up the dog. “And this is for my daughter, Lilly. I thought it might help make the transition easier.”

The puppy is so adorable! And the man holding the puppy isn’t so bad himself. I notice my gaze is lingering a little too long. Get it together, Rachel. “Transition?”

“My mother has been taking care of Lilly since she was two.”

“Oh. Of course. Well, if it’s any consolation, Lilly seems to like me well enough. Even though it’s only been a couple of hours.” The puppy wiggles in his hands and tries to lick him. “The puppy is very cute though, and I’m sure she’ll love it.”

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He runs a hand down the puppy's back. "I'm glad you approve." His tone is laced with sarcasm.

"I didn't mean it like that."

He takes a moment, in which he relaxes his posture. "Where is Lilly?"

"She's with Laura in the kitchen. Do you want me to go get her?"

"If you don't mind."

I nod and go up the stairs onto the porch, then pass him, resisting the urge to pet the puppy. I glance at him. "I'll be right back."

I find Lilly in the kitchen eating a fresh-baked cookie. I smile at her. "Can I show you something on the porch?"

"Do you want a cookie?"

"Maybe later. Come on. I promise it's worth leaving the cookies for."

Lilly pops the last bite of cookie into her mouth, then jumps down from the stool she is perched on. I take her hand and walk out the door leading to the back porch.

When she spots her father, Lilly squeals and runs to him. He picks her up and hugs her.

She leans back and puts her hands on either side of his face. “You’re here in the middle of the day.”

“Yes, I am.” He kisses her, then sets her down. “And I brought you something.”

“In this box?”

He nods. “Open it up.”

Lilly slowly opens the flap to the box, then gasps and instantly starts crying. She looks up at Preston and whispers, “It’s a puppy.”

He smiles, which completely changes my first impression of him. “Yes, it is.”

She wipes at her tears. “Can I hold it?”

Preston lifts the dog from the box and hands it to her. Lilly buries her face in the puppy’s neck, then kisses it repeatedly on the nose. Tears well up in my eyes as I watch her face light up with excitement and her smile widen so that her cheeks almost can’t contain it. Then, I feel the weight of Preston’s eyes on me.

I nod at him and give him a thumbs up.

He raises an eyebrow, then returns his attention to Lilly. “So, I take it you like her?”

She looks up at him. “I love her. What’s her name?”

“That’s up to you. Whatever you want.”

Lilly turns toward me. “Look what my daddy brought me.”

“She’s so cute, Lilly.”

She kisses the puppy again. “I don’t know what to call her.”

Preston pats her head. “It’s okay. Take your time. You’ll come up with something perfect.”

Lilly nods. “I love her. Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Lilly carries the puppy over to me. “Do you want to hold her?”

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“Maybe for a minute, if you don’t mind.”

She holds the puppy up and I take it from her. The puppy looks at me, and I smile.

“You are one cute puppy. And I think you’re going to be loved a lot.”

I snuggle the puppy for a moment, then give her back to Lilly. She looks at Preston.

“Can I go show her to everyone?”

“Of course. Then bring her back outside to go potty.”

Lilly nods and heads into the house. I look at Preston. “Seems like the puppy’s a hit.”

“She’s been wanting one for a while. Unfortunately, some of her care will fall onto you when Lilly starts school in the fall.”

“That’s fine. I love dogs.”

“Good.” He sets the box aside. “I’ve got some things in the car for the dog, so I need to go get them.”

“Do you need help?”

“Um...sure. That’d be nice. Thank you.”

I follow him off the porch and around the house to his very nice car. He opens the trunk, which is full of dog supplies. He hands me the pink, furry bed and a bag of

toys. Then he picks up a bag of puppy chow and another two plastic bags.

“I like to be prepared.”

“I see that.”

He closes the trunk, and we go into the house through the front door.

We set everything in the living room, then he turns to me.

“I guess we got off on the wrong foot.” He offers his hand. “Preston Michaelson.”

I reach forward and feel the warmth of his hand in mine. A soft, yet firm, handshake.

“Rachel Flynn. Nice to meet you.”

He takes a few steps back. “My mother called me after she left today.”

I smile. “I hope it was to say she found me charming and up to the task.”

He doesn’t return my smile. “She said she approved of you.”

“Oh. That’s good...right?”

He nods. “We’ll see.” He leaves me to find Lilly and take the dog outside.

I watch him go. Hmm. Not a barrel of laughs, I see.

2

Preston

As I sit on the porch, I watch Lilly play with the puppy on the front lawn and think about Rachel. I don't like the idea of having a nanny, but my mother could no longer do it. I had visions of Lilly being a lot more upset that her grandmother is no longer living with us but she seems fine. Maybe the finality of it all hasn't sunk in yet. Or maybe, as I'd hoped, the puppy is a good distraction.

I think about Rachel standing below the porch, armed with a piece of firewood. I'm not sure why, or how, I managed to notice how attractive she was at that moment, but I did. Her big hazel eyes drew me in with every glance. And her auburn hair seemed to catch the sunlight just right, giving it a fiery glow. I guess the fact she jumped into protector mode so quickly is a good sign. Although it was a little extreme.

"Dad?"

"Yes, bug?"

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“Is Rachel going to live in the house with us?”

“No. Rachel is going to live in the guesthouse.”

“But she’s going to be here all the time?”

“Yes. Is that okay with you?”

She nods enthusiastically. “Yes. I like her. She’s pretty. And she’s funny. And we played a game, and she didn’t let me win. Grandma always let me win.”

“What game was this?”

“Checkers. I almost beat her. But I didn’t. And it was really cool. Because I knew she was trying to win and not...coddling me.”

“Coddling you? Where’d you learn that term?”

“I heard Mrs. Cartwright say it to Grandma. She said, ‘you can’t keep coddling that child or she’ll end up as spoiled as her father.’”

I frown. “Um... Mrs. Cartwright is a little...”

“Are you spoiled, Daddy?”

I think about it for a moment. I certainly was as a younger man. But time and life have taught me that the world doesn’t revolve around me. Losing my wife gave me a

new perspective.

“I hope not.”

She smiles at me. “I don’t think you are. I think you’re perfect.”

“Thank you. And I’m glad you like Rachel. Maybe next time you’ll beat her at checkers.”

Well, that’s two votes for Rachel. I still haven’t made up my mind.

Lilly is sitting under the big maple tree in the yard with the puppy in her lap. I go to them and kneel beside her.

She smiles at me. “I love my puppy.”

“I’m glad, ladybug.” I kiss the top of her head. “So, what should we name her?”

She takes a long dramatic sigh. “I think I’ll call her…Cutie Pie.” She nods, then looks at me. “No wait. Precious.” She thinks about it. “No. Sugar. Because she’s sweet as candy.”

“Sugar?”

“Yeah. Is that a good name?”

I take the dog from her and hold it up so I can look into her eyes. “I think that is a perfect name.” I hand the dog back to her.

“Can she sleep in my room?”

“Well, for now, until Sugar is house-trained, she’ll need to sleep in the kitchen.”

“Aww.” Her shoulders slump, and she lowers her head.

“It won’t take long. Once she sleeps through the night, she can sleep in your room. But not on the bed.”

“She has to sleep on the floor?”

“She has a very fancy dog bed to sleep in. She’ll be fine.”

She runs a hand over Sugar’s back. “Okay. I guess.”

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“I think it’s about time for dinner, bug.”

“Can Sugar come in the house?”

“Of course. Let’s show her the new bed. I bet she’s worn out from all the love you’ve been giving her.”

Lilly nods. “I have loved her a lot already.”

I smile. “Yes, you have.”

After getting Sugar settled into her bed in the corner of the kitchen, we go to the dining room. I glance at Laura when she comes in with three bowls of soup.

“Where’s Miss Flynn?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’ll track her down.”

Rachel comes into the dining room a few minutes later. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know I was expected at dinner.”

“Did you have other plans?”

“No, ofcourse not.” She sits down in front of the third bowl of soup. “Mmm. This looks delicious. Better than the sandwich I was going to make for myself.”

“You’ll eat dinner with us and get Lilly ready for bed, then you’ll be free for the

evening.”

“Okay.”

“You can make your own breakfast. Just be here by eight. That’s when I leave for work. Laura will see that the two of you get lunch.”

“Got it.” She nods.

I busy myself with my soup and Lilly picks up the conversation.

“Rachel, guess what I named the puppy.”

“Um...hmm. Let me think. Fluffy?”

She giggles. “No.”

“Cupcake?”

“Nope, I named her Sugar!” Lilly exclaims.

“Well, that’s perfect. I love it.”

“Because she’s so sweet.”

I clear my throat. “Lilly. A little less talking and a little more eating.”

She frowns at her soup. “But I don’t like this red soup.”

“It’s tomato soup.”

“I don’t like tomato soup, either.”

I glance at Rachel, who is holding back a smile. “Eat a few bites, please. You don’t have to finish it. Then you can eat your crackers.”

Lilly eats two small bites, then pushes the bowl toward the center of the table. I guess, technically, she did what I asked.

Rachel eats a spoonful of soup. “I love red soup.”

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Lilly giggles and eats a cracker.

The remainder of dinner is a bit awkward. I'm not used to having a complete stranger in my home. And definitely not the attractive, female kind either. But Lilly helps keep the atmosphere light and playful. When we finish dessert, I ask Rachel to come into my office for a few minutes.

"Of course. Let me get Lilly situated in her room and I'll be right there."

I leave the table and head for my office. I need to get a few things straight with Miss Flynn.

The room is less like an office and more like a den or library. The home had belonged to my grandfather and he was an avid reader. He had massive bookshelves on two of the walls and they were still filled with his books. I'd never be able to read them all. But he always claimed he'd read most of them.

Knock Knock.

"Come in."

The door is partially ajar. She gently pushes it the rest of the way before entering into the room.

"Have a seat."

She sits on the chair in front of my desk. "Am I in trouble already? I feel really bad

about the suspected intruder incident.”

“You’re not in trouble. I just want to talk about a few things.”

“Okay.” She clasps her hands in her lap and cocks her head at me. Once again I notice her auburn hair and angelic face. Her appearance is in contrast to her somewhat feisty attitude. She definitely isn’t intimidated by me.

“My mother might have told you that I’m not completely on board with the thought of having a nanny for Lilly.”

“She did mention you weren’t too happy she had to move back to the city.”

I sigh. “It couldn’t be helped. She has some health issues and we’re a ways out for her to get regular care.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“The other issue I have is the fact that you’re...so young.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I’m not that young.”

“Right. I know. What I meant was...when she mentioned hiring someone for me, I pictured someone older. More...”

“Matronly? A spinster perhaps?”

I can’t help but smile. “Do you really think it’s wise to mock your new boss?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not mocking you. I should’ve said grandmotherly.”

“Yes, more like that.”

She cocks her head again. “Why does it matter? Certainly someone of my young age can better keep up with Lilly’s enthusiasm.”

I point at her. “Fair point.” I lean back in my chair. “I assume Mom went over the schedule and what’s required of you on a daily basis?”

“Yes. Monday through Friday, eight to eight. You like to spend the weekends with her. It’s your one-on-one time.”

“Correct. The weekends are important to me.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“As is the couple of hours between dinner and bath time.”

“I will make myself scarce during that time.”

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“Thank you. I’d appreciate it.” I swivel back and forth in my chair. “Is the guesthouse satisfactory?”

“Yes, it’s lovely. Thank you. It’s nicer than any apartment I’ve ever had.”

“Okay, then. Good. I guess that’s it. Unless you have any questions.”

She moves to the edge of her chair. “Just one. Mrs. Cartwright. She’s...”

I wave a hand at her. “Don’t worry about her. She’s been temperamental for as long as I can remember. It’s nothing personal.”

“Your mother said she’s been with the family for a while.”

“Yes. She was actually my nanny until I was five. Then, apparently, I was too much for her to handle. She became the housekeeper, and I was given a new nanny. His name was Ted. He was great and I still keep in touch with him.”

“That’s very sweet. I’d love to think that in twenty years or so, Lilly will stay in touch with me.”

“I guess time will tell. So...” I stand, giving her the cue that the meeting was over.

She gets to her feet. “I’ll come get Lilly at seven-thirty when it’s time for her bath.”

“Thank you.”

I watch Rachel as she leaves the room. There is a rhythm to the way she moves. Like she is walking to a song in her head. I shake my head. I should've insisted on a spinster who walked slow and deliberate. With a cane, perhaps.

I spend some time with Lilly until Rachel comes to give her a bath. Then I go back to my office to do a little work. When I hear singing that doesn't sound like any music Lilly listens to, I get up to investigate. The singing is coming from the bathroom. I stop outside the door.

The song is about mermaids on an adventure to find pearls deep in the ocean. It's Rachel. She's really good too. Her voice is beautiful and enchanting. I am amazed.

I hear Lilly clap. "Sing some more."

"Okay, but then it's time to wash your hair."

I quietly step back and go back to my office. That was a surprise, a pleasant surprise. I sit at my desk as the phone rings.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, honey. What do you think about Rachel?"

"Um...too soon to tell."

"You need to give her a chance."

"I know. I am." I look at the clock on the wall. "It's been five hours, Mom."

"Alright, but you need to be nice to her."

“I’m always nice.” When she doesn’t respond, I add, “I’m nice most of the time.”

“She’s going to be good for Lilly. You’ll see.”

“How’d you find her, anyway?”

“Through an agency. Don’t worry, she’s been vetted. She worked for a friend of the Parkers for two years until they moved to France.”

“Okay. I trust you did your due diligence before bringing her into my home.”

“She’s a lovely girl, Pres. Give her a chance.”

I end the call and lean back in my chair. A lovely girl. That, I noticed.

3

Rachel

Since my first day fell on Friday, I have the weekend to get settled into the guesthouse. Preston had made it clear he likes to have the weekends with Lilly. So I am free to do what I want. I really don't have anything to do, so I sleep in and it felt good. That is until I am awoken by a knock on my door.

I put a long cardigan sweater on over my T-shirt and pajama pants, then went to the door and call through it. "Who is it?"

"It's Preston."

Interesting. Why is he knocking on my door on a Saturday morning? Perhaps something came up, and he needs me. Open the door and find out.

I run a hand through my hair, then pull the sweater closed and open the door a few inches. "Hey."

He takes a step back. "I woke you."

"It's okay. Is something wrong?"

"Um...yes. It's Lilly."

"Is she alright?"

He clears his throat. “She insists you come with us today on our outing.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t want to intrude on your weekend time.”

“I agree with you on that, but she’s currently having a bit of a breakdown over it. I don’t generally give into her when she goes full Carrie on me.”

I smile. “Is she moving things with her mind?”

He laughs. “No. Maybe that was a bad analogy.”

“Well, good. Otherwise, I’d need to ask for more money.”

My comment stops him for a moment. “I’d appreciate it if you’d consider coming. I think it’s finally sinking in that her grandmother isn’t here, and she’s formed quite an attachment to you already.”

“Of course. Um...what type of outing are we talking about?”

“Hiking to the creek. It’s about a half-mile. Picnic lunch. Catching various creepy-crawlies.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’d love to come. As long as you’re okay with it.”

“It’s fine. You don’t mind the creepy-crawly aspect?”

I laugh. “Anything but snakes. I just need some time to get ready.”

“Will an hour work?”

“That’s perfect.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll see you in an hour.”

I close the door.Okay. I’m spending the day with Lilly and her very good-looking dad. I can do this.I am having trouble picturing Preston catching bugs and playing in the creek. But maybe he’ll surprise me.

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I get dressed in jean shorts and a T-shirt, and I put my hair in two braids. I'm comfortable and ready for whatever this adventure brings. I eat a quick breakfast, then leave the guesthouse. Preston and Lilly are on the front porch of the main house, and when she sees me, she runs down the steps and across the yard to me, a beaming smile on her face.

"Rachel. You're coming!"

"Yes, sweetheart. Thanks for inviting me." She is holding Sugar, and I give the puppy a pet.

"Sugar is coming with us, too."

"Awesome."

Preston comes down off the porch in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, not looking anything like the businessman I'd met yesterday. My eyes trace his physique, noticing the not-so-subtle contours of his muscles beneath his T-shirt. He must spend some time on those tennis courts or in the pool. He doesn't see me ogling him, does he?

I quickly shift my eyes to his. It seems he is scanning me as well, though I'm not sure. He looks away quickly. It's probably the braids, they make me look like I'm sixteen. Not the best way to prove to Preston that I'm an adult.

He glances back at me. "So, are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

He slips on a backpack. “Okay, let’s go.”

He heads across the yard toward an open field beyond the house. I fall in step beside him while Lilly runs ahead about ten feet with Sugar at her heels. The puppy tries to keep up with her but has to stop every few feet to sniff something or bark at noises and shadows.

Preston glances at me. “It’s an easy hike. Mostly flat. Shady. About a half-mile to the creek.”

“No problem.”

We walk on in silence and I can’t tell if he is unhappy I am with them or if he just isn’t used to holding conversations with people outside of his business world. I conclude it’s probably both. It’s fine though. I’m not used to holding conversations with wealthy businessmen. Cute or not.

About twenty minutes later, I can hear water rushing, and Lilly turns around and smiles at Preston. “Can I go ahead to the creek?”

“Yes. Just don’t go near the water until I get there.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He glances at me. “She loves the water.”

“It seems you have an outdoorsy girl.”

“Yeah. Not sure how that happened. She lived in the city until three years ago.”

“She’s very happy out here.”

“That’s all that matters to me. I have an hour commute every day, but it’s worth it to see her embracing country life.”

“She’s a lucky girl.”

“How do you figure?”

“She has a dad who puts her happiness first.”

He sighs. “I try. But I’ve made my fair share of mistakes.”

I smile at him. “We all do. Nobody’s perfect.”

He nods as we reach the creek. Lilly is standing as close as she can to the creek without being accused of getting too close. She looks at Preston and he waves at her.

“Go ahead.” She runs to the edge of the water and starts picking up rocks. “Pace yourself with the rock collecting. I don’t want to be hauling too many of them back to the house.”

Sugar finds a shady spot and lays down to rest. A half-mile hike for her is a momentous undertaking. Preston removes his backpack and goes to the water next to Lilly. She shows him her collection of rocks and he admires each one like it’s the best rock he’s ever seen. I am beginning to see another side of Preston Michaelson. And I like it.

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I give them a few minutes alone, then join them. We spend the next thirty minutes finding the best rocks along that section of the creek. Preston told her she had to limit it to ten. So she keeps switching them out until she finds ten perfect rocks. He puts them in the backpack for her.

“Can I get in the water now?”

“Yes. Just stay close to shore. No deeper than your knees.”

She nods and steps into the water with a squeal. “It’s cold!”

“I imagine it is.” He sits down on a tree stump and watches her.

I go to the water’s edge. “Can I come in there with you?”

She grins. “Yes, I’m looking for crawdads.”

“Ohh, nice. Where do you find them?”

“They like to hide under the rocks.”

I wade into the water and we turn over several rocks but don’t find any crawdads. When she goes to a big rock, she scowls at it. “I bet they’re under there.”

“Hmm. That’s a big rock. It looks like a good spot, though.”

She looks at me. “Can you move it?”

“Um...I’ll try.”

I bend down and put my hands under the rock. It’s slippery and heavy, but I really want to move it for her. I give it a concentrated effort and lose my balance. The next thing I know, I am sitting in the cold water.

Preston jumps up and runs over to me. “Are you okay?”

I look up at him. “I’m sitting in a creek.”

He grins. “Yes, you are.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Hmm. It kind of is.”

I splash some water toward him, which he dodges, but then he steps into the water and holds his hand out to me. I take it and he pulls me to my feet. He holds onto my hand a little longer than he needs to and stares into my eyes. Then he clears his throat, lets go of my hand, and takes a step back.

I look down at my wet clothes. “I totally meant to do that, by the way.” I am wet up to a few inches above my waist. I wring out the bottom of my shirt as I walk to shore.

Lilly comes out too and hugs me. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s not your fault. I just lost my balance.” I rub my backside. “Good thing I landed on something soft and padded.”

Preston is still in the water and he goes to the rock. “Should we see if there are any crawdads under here?”

Lilly jumps up and down. “Yeah!”

Preston flips the rock over like it is nothing, and Lilly squeals as three crawdads swim out from under it.

“I knew it. I was right.” She cheers.

Preston grabs one as it swims by him and comes out of the water to show it to Lilly.

“Do you want to hold it?”

She backs away from it. “No.”

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He laughs, then lets it go in the water. They watch it until it swims under another rock.

“Find some more, Daddy.”

“How about we eat the lunch Laura packed for us first? And let Rachel dry out.”

She nods and follows him away from the water.

He looks at me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I give him a thumbs up. “We’re not having fun unless someone ends up in the water.”

He laughs. “Better you than me.”

I nod toward his wet shoes. “I got you off your stump and into the water.”

“I guess you did.”

Once more, I notice his sun-kissed arms and legs. Thoughts of him in the pool cross my mind and the idea of seeing my boss in swim trunks causes a rising heat to my cheeks.

Preston takes our lunch out of the backpack along with a blanket to eat it on. He spreads it out and sits down with Lilly. I stand at the edge of it and he looks up at me.

“Take a seat.”

“I don’t want to get the blanket wet.”

“It’s just a blanket. It’ll dry.”

I smile. “Okay. I guess I will.” I sit, and he hands me a sandwich.

“I hope you like peanut butter and jelly. It’s our sandwich of choice on these adventures.”

I take the sandwich from him. “Love it.” I wonder what his business associates would think about him sitting here, cross-legged on an old blanket, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He is definitely more than a pretty face and a successful businessman. This is a man who adores his child wholeheartedly, someone who piques my interest. I find myself beginning to like Preston Michaelson.

Lilly giggles at Sugar, who has woken from her nap and is begging for a bite of a sandwich.

Preston points his finger at her. “Don’t feed her. I know she’s cute, but we don’t want her to think she can beg and get food from you.”

Lilly pouts for a moment. “Okay.”

Preston reaches into the backpack. “I did bring her some snacks, though.” He hands a little bag of dog treats to Lilly. “Just a couple of them.”

Lilly holds up a treat in front of Sugar. “Sit. Sit.” Sugar looks at her and whines.

Preston glances at me, then shakes his head. “You’ll have to work on that with Sugar. She’s not quite ready.”

Lilly lays the snack in front of the dog. “Here you go, my little Sugar Bear.”

When Preston finishes his sandwich, he takes a drink from his bottle of water. “So, what’s next, Miss Lilly?”

“Bugs.”

Preston glances at me again. “Bugs, huh?”

Lilly laughs. “Daddy doesn’t like bugs much.”

I smile. “They’re not my favorite either. I’ll help you look but I’m not going to pick them up.”

Lilly nods. “I just like to look at them, too. Except for ladybugs. I love ladybugs. And caterpillars. And butterflies.”

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Preston gathers the bags our sandwiches had been in. “Finish up, then we’ll go look for ladybugs, caterpillars, and butterflies.”

She giggles. “Remember when I used to call them flutterbys?”

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s when I was a baby,” she tells me.

“Yep. Last year when you were a baby.”

4

Preston

I hadn’t wanted Rachel to come with us. In fact, I was a bit irritated when Lilly threw a fit when I told her no. I am glad now that I gave in to her tears and asked Rachel to come on our day of adventure. She isn’t interfering; she’s making it better.

We are currently examining the bark of the pine trees, looking for wood beetles. We’ve already let ladybugs crawl on us, chased a half dozen butterflies, and found one caterpillar on the backside of a large, green leaf.

Rachel had been a trooper through it all, but none of it compared to how well she took falling into the creek. She landed with a splash and a look of shock but got over it pretty fast. It would seem this woman can handle anything. I assume her shorts are probably still wet but it doesn’t slow her down as we look for bugs. I am pretty sure

she is hoping she won't find one. Ladybugs and butterflies are one thing, but I don't believe beetles are on her list of "bugs I will touch."

When she goes around a tree, I hear her gasp. I figure she found a beetle, but when I come up behind her, she is frozen and staring at the ground.

She glances at me, points a foot in front of her, and whispers, "Snake."

I come close to her, look over her shoulder, and see the black snake with a yellow stripe. "It's just a garter snake."

She talks through gritted teeth. "I don't care what kind of snake it is. It's staring at me."

I try not to laugh as I put my hands on her shoulders. "It's harmless. Just take a step back."

"It's going to strike."

"It's not going to strike. They don't strike. I assure you, it's more scared of you than you are of it."

"Why is it staring at me then?"

"It's probably wondering the same thing about you." I put some pressure on her shoulders. "Come on. One step at a time." She takes a step back. "There you go."

She takes another step, then shrieks when the snake slithers off under a bush. She turns to me and throws her arms around my neck. "Thank you." She suddenly seems to realize what she is doing. She lets go and takes a step back. "Oh, sorry."

“It’s okay.” It was actually very okay. But I mentally reprimand myself for thinking so.

She moves away from the trees into a clear area. “Okay. I’m done looking for bugs. I’ll just stay right here in the open where I can see anything crawling, flying, or slithering toward me.”

Lilly comes up to her and hugs her. “You’re so brave, Rachel.”

Rachel looks at me over Lilly’s head and shakes her head as she pats Lilly’s back. “Thank you, honey.”

I pick up the backpack. “I think it’s time to head home.”

Lilly looks up at Rachel, and in her most grown-up voice asks, “Will you feel better if we go home?”

“I think so. Is that okay?”

Lilly nods. “Yes. Let’s get you home.”

I smile. “Alright, ladies, let’s go.”

As we head down the path toward home, Lilly and Sugar run ahead. Rachel comes up beside me.

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She is quiet for a moment before she glances at me. “I’m sorry I freaked out over the snake.”

“It’s fine,” I reassure her.

“Snakes are...not my favorite animal.”

“Perfectly understandable.”

“And I’m sorry about the...you know.”

“That’s fine, too.”

She touches my arm and stops walking. I stop as well, and she smiles at me. “You know, yesterday when I was threatening you with a piece of firewood, I thought you were someone very different.”

“An intruder?”

“No. I mean, you were Mr. Michaelson, my boss.”

“And who am I now?” I am almost afraid to hear her answer.

“You are Lilly’s father.”

“Is that better or worse?”

She looks away from me for a moment and watches Lilly and Sugar. “Better. Much better.”

I smile. “Good to know.”

We continue walking and, after a while, I say, “I heard you singing last night.”

She puts her hands to her face. “Oh my gosh. That’s so embarrassing.”

“You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about. You’re really good.”

She sticks her hands in her pockets. “When I was a kid, I wanted to be a professional singer. A popstar.”

“And why didn’t you pursue that?”

“I had a teacher in eighth grade who told me my voice was adequate but not star quality.”

I stop walking. “That’s a terrible thing to say to a kid.”

She stops and looks at me. “Right? But at the time, I took it to heart. I figured he knew what he was talking about.”

“Man, I’d like to take that guy out behind the bleachers and have a talk with him.”

“Mr. Michaelson!”

I laugh. “Sorry, I just hate when people say stupid things without even considering what impact it might have on a child.”

“It sounds like you had a teacher like mine.”

I sigh. “I had a couple of them in boarding school. Granted, I was a bit of a pain. But some people shouldn’t be teachers.” We begin walking again, catching up to Lilly who has stopped to pick some flowers.

“Boarding school, huh?”

“Yeah. It was horrible and I let everyone around me know just how unhappy I was. I’ll never do that to Lilly.”

“Good.”

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“Private school, yes. A well-vetted private school. But I’ll never send her away to school. Until college, of course. If she wants to go to college, but I won’t force her.”

“I take it you didn’t have a choice in where or if you went to college.”

“The last four generations of men in my family went to Princeton. There was never any other option. But that didn’t bother me as much as boarding school did.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “I survived. I got a good education.”

“I’m sure your parents thought they were doing what was best for you.”

“I know. But that didn’t make it any easier at the time.”

I’m not sure why I am opening up to Rachel. There are probably only three other people I currently know who are aware of my days at boarding school. I never talk about it. Now, here I am telling a virtual stranger, but she doesn’t feel like a stranger. She feels like someone I’ve always known.

When Sugar sits down in the middle of the trail and refuses to go any further, I pick her up and carry her the rest of the way. The poor puppy is exhausted from a full day of running around with Lilly, and she instantly falls asleep in my arms. When we get to the yard, I hand her to Lilly.

“Go put Sugar in her bed. She needs a nice, long nap.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

“And thank Rachel for coming with us.”

Lilly goes to Rachel and hugs her with her free arm. “Thank you, Rachel. It was the best day ever. And I’m sorry you fell in the creek. And I’m sorry about the…” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “The snake.”

“Thank you. I had a great time, aside from those two things.”

Lilly runs off, and I look at Rachel. “I ah…well, I have to admit I wasn’t too happy Lilly wanted you to come but I’m glad you did. Thank you.”

“Thank you for asking. It was good Lilly and I were able to spend time together before Monday when it’ll just be the two of us for the week.”

“That’s true. Well, okay, then. Have a good rest of your day.”

She turns and walks away from me and I watch her longer than I should have. Right. Don’t go there. It would be highly inappropriate. And you’re not ready to go there with her or anyone else. I head for the house to take a shower and get dressed for dinner.

On Sundays, I like to spend some time on the tennis courts. I’ll give the backboard a good workout and practice my serves while Lilly plays ball girl. She loves fetching the balls for me and it keeps her entertained. After an hour of slamming the ball into the wooden wall, we head for the pool. She loves swimming even more than chasing tennis balls.

While she sits on the steps to get used to the water, I dive into the deep end. I swim down the length of the pool underwater and come up right in front of her.

She squeals. “Pool monster!”

I laugh as I stand and pick her up. “Time for you to get wet, Lillybug.” She kicks her feet in protest, giggling as I carry her to where the water is at my waist. I bend my knees and bring her down with me into the water. She puts her arms around my neck and we go under briefly.

When I come up, I hear, “Oh, sorry.”

I turn to see Rachel standing on the side of the pool. “Did you need something?” I stand with Lilly in my arms, and Rachel looks everywhere but at me.

“I was looking for Benjy. He said he’d tell me about the flowers planted in front of the guesthouse.”

“I think he’s over by the pond pulling weeds.”

She ventures a look at me. I’m pretty sure she blushes before saying, “Thank you. Sorry to interrupt.”

“You’re not interrupting.”

“Okay, then. I’ll go find Benjy.” She turns and walks away from the pool. I smile at Lilly. “Do you want to do some jumping?”

She nods. I carry her to the side of the pool and set her on the cool decking. I back up about three feet and hold my arms out.

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She waves at me. “More. Go farther.”

I take one more step. “Okay, this is pretty far.”

She takes a big breath and holds it, then jumps. I catch her, and she hugs me. At times like this, I try not to think about her growing up and becoming a sullen teenager. Hopefully, she’ll stay sweet and continue to love her dad but I know the day will come when I am no longer the only man in her life.

5

Rachel

On Monday morning, I walk towards the main house at seven-fifty as Preston comes out the door. He gives me a smile that seems a bit reserved. Is he in business mode again?

I smile brightly, hoping it’ll catch on. “Good morning.”

“Morning.”

“So, you’re off to work?”

He frowns at my obvious question. “Yes.”

“Is everything okay?”

He nods as he steps off the porch and heads for the car that is waiting for him. He stops at the backseat door and looks at me.

“It’s nothing personal. I just don’t like Mondays...”

“Okay. Good.”

“I’m assuming you’re comfortable with the idea of being in charge of Lilly all day.”

“Of course. We’ll be fine.”

He nods. “Right. Okay, then.” He opens the car door but stops when I put a hand on his arm. He looks at my hand, then at me.

I remove my hand. “I don’t want you to worry about Lilly. We’ll get on just fine.”

He takes a moment. “I’m sorry. I’m just having a little trouble leaving her with someone who isn’t...”

“Her grandmother?”

“Yeah. No offense. It’s not you. It’s just the idea of a nanny.”

“I get it. You can call anytime and check up on us. I won’t be offended.”

“I might do that.”

I smile at him. “Please do. I don’t want you worrying about her all day.”

He nods again, then gets into the car. “Don’t let her get away with too much.”

“I won’t.”

“Okay.” He closes the door, and I back up a few feet as the car pulls out. I haven’t been worried at all about taking care of Lilly until now. I don’t know if he can see me, but I wave at the car. No pressure. I got this.

I hear the front door slam and Lilly runs across the porch and down the steps. “What are we going to do today?”

“Well, I thought the first thing we could do is go to the pond and you could introduce me to the koi. Benjy tells me you’ve named them all.”

“I did.”

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“Let’s go then.”

Lilly does indeed have names for all ten of the koi in the pond and she introduces me to all of them. Then we feed them some special pellets and help Benjy pull out some of the overgrown plants around the edge of the pond. While we work, Benjy tells us how special they are.

“Koi bring you good luck. They’re a symbol of strength, courage, and perseverance.” He leans close to Lilly. “According to Japanese legend, koi swim against the strongest currents in search of a special waterfall. Should they find it and successfully ascend the falling water, they will become dragons and fly away.”

Lilly’s eyes grow big. “Dragons? Cool.”

I look at the fish in the pond. “Good thing these guys are safe in the pond. Not a waterfall in sight.”

“But I want them to turn into dragons.”

Benji laughs. “That would be a sight to see.”

We leave Benjy to go have lunch and while we are eating, my phone rings. It’s Preston. I excuse myself and leave the dining room to answer the call.

“Hi.”

“Rachel. How’s it going?”

“Great. We’re eating lunch. We spent the morning at the koi pond. Did you know koi can turn into dragons if they swim up the right waterfall?”

“Actually, I did. Benjy told me that story about twenty years ago.”

“So, he’s been with the family a while too, then.”

“Yes.” He is quiet for a moment. “I want to apologize for this morning.”

“I don’t remember you doing anything to apologize for.”

“I was grumpy. I’m not fond of Mondays.”

“You mentioned that.”

“What’s the plan for the rest of the day?”

“I think we’re going to go swimming this afternoon.”

“Sounds fun. I’ll be at a board meeting.”

“I win.”

“Yes, you do. I’ve got to go. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Have fun at your board meeting.”

“Goodbye, Rachel.”

He ends the call, and I go back to Lilly and my lunch. I give her a smile. “How about a swim after lunch?”

“Yippee!”

We spend the next few weeks in much the same manner. We’d explore the grounds and find something interesting to keep us occupied for a few hours. Then we’d spend the afternoon in the pool. Preston leaves in the mornings in a better mood than he had been on that first Monday, and we all have a pleasant dinner every night. Lilly will spend the meal talking about what we did that day.

I believe Preston is pleased with how things are going and not so against the idea of a nanny anymore. At least I hope so. I hope he likes the job I am doing with Lilly because I sure like taking care of her. She is a sweetheart, with just an occasional outburst when she doesn’t get her way. But she gets over it quick enough. And I like him, too. Handsomeness aside, he is interesting and I like spending time with him.

On a Thursday afternoon, we are at the pool and I am sitting on the edge with my legs in the water, watching Lilly. I’ve been swimming and my hair is in that weird stage of being half dry but a tangled mess from being wet. The last person I want to see me is Preston. So when I hear someone behind me, I am afraid to see who it is.

When Lilly yells, “Daddy!” My worst nightmare comes true. I turn and look up at him.

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“Hey, you’re home early.” I hope he’ll say a quick “hi,” then go to the house but he doesn’t.

He sits down on the end of a chaise and smiles at me. “You’re very observant.”

I turn back to the water, feeling vulnerable in my swimsuit. It is a fairly modest one, but still, I am in a swimsuit in front of my boss. And not just any boss but my handsome, muscular boss. I wonder if he felt like this when I saw him in the pool on Sunday. Probably not. When you look like he did in a swimsuit, you don’t care who sees you.

Lilly dog paddles to the edge of the pool and hangs from the side. “Daddy, come swim with us.”

He glances at me. “No, I can’t kiddo. Not today.”

“But I want to jump.”

“We’ll swim this weekend.”

I run a hand over my hair, which does nothing. It’s hopeless. Why is he just sitting there? I don’t want to get up and wrap a towel around me. That will just show him how self-conscious I am. So I sit and wait for him to leave.

He stretches out his legs and crosses his ankles. “I thought we might have pizza tonight.”

Lilly splashes the water. “Yay! Can we eat at the picnic table?”

“Sure, that sounds fun. What do you think, Rachel?”

“I love pizza.”

He bends his knees again and gets to his feet. “I’ll order it in about an hour.”

I smile up at him and nod.

It looks like he is going to say something, but then he changes his mind. He walks away, and I turn to watch him go. From now on, we get out of the pool before four o’clock.

I wash the pool water out of my hair before dinner, hoping it’ll remind Preston that I don’t always look like a drowned rat and then meet them for dinner. He seems distracted while we eat our pizza, and I wonder what has happened between our meeting at the pool and dinner. His whole attitude has changed. When we are done, he asks me if I’ll meet him on the back porch in twenty minutes.

“Of course.” Was he mad? Unhappy? Did I do something wrong? I guess I’ll find out.

Preston is sitting on a wooden Adirondack chair when I come out. He motions toward a matching chair. “Have a seat.”

I perch on the edge of it. “Am I in trouble?”

He seems to relax a little. “No. On the contrary, I want to thank you for doing such a good job with Lilly.”

“Oh.” I settle into the chair. “Thank you.”

“It seems even Mrs. Cartwright approves of you.”

“Wow. Really?” She’s never said more than a word or two to me. And I’ve never gotten a smile from her. “I guess that’s something.”

“It’s a big something.”

I glance at him. “I was afraid your mood at the table was because you were unhappy with me.”

“My mood?” He sighs. “I really try to leave work at the door. But sometimes, it creeps inside with me.”

“Anything serious?”

“No. Just normal business headache stuff.” He looks at me for a long moment. “There is something else I’d like to talk to you about.”

“Okay.”

“I’m no longer worried about Lilly making the adjustment from her grandmother to you. And I’ve come to accept the whole nanny concept.”

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“Is there a “but” coming?”

“No. I find myself being...envious of the time you get to spend with Lilly.”

I shake my head. “She loves you. And you make the most of your time with her.”

“I know. I try. But I don’t feel it’s enough.”

I cock my head at him. “Aren’t you the boss? Can’t you take more time off if you want to?”

“I wish it was that simple.” He looks at the doubt in my eyes. “What?”

“It’s not my place to say anything.”

“Please say what’s on your mind.”

I take a moment. “I know you have responsibilities. A business to run. People who depend on you for their livelihoods. But Lilly will only be young for so long. It goes by really fast.”

“So, what are you suggesting?”

“If it’s a matter of maintaining a certain lifestyle, it seems like you could crunch the numbers a lot and still be able to give Lilly a good life. I mean, honestly, how much money does one need?”

He sighs. “Like I said, it’s not that simple.”

“Right. Of course. I’m just a nanny. I don’t know anything about the world you live in. Except by observing it from the outside.”

“And what have you observed?”

“I shouldn’t say anymore.”

“Too late now.”

“I’ve worked for a few families. None of them were in your income bracket. But it seems they aren’t very happy and their kids certainly aren’t happy.”

“You don’t think Lilly and I are happy?”

“You are an exception. Lilly seems very happy. I’m not worried about her.”

“You’re worried about me?”

I’m not sure whether to answer him or not. “A little, yeah.”

He gets to his feet. “Well, it’s not your job to worry about me. It’s your job to take care of Lilly.”

I look up at him. “Yes. You’re right.”

“You should go check on her. It’s almost bath time.”

I stand. “Of course. I’ll go take care of that.”

He goes to the porch railing and looks out at the yard as I walk behind him and go into the house. You asked. You kept telling me to speak my mind.

Before I go inside, he speaks again. “I’m okay, Rachel. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Okay. I’m glad to hear that.” The man is not okay.

6

Preston

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It bothers me that Rachel thinks I'm not happy. I am as happy as a man in my circumstances can be. After losing my wife, I accepted the fact that I would never be truly happy again. I had Lilly, and that was all the happiness I needed.

As I'm tucking Lilly in on Friday night, she gives me the smile she always gives me when she wants something.

"What's on your mind, bug?" I tuck her favorite bear in next to her.

"Is tomorrow Saturday?"

"Yes, it is."

"Our adventure day."

"Yes. What would you like to do?"

"Can we go to the cabin?"

The cabin is more of a shack. It is on the far side of the property and is a fairly long hike.

"Are you sure you want to go that far? It's a long walk."

She nods. "Yeah. I want to go to the cabin. I want to show it to Rachel."

I try not to react negatively. I don't want to get her upset before bed.

“I know you like Rachel, but you spent all week with her. Don’t you want a day with just me?”

She thinks about the question, then looks at me. I assume she is deciding whether she wants to hurt my feelings or not.

She hugs the stuffed bear. “It’s okay, Daddy. You’re fun, too.”

No one ever showed me the passage in the parent handbook that says you’re going to spend a fair amount of time feeling guilty. I sigh. “If you really want her to come, I’ll ask her.”

She sits up and hugs me. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. She might have other plans.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure she has things to do on her weekends.”

“But you’ll ask her?”

“Yes, I’ll ask her.” I lay her back down. “Now, time for sleep. We have a big adventure tomorrow.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too.”

I leave her room and think about bringing Rachel to the cabin tomorrow. It isn’t a horrible idea, but she is probably busy. I decide to go ask her now before it gets too

late.

When I get within two feet of her door, it bursts open, and a cloud of smoke comes out, followed by Rachel. She stops short when she sees me.

I look past her at the doorway. “Is the house on fire?”

“No. It’s just the woodstove.”

I walk past her and into the smoke-filled room to the woodstove and open the damper all the way. She followed me in and when I head for the door, I take her arm and bring her outside with me.

“You didn’t open the damper.”

“Damper?”

“It should be fine now.” I cough. “It’s June. Why did you light the woodstove?”

“It’s cool out here in the country.”

“Not that cool.”

She shrugs. “I just thought a fire would be nice.” She peers inside the door. The smoke is clearing out now that it has someplace to go. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s just a little smoke. It’ll clear out soon.”

“You must think I’m an idiot.”

I motion toward a chair. “Have a seat. I’ll go open the windows.”

When I come back out, she is perched on the edge of the chair. “Is it okay in there?”

“No permanent damage. Although it’ll smell like smoke for a while. Mrs. Cartwright might give you some grief about it.”

“And she was just starting to like me.”

“Like isn’t really in her vocabulary.”

“Right. She approves of me.”

I lean against the railing and she looks at me. “Why are you here?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Do you have stuff to do? Shopping, friends to see?”

“Not really. Why?”

“Lilly wants to invite you to our day of adventure.”

Rachel smiles. “She’s so sweet. But I can’t interfere again.” She smiles at me. “Did she go all Carrie, again?”

“No. Because I didn’t say no.”

She nods. “You want to make me the bad guy?”

I laugh. “That’s not my intention. If you’d like to come, you’re more than welcome.”

“Does this adventure involve snakes or bugs?”

“Well, I can’t guarantee we won’t run into any but the chances are pretty slim. There’s an old cabin on the property. It’s rustic but still standing. She likes to go there and hang out. There’s a big swing in the tree out front and a pond with frogs and ducks. Do you have a problem with frogs?”

“No. Frogs are cool.”

“So...?”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d love to go.”

I straighten up from the rail. “Good. That’ll make Lilly happy. It’s a bit of a hike so wear good shoes and pants. There might be mosquitos on our way back. They come out at dusk.”

“I’ll be ready.”

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“Okay.” I nod toward the door. “Next time you build a fire, open the damper.”

“Got it. I’m glad I didn’t burn your house down.”

“So am I.”

I leave her and go back to my house. I am glad she is coming. Lilly will be happy, and that makes me happy.

The next morning, I have breakfast with Lilly and then get her dressed in preparation for the day. She is all set in her high-top tennis shoes, jeans, a T-shirt, and a long-sleeved cotton shirt to wear over it if the mosquitos come out.

Rachel must’ve been watching for us because when we go out to the front yard, she comes out of her door. She is dressed appropriately too, in jeans, hiking boots, a T-shirt, and a light jacket tied around her waist. My attention is drawn to her graceful curves, a quick glance reveals her beautiful silhouette.

Laura packed us a lunch and some bottled water in a backpack. I slip it on as Rachel comes up to us.

She smiles at Lilly and hugs her. “Looks like we are all ready for an adventure day.”

Lilly takes her hand. “I hope you don’t get scared by any snakes today.”

“You and me both, kiddo.”

They walk ahead of me on the trail for a while, then Rachel glances back at me and lets Lilly go ahead. I come up beside her.

She smiles. "So far. So good." When I raise an eyebrow, she adds, "Not a bug or snake in sight."

"Just stay on the trail. You should be fine."

"How far is the cabin?"

"About two miles."

"Your property goes two miles?"

"My grandfather had a ranch here at one time. Fancied himself a cowboy."

"Interesting."

"He lasted about six years, then he sold all his cattle and moved back to the city."

"Is the cabin we're going to his?" she questions.

"It was a haybarn for the cattle. Then my father and I spent a summer turning it into a cabin when I was in high school."

"So you built it?"

"I pounded a lot of nails and cut a lot of lumber. But it was more of a renovation than a build. And like I said last night, it's pretty rustic."

"I'm excited to see it," she smiles.

“Don’t expect too much.”

“Well, it’s pretty cool that you got to build something with your dad.”

“Yeah. At the time I wasn’t too happy doing it. But when he died two years later, I was thankful for the time we spent there.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrug. Once again, I have no idea why I am telling Rachel stuff I never talk to anyone else about.

“And now you get to share it with Lilly. That’s really special.”

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I need to change the subject. Lilly helps with that. She stops walking and points to something in the trees. We join her and spot a doe and her two fawns.

I kneel next to Lilly, and she whispers, “They’re so cute.”

I whisper back. “Shh. Be really quiet so we don’t scare them.”

The three of us watch the deer for several minutes. Then the wind changes, and the doe catches a whiff of us. She looks in our direction then runs off with her fawns right behind her.

Lilly waves at them. “Bye, deer.”

I stand and pat her head. “Okay, let’s keep going.”

Forty-five minutes later, we reach the clearing with the cabin. I glance at Rachel to see what her reaction is when she sees it.

She smiles. “Wow, it’s beautiful.”

I laugh. “Beautiful? That’s not a word I’d really use to describe it.”

“No, it is. I love it.”

The cabin sits in a grassy clearing surrounded by pine trees. It still looks like a small barn on the outside with shiplap siding, a rounded metal roof, and a small front porch. My father and I had originally cleared the brush from around the cabin, but it is

slowly creeping back in.

The small pond can be seen through the trees. It is spring-fed and still has a lot of water in it even though it is midsummer. Lilly's favorite thing is the big oak tree in front of the cabin with a tire swing on it. When we moved to the property, I had someone make sure it was safe before I let her use it.

She runs to it now and puts her legs through the tire. "Push me, Daddy."

I set the backpack on the porch and go to push the swing. She squeals in delight and asks to go higher.

After a few minutes, I give her a final big push. "Okay, I want to show Rachel the inside of the cabin."

Rachel follows me up the two steps to the porch, then we go inside. It has gotten cloudy the last half of our walk, so it is pretty dim inside. I light a gas lantern sitting on the counter then hold it up.

"This is it."

She looks around. "I love it. It's great."

The cabin is one single room with a counter on one side that serves as the kitchen. There is a camp stove to cook on, a plastic tub to hold water, and a small collection of random dishes. There is no power or running water and the bathroom is an outhouse behind the house.

There is a couch and two big easy chairs nestled around a big woodstove. And in the corner opposite the kitchen area is a mattress and box spring on the floor.

Rachel looks at the bed and I smile. “We talked about hauling a bedframe in here, but it never happened.”

“How often do you stay the night here?”

“Every ten years or so. I haven’t slept here since the last time I was here with my dad.”

“It’s so clean.”

“Benjy keeps an eye on it. He comes about once a month and spends the night. He actually loves this place.”

“Well, I love it too. You should spend the night here with Lilly sometime.”

Lilly comes through the door and hears what Rachel says. She takes my hand. “Can we, Daddy? Can we spend the night?”

“No, honey. Not tonight. We’re not prepared to do that. We don’t have food or water. No extra clothes. Besides, Laura would wonder why we weren’t home for dinner.” I glance at Rachel. “But I promise we’ll come spend the night before school starts.”

“Yay!” She looks at Rachel. “Do you want to come spend the night with us?”

Rachel gives her a smile. “I think that should be a special daddy and daughter outing. But I’ll be very excited to hear all about it when you come back.”

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Lilly seems satisfied with that and heads for the door.

I call after her. “Stay close and don’t go to the pond without us.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Rachel smiles at me shyly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to put ideas in her head.”

“The idea has been in her head for a while. It’s about time we do it.”

At the sound of thunder in the distance, we both go outside to the porch. The clouds are rolling in now and they are dark and heavy with rain.

7

Rachel

We watch the clouds roll in and Preston calls Lilly to come onto the porch. A few minutes later, the rain starts. Preston doesn’t seem too concerned, but it looks to me like it isn’t going to end anytime soon.

I glance at him. “So, do you get these storms here often?”

“A few each summer.” He looks at the sky. “It should blow over.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

He looks at me. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

He goes to a stack of firewood on the porch and picks up several pieces, then smirks at me. “It seems you don’t have a lot of luck when it comes to firewood or woodstoves. I’ll bring these inside in case this lasts awhile, and it gets cold.”

“It’s all yours, boss. I’m not touching it.”

I stay on the porch with Lilly and we watch the rain, which is coming down hard now. When Preston comes back out, he has the packed lunch with him.

“How about we eat our lunch while this weather clears up?”

I take the lunch from him and hand out the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while he checks his phone. He tucks it back in his pocket with a frown then smiles when he sees me watching him.

“No service out here.”

“Are we losing our optimism?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet.” He takes a bite of his sandwich and nudges Lilly. “What do you think about this rain, Lillybug?”

“It’s loud. And I wanted to go to the pond.”

“We’ll go when it stops. If it’s not too muddy.”

Lilly seems satisfied with his answer, but I have my doubts the rain is going to stop anytime soon, and even if it did, the path to the pond will be muddy. In fact, the trail all the way home will be muddy. Our day of adventure may get even more

adventurous.

When the wind picks up and the rain starts coming onto the porch, we go inside. Preston lights another lantern, and we can see pretty well between the two of them and the gray light coming through the window.

Lilly goes to the couch and sits down. “What are we going to do now?”

Preston kneels in front of the woodstove. “Well, I, for one, would love a cup of coffee. How about you, Lilly?”

She giggles. “I don’t drink coffee.”

I glance toward the kitchen area. “I’ll go see what’s in the cupboards.”

Preston begins getting the woodstove ready for a fire, which seems to indicate he is beginning to believe as I do. The rain isn’t going to stop anytime soon.

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There is a set of cupboards above the counter in the kitchen and three more below it. I search through the ones above first. There are several cans of food we can eat if we are still here for dinner. I also find a can of coffee and a plastic container with small packages of hot chocolate.

I turn toward the living area. “How about some hot chocolate, Lilly?”

She turns on the couch and gets onto her knees as she looks at me over the back of it.

“I love hot chocolate.” She exclaims.

“How about you, Preston? There’s coffee.”

“Coffee sounds great. I think I’ll start this fire, too. It’s starting to cool off a little.”

I smile at him. “You know, I’m an expert at lighting woodstoves. I can do it if you want.”

He chuckles. “I’ve got it, thanks.”

I laugh. “Alright. I’ll just heat some water for the hot chocolate and get this percolator going.”

There is a ten gallon container of water with a spigot. I fill a kettle with water then fill the percolating coffee pot. It will make four cups of coffee. I figure we might need it all and then some.

While the water heats, I look through the remaining cupboards. Most everything is in cans, but there are two different kinds of pasta in plastic containers. There are also crackers, cookies, and some cans of nuts. Everything had been packaged to keep the bugs and rodents out. I imagine in a house that sits empty most of the time, it's a necessity.

Lilly is still watching me over the back of the couch, and I smile at her. "Almost ready."

"Are there marshmallows?"

"No, but there are some chocolate chip cookies."

She claps her hands in excitement then turns back around to watch Preston. He'd lit some paper under the kindling and is watching to make sure it ignited the wood. I watch him for a moment too. Out here, in this place, he isn't the rich Preston Michaelson or even my boss. He is just a man making sure his daughter and I are warm and comfortable.

When he closes the door and stands, I look away. I don't need him to know I am admiring him in a way that I shouldn't. Regardless of how I am seeing him right now, he is still my boss. My extremely good looking boss who I'm very interested in getting to know better.

When the water is hot, I make Lilly's hot chocolate then pour two cups of coffee. I bring Preston and Lilly their cups then retrieve my own. Preston is sitting in the chair, so I sit on the couch next to Lilly.

She looks at me. "Cookies?"

"Oh right." I start to get up, but Preston stops me. "I'll get them. Sit. You've been

slaving away in the kitchen for...ten minutes or so.” He smirks at me.

I smile. “Thank you. I am pretty worn out from boiling the water.” I tease.

He gets the cookies and hands one to Lilly then offers me one. “Care for a cookie?”

“I think I will, thank you.”

He takes one for himself then sets the package on the table next to his chair. While he takes a bite, he goes to the front door and opens it. The rain is still angling onto the porch and he closes the door.

“No change.” He returns to his chair. “So, it’s not looking super great out there.”

“Do you still think it’s going to blow on through?”

He glances at Lilly, then shakes his head. “I think the rain is here to stay for a while.”

I finish my cookie. “So what does that mean, exactly?”

He leans forward. “Lilly, how’d you like to spend the night in the cabin tonight?”

I grab her cup of cocoa right before she jumps up to celebrate. “We’re going to have a sleepover?”

He looks at me. “Um...Sort of.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “What do you think?”

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“I guess we don’t have a lot of options if it keeps raining.” This is an interesting development, and I need a moment to let it sink in. I get up and go to the kitchen and open a cupboard. “There’s plenty to eat. We won’t go hungry.”

When I turn back around, Preston is right behind me. I gasp, and he takes a step back.

“Sorry.”

“No. It’s fine. I just didn’t hear you get up.”

“If you’re not comfortable with this, we can bundle up Lilly and attempt to hike on out of here.”

“Of course not. It’s fine. Really.”

He looks at me for a moment. “Maybe it’ll stop in time for us to leave before dark.”

“Maybe.” I’d be lying if I said a part of me didn’t want it to stop. I wanted the three of us to stay in this cabin in the rain.

“We’ll see how it goes.” He steps back again, then crosses the room to the door. “I better bring in some more firewood before it gets too wet. I think the pile is catching some of the splashes from the rain on the porch.”

“Good idea. Just in case.”

He goes outside, and I go to the door so I can open it for him. I step outside, and he

looks at me. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Yes. It’ll make Lilly’s day of adventure into a night of adventure.”

He moves to the woodpile. “Well, I don’t know how adventurous it’ll be. Not a lot to do in there.”

“We’ll figure out something. Do you know any good ghost stories? Appropriate for a child, of course.”

He thinks for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t tell me you and your friends at boarding school didn’t exchange a story or two.”

He grins. “Sure. But nothing I want to share with Lilly.”

“I’ll come up with something.”

“I’m sure you will.” He loads his arms with firewood, and I open the door for him.

As he goes through the door, I ask, “Do you want me to grab a couple more pieces?”

“Are you going to threaten me with them?”

I shake my head and smile. “You really need to let that go.”

He drops the wood by the woodstove. “I would, except you’re the only person who ever accused me of being an intruder. And you were prepared to run me off.”

“I wasn’t thinking, clearly. It was my first day! I was nervous and wanted to make a

good impression. Then there was someone I hadn't met yet just standing there...I guess I went into protector mode."

"You made an impression all right." He mutters while he returns to the chair and picks up his coffee. "I was wearing a suit. I'm pretty sure I didn't look too much like someone who'd break into someone else's house."

"You were on the back porch with a big box in your arms."

He laughs. "My back porch."

"Yes. We established that." I love how this trip has brought out a more playful Preston. He seems more relaxed and comfortable around me. That is a good thing, and it makes me quite happy.

Lilly jumps to her feet. "I know what we can do."

Preston smiles at her. "What, Lillybug?"

“We can make a fort!”

He looks at me and I smile. “I think that’s a great idea.” I stand and take Lilly’s hand. “Let’s see if there are some extra blankets in the trunk by the bed.”

The trunk has blankets and pillows in it, and I take a few of them out.

“Okay. Where should we build it?”

Lilly looks around the room. “We can use the couch and the kitchen chairs.”

“That’s perfect.” I glance at Preston, who is smiling at me. I return it, then look away. His smile is infectious and does things to my stomach. I’d felt butterflies a time or two in my limited experience around men. But this is a whole new level. The effect seems to be exaggerated now that we are in this small cabin with the prospect of spending the night here.

He gets to his feet. “What can I do?”

I hand him a blanket. “You can figure out how to attach this to the back of the couch.”

“Hmm. Okay, I went to Princeton. I should be able to come up with something.”

“Did you study engineering?”

He laughs. “No, business.”

“So, that probably won’t help you much.”

“I guess not.” He sets the blanket down. “But I know what might. I’ll be right back.” He goes to the door and takes a raincoat from a hook hanging next to it.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m accomplishing the mission you gave me.”

“And you need a raincoat to do that?”

He nods then goes through the door. A few minutes later, the door opens, and he is on the other side of it, soaked. He smiles and holds up a handful of clothespins.

I laugh. “Oh my gosh. Stay there. Let me get you a towel.” There is a beach towel in the trunk and I bring it to him. He takes off the raincoat and hangs it outside. Then comes inside the door and takes off his boots.

“You’re kind of crazy, you know that?”

He shrugs. “Just wanted to do my part.” He dries his face and hair. His shirt is dry because it has been under the raincoat. But his pants are wet from the knees down. He hands me the clothespins. “If you can handle this, I’m going to go stand by the woodstove for a bit.”

“Good idea.” Well, that was pretty darn cute.

Lilly laughs. “Daddy, you’re our hero.”

I have to agree with her.

Preston

I hadn't intended to get so wet when I went outside. But once I committed to it, I had to see it through. I stand with my back to the woodstove while I watch Rachel and Lilly construct the fort. They attach the blanket to the couch using the clothespins, then tie the two other corners to two of the kitchen chairs.

Rachel then hangs two more blankets over the first one to make the sides. She seems to be having as much fun as Lilly is. When they've built the structure, they fill it with pillows and blankets.

Lilly crawls inside. "Come on in, Rachel."

"Hold on. I need to get the cookies." She goes to the table and picks up the cookies. She takes one out and hands it to me. "Cookie?"

"Sure, thanks. Don't you two ruin your dinner, now."

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She points at me. “We’re on an adventure. We can’t worry about that kind of stuff.”

Lilly crawls out of the tent. “Daddy, are you coming?”

“As soon as I get dried off a little.”

She goes back inside and Rachel crawls in after her. I listen to them giggling and whispering. Rachel is so great with Lilly. I couldn’t have asked for someone better to be her nanny.

I feel my pant legs. They are still damp, but not too bad. “Hey, you two. Make room for me. I want some more cookies before you eat them all.” I pull back a corner of the blanket. “Is it dark in there?”

Rachel smiles. “Yes, pretty dark.”

I go to the desk by the door and get a flashlight from one of the drawers. Then I crawl into the tent. It is a small space, and we are really close together, but I don’t mind. I hand the flashlight to Lilly then put her in my lap.

I smile at Rachel. “This is pretty cozy.”

Lilly looks up at him. “Daddy, can I sleep in here tonight?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Yay! Rachel, do you want to sleep in here with me?”

“I think I’ll sleep on the couch.”

I look at her. “I’ll sleep on the couch. You take the bed.”

“It’s your cabin.”

“So? Please, take the bed.”

“Okay. I’m not going to argue about it.” She takes Lilly’s hand. “I have a great idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s play never have I ever,” Rachel suggests.

“How do you play that?”

“Somebody says, ‘never have I ever rode a horse’ or something like that. And the other two people have to eat a bite of their cookie if they have done that thing.”

“Okay. Can I start?” Lilly asks.

“It has to be something you haven’t done.”

“Okay.” She taps a finger on her lips for a moment. “Never have I ever spent the night in this cabin before.”

Preston takes a bite from his cookie. “Many times.”

“Okay. Your turn, Daddy.”

I look at Rachel. “Never have I ever played never have I ever in a tent before.”

Rachel takes a bite of her cookie. “Girl Scout camp.” She thinks for a moment. “Never have I ever had my very own puppy before.”

Lilly giggles and takes a bite of her cookie, as do I. “Rosco. A golden lab I got when I was ten.”

“Where’s he now, Daddy?”

“Well...” He glances at me. “He’s in heaven.”

“With Mommy?”

“Yeah, honey. With Mommy.” I think maybe that’ll end the game, but Lilly chimes right in with another question. We play a few more rounds, then I lift Lilly off my lap. “I need to go check the weather.”

I crawl out of the tent, then get to my feet and head for the door. I go out onto the porch. The rain has changed direction again and is no longer hitting the porch. But it is still coming down hard. It is also getting too late to walk home, even if it has stopped.

When the door opens, I turn to see Rachel, and she smiles softly at me. “Still coming down, I see.”

“Yeah. I think we’re here for the night.”

“Is everyone going to be worried about us?”

“I told Benjy where we were going. So once it started raining and continued raining, I’m sure he figured we’d be staying out.”

“Okay. I don’t want them sending out a search party or something. I’m sure you missing would be a pretty big deal.”

“I don’t think I’d be missed too badly.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” She steps closer to me. “I’m sorry if my dog question

brought up sad memories.”

I shrug. “It’s fine. Lilly and I talk about it. She actually handles it better than I do. But she was pretty young. She doesn’t have any real memories of her mother. Only stories and pictures.”

“I’m so sorry. That must be very hard for you.”

“It is. But you do what you got to do. Especially when you have a child to raise.”

She nods. “You’re a great father, Preston.” She gives me a sly smile. “And I’m not just saying that because you sign my paychecks.”

“I guess I need to start paying you for Saturdays.”

She shakes her head. “Days of adventure are on me.”

“Okay. Then consider yourself formally invited to all the future ones.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want it to become a regular thing. It’s your day with Lilly.”

I don’t know why, but I take a step toward her. “I want you to come. You add a whole new level of excitement to our days.”

She studies me for a moment. “Thank you, Preston. That means a lot to me.”

I hold her gaze for a moment, then look away. Something is happening between her and me and I’m not sure if I am ready for it. I turn toward the clearing and take a breath.

She puts a hand on my back. “I’ll go check on Lilly.”

I nod but don’t answer her. Her touch has sent a wave of electricity through me and I need to figure out what that means.

I stay on the porch for about twenty minutes but don’t really come up with any answers. I go back inside to find Lilly still in the tent and Rachel looking through the cupboards.

She glances at me when I come in. “So, we have chili, beef stew, split pea soup, chicken noodle, and ravioli. It’s quite the selection.”

I laugh. “Wow, how do I decide?” I walk over to her. “What sounds good to you?”

“I’m going to have split pea soup. Lilly wants chicken noodle. You can have whatever you want.”

I clear my throat as I think about it. “Hmm. I think I will go with beef stew.”

“You got it. Are you hungry yet?”

“Sure. Do you need help?”

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She holds up a can opener and frowns at it as though she's never seen one, then she cocks her head and smiles at me. "As long as I can figure out how to use this thing, I think I can handle it."

"Is there more coffee?"

She fills my cup and hands it to me. "It's kind of upsetting that this tastes just as good as the coffee coming out of my five hundred dollar coffee machine."

She holds up the percolator. "Two dollars at the thrift store?"

I laugh. "Probably."

"We could take this back with us."

"Let's save that for here. You never know when we might get stuck in the rain again."

"You're right. You never know."

We share another long gaze, but this time she looks away first. I detect a slight blush, which makes her cheeks a lovely shade of pink. It would seem she's as unsure as I am. She sets the three cans on the counter and begins opening them. I watch her for a moment then figure she probably doesn't need an audience.

I go to the tent and kneel in front of the entrance. "How's it going in there, Lilly?"

“Come inside. I’m making shadow puppets, but I don’t know how to do it. I can only make a rabbit.”

“Hold on.” I put my cup on the table, then crawl into the tent. “Okay. Let me see if I can remember how this works.” I figure out how to do a few different animals. They are rough and don’t really resemble what they are supposed to look like, but Lilly is delighted.

When Rachel says dinner is ready, we both crawl out of the tent. I stretch out my back then go to the table. Since two of the chairs are being used to hold up the tent, there is only two left at the table. Rachel has set up a step stool for Lilly to sit on.

There are three bowls with our chosen meal, along with some crackers.

“It’s not fancy. But hopefully, it’ll fill us up.” She sits down.

I help Lilly onto the stool then sit down in the chair next to her. “Looks great. A perfect adventure meal. As long as we don’t run out of cookies.”

“I think maybe Benjy likes his cookies. There’s a few packages of them.”

Lilly claps. “Yay!”

I look at her. “Eat your soup and there might be another cookie or two in your future.”

She picks up her spoon. “May I have a cracker, please?”

“Of course.” I hand her a few crackers. “Do you want them in your soup?”

She wrinkles her nose. “No. That’s gross.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, what was I thinking?” I wink at Rachel. She looks away from me and blushes, again. There is definitely something going on here. I winked at her. What’s that about?

I turn back to Lilly. “So, what should we do after dinner?”

“Are there any games?”

I think for a moment. “I think there might be a game or two in the wardrobe next to the bed.”

She starts to get down, and I put a hand on her arm. “Eat first.”

She nods and resumes eating her soup. I smile at Rachel. “Are you up for a game or two?”

“Sure. I love board games. Except for Monopoly.”

“I don’t believe there is anything quite as elaborate as Monopoly. If I remember correctly, there is Life, Sorry, and a couple of card games.”

“Sorry is always fun.”

After dinner, I take my bowl and Lilly’s to the kitchen counter. Rachel is there, frowning at the plastic tub.

“So, how do you do this? I don’t want to use all of our water to wash the dishes.”

I pick up the third bowl. “Let’s let the rain do the dishes for us.” I head for the door and she follows behind and opens it for me. I set the bowls on the steps where the rain would hit them. “This should work.” I look at her. “Of all the things I thought might throw you on this little misadventure, I didn’t think doing the dishes would be one of them.”

“I wasn’t thrown. I was just...considering my options.”

“Oh, okay. My mistake.”

She looks at me for a moment. “Can I say something I shouldn’t?”

“Um...sure.”

“I’m really enjoying our misadventure.”

I smile. “Why is that something you shouldn’t say?”

“Because you’re the reason I’m enjoying it.”

“Because I’m here?”

“No. Because you’re you.”

I lean against the railing. “And who am I exactly?”

She looks out at the rain. “I shouldn’t say.”

“No. Please do.”

She takes a breath, then looks at me again. “You’re someone I’d like to get to know better.”

I cock my head. “In what capacity?”

She laughs. “Preston. You sound like you’re interviewing me.”

I smile and reach for her hand. “Sorry. It’s kind of what I do. But I still want to know.”

“In a way that might compromise our business relationship.”

I rub the back of her hand with my thumb. “Hmm. I’m not sure if I’m willing to risk losing you. Lilly loves you. You’re great with her. I wouldn’t want you to discover that I’m not who you must think I am.”

“I’m not too worried about that. The man I’ve seen today is a man who will go out into the rain to get clothespins for his daughter’s fort. A man who is happy to spend an hour inside the fort making really bad shadow puppets.”

I laugh. “Are you judging my talent as a shadow puppet artist?”

“I’m not sure artist is the right word to use. But you get an A plus for effort.”

I let go of her hand and sigh. “Tell you what. After a game or two of Sorry, we’ll see how you feel.”

9

Rachel

I’m not sure why I decided to admit to Preston how I feel, but it seemed like he wasn’t too shocked by my confession. I guess I’ll see how the rest of the night goes now that it’s out there. I am a little scared and nervous to see how it all plays out.

We go back inside and Preston looks through the wardrobe for the games. Then he brings the game of Sorry to the table.

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“I challenge you, ladies, to a game of Sorry.”

Lilly and I join him at the table. I made more coffee and hot chocolate and I made my drink a mix of both. I also brought cookies and some cheese crackers.

Preston looks at my cup when I set it down. “What’s that?”

“Chocolate coffee.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you want me to add chocolate to your coffee?”

“No. Straight black is fine.”

I shake my head. “This is supposed to be a night of adventure.”

He sighs. “Fine.” He hands me the cup. “Ruin my coffee.”

I take it from him. “I promise you’ll like it...Or maybe you won’t like it. We’ll see.”

I take his cup to the kitchen and add some hot chocolate mix, then stir it in. I bring it back to him and watch him until he takes a drink.

He nods. “Alright. Not bad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He opens the game box. “Let’s get this game started.”

I watch him set up the board. “Are you one of those guys who is ruthless when playing board games?”

“Me? Nah.”

Lilly laughs. “Daddy likes to win.”

I smile. “I bet he does.”

He looks at me. “Seems to me you beat my daughter at checkers.”

“It was a very close game. And I don’t believe in letting a child win just for the sake of winning. It builds character.”

“Exactly. I agree.”

“Hmm.” I look at Lilly. “You and I have to make sure your dad doesn’t win.”

She gives me a thumbs up. “We’re going to beat you, Daddy.”

“Yeah. We’ll see about that.”

We start the game, and I begin to see the competitive side of Preston. The cards aren’t going his way, and he keeps getting sent back to start. When Lilly lands on his square and sends him back, he squints at her.

“Wow.”

She shrugs. “You have to start all over.”

“Again.” He glances at me and I smile at him.

“I can see why you’re a successful businessman. You don’t like to lose.”

He laughs. “Who does?” He pats Lilly’s hand. “Good job, honey.”

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“You’re not mad?”

“Of course not.” He reaches for the package of cookies. “But I’m taking control of the cookies until you two start being nicer to me.”

I move the crackers over between Lilly and me. “Fine. We’ll control the crackers, then.”

We play for another hour and Lilly ends up winning. Preston leans over and kisses her on the cheek. “Good game, bug.”

“Can I have a cookie now?”

Preston grins. “You may have two cookies now. Then it’s time to settle down in your fort.”

She yawns then says, “I’m not tired.”

“Even so. It’s late. And we have to hike home tomorrow. Assuming the rain decides to stop.”

“Can we stay again if it doesn’t?”

“I’m pretty sure the rain will stop soon. So probably not.”

“But if it doesn’t?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

I get up and take Lilly’s hand. “I bet you have to go to the bathroom.”

She nods.

I look at Preston. “I assume there’s a bathroom somewhere?”

He points at the front door. “Outside. About a hundred feet behind the house.”

“An outhouse?”

“Yes. Or, you know. There are a lot of trees out there.” He gets to his feet. “Do you need me to come with you? I can hold a flashlight.”

“I think we can manage. I’d just like to not get soaked.”

“Wear the poncho and carry Lilly.” He goes to the door and opens it. “It’s not currently pouring, so it might be a good time to go.”

I smile at Lilly. “Okay, are you ready for an adventure?”

“Going to the bathroom isn’t an adventure.”

“It is here.”

I put on the poncho and Preston puts a smaller raincoat on Lilly. Then he hands me the flashlight and goes onto the porch with us.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?”

“We’ll be fine.” I look out at the dark. “There aren’t any wild animals around here, are there?”

He glances at Lilly. “No. Perfectly safe.”

I pick up Lilly, turn on the light, and step off the porch. He calls after us. “I’ll be right here. And if you’re not back in five, I’m coming to find you.”

I wave over my head. “We’ll be right back.”

“You know what happens every time someone says that?”

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I turn and smile at him. “Chill out, Dad.”

We make our way around the cabin and can see the outhouse once we get to the back of it. When we finish, we head back to the cabin and Preston is on the porch waiting for us.

We go up onto the porch and I hand him the flashlight. “Okay, that wasn’t very much fun.”

Lilly laughs. “Yes, it was. It was an adventure!”

Preston helps me out of the poncho. “When you’re six, everything is an adventure.”

Like Preston had been after getting the clothespins, I am wet from the knees down. I take off my shoes by the door and head for the woodstove. Preston takes Lilly to the plastic tub and helps her wash her face and hands with water from the container.

When she’s done, she comes to give me a hug. “Goodnight, Rachel.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart. Sleep well in your fort.”

“I will.”

Preston tucks her into the blankets in the fort and gives her a flashlight to keep with her. “I’ll be right there on the couch if you get lonely.”

“Okay, Daddy. But I won’t. I’m brave.”

He kisses her. "I know you are. You're the bravest girl I know." He closes the tent up then moves to the fireplace. "How wet did you get?"

"Not too bad."

"I saw some lightning when I was waiting for you. Do you want to go out on the porch and watch it?"

"Sure."

He goes to the door and hands me a coat, then puts one on. We go outside and sit in the two old, wooden chairs. After a few moments, we see lightning in the distance over the trees.

I put my hands in the pockets of the old coat. "Wow. Beautiful."

"Are you warm enough?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"Um... If it's okay, I'd like to tell you about my wife."

I look at him in surprise. "Of course. I'd like that."

He is quiet for a few moments before he speaks. "Steph was smart, and she loved to read. She'd read two or three books a week. She had a degree in history and read historical novels and biographies. She was a fountain of information. If it happened in the past, she knew about it or would research it if she didn't. We met in college, were nothing alike, and somehow fell in love. We got married not long after we graduated and Lilly came along two years later. Two years after that, I lost her."

“I’m so sorry, Preston.”

He is quiet again. “She was twenty-six. You expect to have your whole life together and then...if it wasn’t for Lilly, I don’t know that I ever would’ve recovered.”

I reach for his hand. “You probably never want to put yourself in that situation again and it’s perfectly understandable.”

“For the last few years, that’s exactly where my head has been. Even though I know Steph would want me to move on. And even though Lilly deserves to have a mother.”

“I can’t even imagine what that feels like. It’s devastating.”

He nods. “My mother has been telling me that I’d change my mind someday. That I’d meet someone and things would change.”

“It could happen.” I try to retrieve my hand, but he holds on to it.

“You.”

“What about me?”

“You’ve got me very confused. I seem to be drawn to you. And I don’t know if it’s because you’re so good with Lilly. Or the fact Lilly likes you so much. Or if it has nothing to do with Lilly and I...”

“You don’t have to figure it out tonight, Preston.”

He looks at me. “I never thought I’d want to spend time with another woman. Have fun. Enjoy myself. Get that stupid weird feeling in my stomach when you’re close to me.”

“Well, if it helps at all, I feel it too.”

His lips curve up into a smile. “Well, that’s good, I guess. It’d be just my luck to fall for someone finally, just to have her tell me she’s not interested.”

I turn toward him. “I’m interested, Preston. And I can wait until you figure out how you feel. And if you’re ready to feel that way and what that might mean moving forward.”

“And if it turns out, I’m not ready to go down that road, have I just ruined everything? Are you still going to be able to work for me and take care of Lilly? I really don’t want her to lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

We watch the lightning for a few minutes. He is still holding my hand, and it feels nice. He needs time to figure things out, and I'm going to give it to him.

He glances at me. "So, what about you? What's your relationship history?"

I smile. "Pretty boring. A few boyfriends here and there. I never really found anyone I wanted to spend time with."

He grins at me. "Until now?"

"Yes. Until now. But no pressure."

"Right. No pressure."

He stands and goes to the railing. "Why me? If I may ask. What's the attraction?"

I lean back in my chair. "Wow. Um...let me think. I guess when you didn't fire me on the first day when I threatened to clobber you with a piece of firewood, that was a good sign."

He chuckles. "It never crossed my mind to fire you."

"But I guess it's because you love your daughter so much. Any man who isn't afraid to show his undying devotion to his child is an automatic winner in my book."

He grins again. "So it's not because I'm so good looking?"

"Well, that's just a bonus." I get to my feet. "Actually, that's the only reason. I just made all that other stuff up to impress you."

"I figured."

I go to the railing to stand next to him and take his hand again. “I’d love for this to be the beginning of something. But if you’re not ready or if I’m not the one, I can live with that. I’m here for you and Lilly, no matter how all this turns out.”

He looks at me for a moment. “How about another game of Sorry?”

“Are you going to be a sore loser when I win?”

“What makes you think you’re going to win?”

“Can we eat some more cookies?”

“Yes. And more chocolate coffee,” he says.

“You want more coffee this late?”

He squeezes my hand. “I don’t think I’ll be doing much sleeping tonight. I’ve got a lot to think about.”

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“I’ll go make some more coffee.”

“I’ll set up the game.”

We go inside and I go to make coffee while Preston checks on Lilly. He comes up next to me. “She’s sound asleep.”

“It was a pretty adventurous day.”

“Yeah. It’s going to be hard to top it next Saturday.”

“If the rain doesn’t stop, we may still be here.” I laugh.

“Don’t say that. I do have a business to run.”

“And you said no one would miss you.”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said about Lilly only being young for such a short time.”

“It wasn’t my place to say anything. The time you spend with Lilly, you are with her one hundred percent.”

“I know. But still, you’re right. I need to think about cutting back a little. Even if I could just get one extra day.”

I nudge him. “Does that mean I’d lose a day’s pay?”

“No. It just means that you’ll need to be ready for two days of adventure a week.”

“I think I can handle that. But next time we hike to the cabin, we’re bringing an overnight bag just in case.”

10

Preston

I win our game of Sorry, though Rachel makes it tough. And afterwards, we say goodnight without any further discussion about our conversation on the porch. She takes the bed, and I sleep on the couch. Although sleeping really isn’t what I’m doing. I toss and turn all night, thinking about Rachel and what our conversation had meant.

At some point during the night, Lilly climbed onto the couch with me. Because when I wake up, she is curled up beside me. The sun is shining through the windows, which is a good sign. We’ll be able to go home today. I’m not all that happy about it, though.

I don’t want to wake Lilly, but I have a crick in my back and have to sit up. She mumbles in her sleep when I move next to her, then she wakes up with a smile.

“Daddy.”

“Hi, baby. Did you get scared in the middle of the night?”

She shakes her head. “No. I got cold.”

“I guess I’m good for something.” I sit up and glance at the bed. Rachel isn’t in it. In fact, she isn’t in the cabin at all. I can smell coffee, though, so she’s been up long

enough to do that. Lilly is sitting next to me. “Do you have to go to the bathroom?”

She nods.

I stretch, then get to my feet. “Okay. I’ll take you.”

We put on shoes and jackets then go onto the porch. Rachel is sitting in one of the chairs with a cup of coffee. The rain has stopped, and the sun is shining.

She smiles. “Good morning.”

“Morning. How long have you been up?”

“About a half hour. I didn’t want to wake you guys up. You looked so cute snuggled up on the couch.”

I smile. “I’m going to take Lilly to the outhouse. We’ll be right back.”

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We step off the porch and she calls after us. “You know what happens when people say that?”

I wave over my head as we go around the corner of the house. When we come back, she has a cup of coffee for me.

“Thank you.”

Lilly goes to the door. “Can I go play in my fort?”

“Yes, honey. We’ll be out here on the porch.”

I sit in the chair next to Rachel and take a sip of my coffee. “How’d you sleep?”

“A little bit restless.”

“Me too. Actually, a lot restless.” I get to my feet and go to the railing. I lean forward and rest my hands on the wooden rail as I look out at the trees, still wet from the rain, glistening in the sun.

Rachel comes up and puts her hand over mine. “Once we get back to the house and resume our normal lives, it might make things clearer for you.”

I look down at her hand. “I suppose.” I turn toward her and take both her hands in mine. “But right here, right now, things are pretty clear.”

Her eyes twinkle. “Really?”

I smile at her. “Yeah.” I look at her for a moment, my eyes drift to her lips before I lean toward her.

“Daddy?”

I let go of Rachel’s hands and take a step back. “Yes, Lillybug?”

“I’m hungry.”

I smile at Rachel. “The kid is hungry.”

She nods. “We should probably take care of that.”

We go inside with Lilly and Rachel searches the cupboards for something resembling breakfast. She finds a plastic container with cereal in it and holds it up. “Cereal?”

Lilly wrinkles her nose. “I don’t like cereal without milk.”

Rachel studies the container for a moment. “How about I mix up some hot chocolate, but with cold water, and pour it over the cereal?”

Lilly claps. “Yay!”

I frown. “I think I’ll pass on that.”

Rachel smiles. “Me too.” She continues looking through the cupboards. “We have dehydrated eggs.”

I shake my head.

“Okay, let’s see. How about a can of brown bread and some jelly?” She shows me the

can of bread and some tiny packets of jelly.

“Um...okay. That’s not too bad.”

She looks through the jelly. “Grape, apple, or strawberry?”

“Apple.”

She smiles. “That’s my favorite, too.” She fixes Lilly’s powdered chocolate milk and cereal then opens the can of bread and slices it into half-inch slices. She brings it along with a handful of jelly packets and two knives to the table then sits down.

I watch Lilly try her cereal. “What do you think?”

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She nods. “Yummy.” I look at Rachel and mouth, “Gross.”

She laughs. “It’s the breakfast of adventurers.”

“Hmm. I guess.”

The brown bread is pretty good with the jelly and I eat several slices. Lilly wants to try it and, between the three of us, we eat all of it along with eight packets of jelly.

I lean back in my chair, fairly full. “I’m going to have to help Benjy restock this place. I think we cleaned him out a bit.”

Rachel looks at me across the table. “So, when do we need to head back?”

I don’t want to go back. I am afraid once we’re home, Rachel might change her mind about how she feels. But I guess if she does, then it would mean it wasn’t real in the first place.

“There’s no rush I guess. We can stay for a few more hours.”

Lilly cheers. “Can we go to the pond and look for frogs?”

“I don’t see why not. It might be a little muddy, but I think since we’re now seasoned adventurers, we can handle that.” I look at Rachel. “Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes. Let’s do it.”

We spend some time cleaning up the cabin. I don't want to leave a mess for Benjy to deal with. We dismantle the fort and stash the extra blankets and pillows. Rachel makes up the bed and cleans up the kitchen. When it all looks pretty much how we found it, we go outside and head for the pond.

The mud isn't too bad, and we stay pretty clean on the path to the pond. The water is high after all of the rain, and the usually clear water is muddy.

Rachel looks into the water. "Are there fish in there?"

"There are some sunfish, that's about it. I don't even know how they got in there."

Lilly spots a frog in the grass near the edge of the pond and goes to try to catch it. I watch her for a moment, then look at Rachel.

"So on the porch a while ago..."

"Yes."

"I almost..." I can feel my face grow hot and she gives me a wide smile. "If we hadn't gotten interrupted. Would you have been okay with that?"

"Yes. I would've been very okay with it."

"Hmm. Good to know." I grin. "Really good to know."

"Does this mean you've come to a decision?"

I take a breath. "I believe I have."

"Daddy?"

I laugh, then turn to Lilly. “Yes, bug?”

“Can you help me catch this frog?”

“Are you sure you want to catch it?”

“Yes. I want to hold it.”

I scratch my head. “Well, okay.”

Rachel puts a hand on my arm. “Let me.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Frogs are...you know they jump and stuff.”

She laughs. “I’ve got this.” She goes to Lilly and kneels next to her. “So, where is this frog?”

Lilly points under a bush. “In there.”

Rachel moves the lower branches aside then cups her hand on the ground. “Got him.” She picks up the frog and shows it to Lilly.

Lilly laughs and looks at me. “She got it.”

“I see that.”

Rachel stands and brings the frog to me. “Do you want to pet the little guy?”

I take a step back. “No. Not really.”

She laughs then lets Lilly hold it for a minute before they let it go. It jumps off and disappears under another bush.

Rachel looks at me. “Frogs? Really?”

“They’re just kind of creepy.”

“Okay.”

I glance at Lilly, who is busy by the water, then take Rachel’s hand. “So, I’m a little out of practice with all of this stuff.”

“That’s okay. We’ll figure it out together.”

I glance at Lilly again to make sure she is busy then lean toward Rachel.

“Mr. Michaelson?” A voice calls from behind us.

Once more, I step back. “Seriously?”

Rachel laughs and pats my chest. “It’s okay.”

“Is it really?”

Benjy comes down the path and walks over to us. “I was worried when you didn’t come home. Thought I’d hike out here and make sure you were okay.”

“Thank you, Benjy. We got caught in the rain.”

“Yeah, that was a doozy. Lightning, thunder. I see the pond’s high.”

I nod. “Yeah. It rained all night.”

“Were you comfortable in the cabin?”

“It was great. Warm and dry. We dug into your food supply a bit, though.”

“No worries. That’s why it’s there.”

Lilly runs over to him. “Benjy, did you come to join us on our adventure?”

“I just came to make sure you were okay, little miss.”

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“We’re fine. We made a fort. And played Sorry. And had hot chocolate.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It was.”

I sigh. “I guess we should head back.” I look at Rachel and she sticks out her lower lip for a second, then smiles at me. I’m not quite ready to go home yet, and it seems, she isn’t either.

We all go back to the cabin and make sure it is secure against the weather and any nosy critters. I hesitate on the porch.

“Benjy. Would you mind taking Lilly back? Rachel and I will be along in a minute.”

He looks confused for a moment, then seems to realize why I am asking him to leave without us.

He gives me a nod and a smile. “Sure thing, Mr. Michaelson.”

I give Lilly a hug and kiss and tell her to make sure Benjy has a great adventure on the way back. She seems excited to go. Rachel and I both wave to them and watch them until they disappear down the trail.

I turn to her. “So. I guess I should’ve asked you first if you wanted to stay.”

She shrugs. “Well, you are the boss.”

“Yeah. Well, I don’t want to be your boss.”

“Are you firing me?”

I shake my head and step closer to her. “No, I’m promoting you.”

“Gee Mr. Michaelson. I don’t know what to say.”

I put my hands on her waist and pull her in close. “You don’t need to say anything.”

She puts her arms around my neck. “I think I’m going to like this promotion.”

I lean in and pause a moment, our lips just an inch apart. “No one here to interrupt again.”

“Just the two of us.”

I gently press my lips to hers. My heart is pounding a million beats a minute then I feel her body melt into mine. All the unspoken words and feelings I have for her are sealed at this moment.

I lean back and gaze into her sparkling hazel eyes. “So, are we really doing this?”

“I believe we are, Preston.”

I put my hand on her cheek and gently pull her in, kissing her again. “The adventure is just beginning.”

Epilogue

Rachel

Eighteen Months Later

I am about as happy as I can be. Our wedding is beautiful and intimate, with just a few friends and family. Lilly is my bridesmaid, and she is delighted to be part of the celebration. We'd spent more time finding her the perfect dress than we did finding my wedding gown. But in the end, we were both happy. She looks and says she feels, like a princess. And I have to admit, I do too, in my very understated dress. After all, it isn't about the dress. It is about the man. Becoming Preston's wife is all I really care about. The rest is just frosting.

We have our reception at the house, with a few more people than had been at the wedding but, still, we keep it small and intimate. It is perfect, and we planned it early enough in the day to give us time to get to our honeymoon spot.

We could've gone anywhere—Hawaii, Paris, the Caribbean. But we both want to go somewhere that means something to us. Somewhere special. The place where it all began.

After we say goodbye to our guests, we change out of our wedding attire and put on jeans, hiking boots, and jackets. It looks like it's going to rain and we want to be prepared. I hope it does rain. A rainstorm would make it perfect.

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We kiss Lilly goodbye and tell her we'll see her in a couple of days. Benjy will be bringing her to us at the end of the week. In the meantime, Bea is staying at the house to look after her. There are a few tears from Lilly and me, but I assure her we'll see her soon and build the best fort ever in the living room.

Preston and I head down the trail hand in hand. We've spent the last three months planning a wedding and we are ready to spend some time alone. I can't wait. We'll miss Lilly but it'll be nice to be just the two of us for a few days.

As we get close to the cabin, the rain starts.

Preston laughs. "Here we go. You got your wish."

I hug Preston. "This makes it perfect."

We run the rest of the way and up onto the porch, which has a new wooden swing on it.

"What's this?"

"It's a gift from Benjy. He built it for us."

"It's beautiful. I love it." I look out at the rain, which is falling gently. "And I love that it's raining."

"Why?"

“It was raining when I fell in love with you.”

“Hmm. I thought you fell in love with me that first day when you thought I was an intruder and you wanted to bash my brains in with that piece of firewood.”

“No. That’s the day you fell in love with me.”

“Oh, right. I was pretty impressed that you were willing to defend the place after only a couple of hours.” He takes my hand. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

“I want to sit on my beautiful swing and watch the rain.”

“We’ll come back out. Just come on.” He opens the door. “Okay. Close your eyes.”

“What did you do?”

“Just close your eyes. I need to light the lantern.”

I close my eyes and stand right inside the door. He returns in a moment and leads me a few feet inside the room. “Okay. Open them.”

I open my eyes. Somehow, he’s managed to refurnish the place, complete with a beautiful brass bed frame and new mattresses. There’s a new couch and two chairs by the woodstove. The only original furniture is the kitchen table and four chairs.

I look around. “How’d you do this?”

“You’d be amazed how far someone will haul something if you pay them enough money.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Well, I couldn’t have my bride sleeping on a mattress on the floor.” I put my arms around his neck and he puts his hands on my waist and pulls me in close. “I hope it’s okay. I hope you’re not disappointed it’s not the same.”

I kiss him. “I love it. Thank you. I can’t believe you did this. Or that it was even possible.”

“Yeah, well, you almost ruined the surprise when you wanted to come here last month.”

“I thought your excuse was kind of lame.”

He kisses me again. “Do you want to go back out and watch the rain?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He grabs a blanket off the couch. We go back outside and sit down on the new swing. He puts his arm around me and we snuggle into the blanket. The rain is falling a little harder, but the porch is staying dry.

He pulls me close. “Are you happy?”

“Preston. If I was any happier, I think I’d explode.”

“Can’t have that.” He kisses me on the temple. “You know we can still go somewhere for a honeymoon. Anywhere you want.”

I shake my head. “This is the only place I wanted to go.”

“Okay.” He’s quiet for a few minutes, then turns to me. “You know. We could add on to this place. Make it bigger. Add a bedroom or two.”

“One for us and one for Lilly.”

“Yeah. But we could put bunk beds in there.”

“Bunk beds?”

“Yeah. You know. For when the next kid comes along.”

I smile. We haven’t really talked about having children together. But it is something I’ve always wanted. “You want to have a baby with me?”

“Of course. One or...more.”

I cock my head. “How many more?”

He shrugs. “Three. Six. I don’t know.”

I gasp. “Six?”

“What do you say?”

I take a moment. “I say we’d need more than two bedrooms. But let’s make one baby at a time. And play it by ear.”

“Sounds like a solid plan, Mrs. Michaelson.”

THE END