

CHAPTER 1



SHELLEY

“UGH.” I GRUNTED AS I SLAMMED MY FIST INTO THE dough, punching a large dent and shrinking the risen mixture to half its height. It was probably too soon to rework the bread dough, but the action worked wonders in releasing some of my pent-up frustration.

I was so done with Patrick. No, I was done with men altogether.

I should have known better than to date a man that will-fully wore spandex in public. Real men didn’t prance around with everything on display, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They wore loose shorts and played real sports. The kind that made them sweat and smell like real guys. They didn’t bend into all kinds of poses like a pretzel and

wear workout clothes that looked better on their female counterparts.

That alone should have tipped me off that something wasn't right. I had ignored that nagging voice in the back of my mind and gone out with Patrick anyway.

I'd been desperate for someone to pay attention to the real me, not the person they thought I was, and Patrick had seemed like he did. He'd made me feel *seen*.

But I'd been wrong. So wrong. *Again*. Turned out the weasel was more interested in seeing how many women he could string along at the same time. Yeah, he'd seen me. As nothing more than a number.

Not anymore, though. I was through.

I rubbed the length of my arm over my forehead, hoping to keep my flour-covered hands out of my golden blonde hair, which had escaped my long ponytail. After a long day manning the bakery alone, and the force with which I'd been pounding the mixture, my ponytail hung crooked and loose.

One last pat, and I set the bowl aside.

"You sure you're done with that? I think you could get another round in if you gave it another go." Mamie's voice startled me as the back door swung closed, alerting me of her presence.

"I think I'll pop this in the fridge for the morning." I exhaled, secretly chastising myself for my childish behavior. "What brings you around so late?" I checked the clock to

make sure I hadn't imagined it was almost closing time. I wasn't ready for any more false hope today.

"With Charlotte away on her honeymoon, I thought I'd come and help you close up. By the looks of it," Mamie eyed me and pulled her brows up high, "you could use the extra help."

Charlotte, the owner of Char's Sweets and Treats, was technically my boss, even though we'd been close friends for almost a decade. As Charlotte's grandmother and the person who raised her from the age of sixteen, Mamie often helped out in the bakery when Charlotte needed an extra pair of hands. Or she came around to sit and catch up on the latest news and eye the customers. Preferably the male ones.

Mamie didn't wait for my reply as she took an extra apron and pulled it over her head.

She may be Charlotte's grandmother, but she'd always treated me like her own family. Ever since my parents had moved away to Florida earlier this year, she mothered me even more.

"Go." She shooed me out to the front of the bakery, not hesitating a second as she plunged her hands into the sudsy water, scrubbing the first bowl she reached for.

The front was empty, which wasn't unusual for a Tuesday just before closing. If I was lucky, the pesky teenagers that left a sticky mess of brownies with hot fudge and ice cream twenty minutes ago would be the last patrons for the day. I did a quick scan of the place, wiping down every

surface I hadn't gotten to earlier, but leaving the mopping. I'd deal with that in the morning. My confrontation with Patrick earlier and the long day at the bakery had left me beyond exhausted.

"So, another date with the charming Patrick tonight?" Mamie beamed as I dragged myself through the door and into the kitchen with the last of the dirty cups and plates I'd missed in the debacle with the hot fudge. Her words halted my advance, making the weight of the day pound down on me in full force.

Mamie's waiting face blurred as my eyes filled with moisture. Frustration had me pinching my eyes shut and keeping them closed to avoid any tears from leaking. I would not cry over Patrick again. I would not.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Mamie's voice sounded near.

I felt her hand on my cheek, brushing a trail of wetness away despite my failing attempts to ward off my emotions.

"There'll be no more dates with Patrick." My voice cracked, and I felt the last of the fight leave me. My shoulders dropped, and I raised my hands to cover my face. Mamie was quick to wrap her arms around me and rub my back. Instead of stopping the tears from falling, I felt all the emotions I'd been holding in since I'd turned my back on that despicable man erupt in a torrent of waterworks.

"There, there now. Let it all out." Mamie continued to

soothe me, whispering kind words of comfort as she held me near.

Her arms stayed wrapped around me until I calmed down. When I pulled back, I felt like I'd been crying for hours instead of only minutes. The steady banging in my head indicated a rhythm achieved only by a constant, drawn-out hammering instead of the mere breakdown I'd allowed myself in Mamie's arms.

"What did that man do to you?" Mamie held me at arm's length, peering into my eyes, her brows drawn together.

"What makes you so sure he's to blame?" I ran my fingers under my lashes, hoping to remove the last traces of my meltdown.

"Tears like that. I'm not an idiot. Only a man can inflict such pain," Mamie shot back. "Tell me now, before I find that man and beat it out of him."

I returned her stare, feeling my lips tugging up in a small smile. When Mamie's pulled down in a frown, I realized she wasn't joking.

"I'll give you one guess. What do men do that make us cry big, fat, ugly tears?" I returned her question with one of my own, still not ready to admit it out loud. How could I be that stupid?

"Are you telling me that..." Mamie sputtered, her cheeks growing red. "Man." She spat the word as if it tasted of bitter lemon in her mouth. "He cheated on you?"

I nodded, feeling my eyes pooling again. I blinked rapidly,

all the while chanting to myself that I would be strong and not break down again. I would not!

“Why, next time I see him, I will...” Mamie’s voice rose as she threw her fist in the air.

“No,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper, my chin wobbling. “I told him all I had to say this afternoon. I don’t want anything more to do with him. I’m done.”

“And rightly so. That good for nothing piece of...”

“Mamie.” I interrupted her, before she started cussing. She had a mouth on her and was well acquainted with not only a colorful English vocabulary, but an expansive French—her mother tongue—one as well. She utilized it frequently when she felt like English didn’t provide her with ample words to do the job sufficiently. It wasn’t often you saw such a put-together seventy-year-old lady with perfect makeup and gray hair pinned up to perfection swear like a sailor.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon. Patrick did me a favor, really.”

“How?” Mamie looked at me, not at all convinced.

“I’m twenty-seven years old. I’ve dated plenty of men, and no relationship has ever lasted, this time included. I’m done with it. No more.”

“What do you mean, no more?” Mamie rested her hands on her hips, studying me.

“I mean, I’m done dating. Each time I’ve either not fallen in love and hurt the guy, or I’ve fallen in love and gotten hurt.

I'm done with it. No more. I refuse to keep doing this to myself."

"You're just saying that because that good for nothing piece of..."

"Mamie," I said, raising my left brow.

"Because Patrick"—Mamie spoke his name through her teeth—"is an idiot. Not all men are like him. You can't give up."

The idea took shape in my mind, brightening my outlook the longer I mulled it over. "Oh, but I can. And I will. No more dating."

"You're not serious. No decisions should ever be made following a breakup. Except maybe a radical makeover. How do you feel about bangs? Or some pink highlights?"

"Mamie." I wasn't in the mood to discuss any type of makeover options.

"You'll feel differently in the morning. There are plenty of great men still out there. Trust me."

"No. I won't." I smiled my first wide smile since three fifteen that afternoon, when I had told that good for nothing Patrick and his hussy I hoped they would be happy together before I walked out on them in his apartment. "I'm so sure of it, I'm making you a promise. No more dating for me. Ever."

"I am going to ignore this. You'll change your mind once you've had a good night's rest."

Before I could argue her statement, the bell rang out in

front, notifying me of a customer. I checked the time and realized I should have closed up four minutes ago. Crap.

Rubbing my hands on the rag tucked in my apron, I ran out front, hoping it was just a single customer and not a horde in search of dessert and a place to settle in for the evening.

“Oh, hi, James.” I recognized the cute guy that was a regular in the bakery. Charlotte had taken him out on a single date when she was secretly dating Will, her husband. Luckily, James had been pretty chill about it, and he’d continued to frequent the bakery.

“Hi, Shelley.” James offered a kind smile.

“We’re about to close.” I walked from behind the counter to the door and flipped the sign over to closed, just in case any other patrons decided to crash in after hours. “What can I get you?” I tried to hide my impatience as my foot tapped a steady beat behind the counter.

“Just two brownies and a granola bar.”

“Sure, coming right up.” I bagged his purchases and rang him up.

“Oh, hi, James.” Mamie walked in with all the flair that woman possessed, causing me to exhale the air I’d just inhaled in a long, drawn out breath. Lord, give me strength.

“Your craving for something sweet is what brings you by this late?” She batted her eyelashes quickly, making her look innocent enough to those who didn’t know her well. Not me. I knew she was up to her scheming ways. I just wasn’t sure what the game was yet.

“On my way to my sister’s, actually. She loves Charlotte’s brownies. I thought she could use a little pick-me-up. She’s been working really hard.”

“How nice.” Mamie’s words were directed at James, but her face was turned to me. “It’s always nice to see a man so dedicated to taking care of the people he loves.”

I rolled my eyes as I handed him his change, all the while shaking my head at Mamie’s poor attempt to try and sway me.

“I bet your sister really appreciates the way you spoil her,” Mamie said.

“I hope so.” James bit on his bottom lip. His gaze moved from Mamie’s smug face to my shaking one, and he fought to hide his smile.

“You’ll make some lady real happy one day, such a fine catch as yourself.” Mamie snatched the box of baked goods up from my hands and handed them over to James.

He chuckled, but didn’t offer any reply. James knew Mamie enough not to respond to these kinds of comments. I walked him to the door, eager to lock up and end this disastrous day. The moment he exited the shop, I forced a smile on my tired face and shut the door, turning the latch with a weary sigh. I couldn’t get home fast enough.

“I bet you he doesn’t wear spandex. But he’d probably look real good in it if he did.” Mamie seemed lost in her thoughts as she gazed out to his retreating form. “Such a fine...”

“Why don’t you help me get the last of the cleanup

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done?” I interrupted her, before she caused any trouble. The way her eyes were zoned into his backside, there was only one way she could have finished that sentence.

Mamie returned her focus to me with a question in her eyes.

“Like you don’t know what I’m talking about. Come on. Let’s finish up so we can go home.” I slung my arm around Mamie as we both headed into the kitchen.

As I lay in bed, the one thought that kept me from letting the tears come and take over was my new resolve. I’d been wrong before to date a guy like Patrick. From the start, that small voice had been warning me that he wasn’t right. And I ignored it. But now I had the best possible plan. If I kept myself from getting in any type of situation like that again, I could never get hurt. No more men, and I’d be just fine.

CHAPTER 2



SHELLEY

THE BAKERY WAS EXCEPTIONALLY BUSY FOR A FRIDAY mid-morning. The morning rush had been its usual bustling event, but a steady flow had continued to trickle in, keeping Mamie and me occupied up front, serving and cleaning tables. If this pace kept up, the display would continue emptying out faster than we had been refilling it.

“You know Will has a really cute cousin,” Mamie said as I rounded the corner, my hands piled high with dirty dishes.

I just shook my head and continued out to the back. Mamie had been on my case ever since my meltdown over a week ago, convinced I was wrong in swearing off men. She was waiting for me to come to my senses.

“Or if blond and blue eyes isn’t what you’re into, I’m sure Will knows some good guys more to your liking. Oh, and there’s that lovely James that’s a regular here.” She sashayed into the kitchen, holding an empty cake stand.

“I’m not having this conversation with you again, Mamie.” I ran my hands under the water and walked past her, drying them on the rag tucked in my apron. “I haven’t changed my mind.” I loaded up a tray with some more brownies and a selection of cupcakes to take out front.

“Maybe not yet.” Mamie followed behind me, her arms laden with another tray of cinnamon rolls. “But that’s because you’re still pining over Patrick.”

I almost dropped the tray I was holding as I stumbled from her words. “I’m not pining for Patrick.” I shook my head. “I told you.” I started filling the display case. “I am over him.”

“If you’re over him, it’s time to look to the future.” Mamie grinned, stepping next to me and adding the cinnamon rolls to the display trays.

“I am looking to the future. That’s what my whole rule is about. No more dating.”

“Hmph,” Mamie spouted. “We’ll see.”

Before I could offer a proper reply, the bell chimed, alerting the arrival of another customer. As I turned to see who’d entered, I was greeted with the one voice in the whole world that could put a smile on my face even on the darkest of days.

“Auntie Shell, we’re here.” The sweet voice rang out through the whole place, warming me instantly with real joy.

“Benny boy.” I ran out from behind the counter and held my arms open. My ten-year-old nephew threw his arms around me and I wrapped him up in a tight hug, lifting his slim frame up in the air. “Oh, man. You’ve grown.” I set him down and ran my fingers through his shaggy-brown mop. His face split into a wide grin, reminding me of my sister, Zoë. This kid had the same bright-blue eyes his mom and I shared, but unlike us, he had his father’s darker hair.

“Hi, Shelley.” A deep, gravelly voice cut through our exchange.

I looked up and saw that matching hair color paired with deep, dark chocolate eyes.

“Hi, Adrian.” I still clung to Ben, unwilling to let him go. “You’re early.”

“Yeah, traffic was smooth.” He rested his hands on Ben’s shoulders.

I stood there, staring at both of them for a second, taking in the changes from the last time I’d seen them. Sure, Ben FaceTimed me all the time, but I hadn’t really seen them since last Christmas when Adrian had brought Ben to celebrate the holiday with my parents. And Adrian rarely got on the phone when Ben spoke to me. Still, something seemed different about Adrian. I couldn’t figure out what it was.

“Well?” Mamie came and stood next to me. “Are you going to introduce me?”

“Oh, sorry.” I shook my head and smiled. “Mamie, meet Adrian and Ben. Guys, this is Renée Dubois, Charlotte’s grandmother. Everyone calls her Mamie.”

“Nice to meet you, Benjamin.” Mamie bent down slightly, peering into Ben’s eyes, a glint of mischief making hers shine. “I’ve heard so much about you. I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Ben smiled back at her, not at all hiding behind Adrian like I expected him to. Mamie clearly made him feel right at ease, like she did most people.

“And you.” Mamie extended her hand to Adrian, offering him a pleasant enough smile. “Not that I can say I’ve heard much about you,” she added under her breath. Luckily, Adrian didn’t hear her muttering.

Even though Mamie wasn’t holding back in the way she was looking over Adrian as if he were a cupcake in the display case, she at least had the sense not to imply anything like she had been with every other male that had walked into the bakery in the past week.

“So.” I clapped my hands together. “When’s your interview?” I knew it was at 2 p.m., but talking gave me something to focus on, other than Mamie eyeing Adrian.

“Mamie,” I said, my eyes still trained on Adrian and Ben. “Why don’t you take Ben to the back and get him something to eat?”

“Sure, *chérie*. Follow me.” Mamie led Ben to the kitchen,

prattling as she wrapped an arm around him. She turned back and offered a huge smile.

Once they were out of hearing range, I dived in without preamble.

“Does Zoë know you’re applying for a job here? In California?”

Adrian met my gaze and answered without blinking. “I spoke to her when I emailed the company my resume. I explained there was a possibility I might get the job, which would mean a move. But you know Zoë. I don’t think she heard most of what I was telling her. She was up north in Canada when we had that particular conversation. Working for a boat charter company. Some place that takes tourists out to spot the whales or something.”

My sister. She never put down roots or worked the same job long enough to build any type of career. Which was fine when she was eighteen, but becoming a mother should have changed that. Sadly, so far, Ben hadn’t been reason enough for her to change.

“Are you nervous about the interview?” I shifted the conversation, trying desperately to halt my train of thought. I didn’t need to spend any more energy being angry with Zo for leaving Ben when he was a nine-month-old baby. She and I might share the same DNA, but that was where the similarities between us ended. I’d never met anyone more different than me.

“Yeah.” Adrian released his breath in a nervous chuckle. “This could be the real break I need.”

Didn’t I know it. This guy had given up a lifetime dream when Zoë had told him she was pregnant, stepping up and carrying the weight of parenthood from day one. Mostly by himself. He had been working construction for over ten years, doing his best to provide a stable family situation for my nephew, with no help from Zoë. That’s why he deserved this position as superintendent for a prestigious building company more than anyone. It’s why I e-mailed him the info when I heard some patrons talk about it a couple of weeks ago.

“Have you thought about what you’ll do if you do get the job?” I raised my brows, waiting for his reply.

“I’ve been looking into school districts, homes we can afford in those areas, childcare options. I think I have it figured out, mostly.”

I studied this man, wondering how he and my sister ever had a child together. The mention of schools, planning, and living arrangements would have Zo running away a mile a minute. She believed in living life to the fullest. And for her, that meant doing what she felt like when she felt like it. No schedule, no fixed appointments, no rules and regulations tying her down.

Of course, Adrian had been her number one partner in crime through it all. But Ben changed things. At least for him.

“It sounds like you have,” I complimented him, though I

wasn't surprised. Adrian had this parenting thing down. You only had to look at Ben to see as much. He was amazing.

I reached out and took ahold of his hand. "If you do end up moving, I'll be here to finally help out with Ben."

Adrian squeezed my hand and met my gaze. His eyes warmed, causing the tight lines to disappear. "Thanks, Shell." His touch, although unfamiliar, filled my chest with warmth.

Our eyes stayed fixed on each other until the bell chimed, alerting me to a customer's arrival.

I shook myself, clearing my foggy brain. Turning to face the new patron, I saw Adrian take a giant step away and pull out his phone.

After serving the young mother and ringing up her order, I turned back to a waiting Adrian. His back was still turned, his hands tucked in the back pockets of his jeans as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

Making my way around the counter, I walked up next to him.

"Sorry about that." I pasted on a smile.

"No worries. I should probably go and get our things checked into the hotel. Ben insisted on coming here first."

A smile tugged the corners of my lips up.

"You're sure it's okay I leave him here with you?" Adrian's head cocked to the side.

"Hey, come with me." I led him to the window in the door between the kitchen and the shop. "See?" I pointed, guiding his gaze to the scene in the kitchen.

Ben sat on a stool at the end of the long worktable; a plate piled high with cookies sat in front of him, a tall glass of milk off to the side. But what was most remarkable was Mamie. She talked to him animatedly, gesturing with both her hands, while Ben clutched his middle and bent over, shrieking in amusement, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I think we’ll be just fine.” I smirked.

“Thank you.” Adrian turned to me. His shoulders slumped, and he released the breath he held.

For the second time today, I found myself studying Adrian. I didn’t have kids. I didn’t know what it was like. But I imagined it couldn’t be easy, especially doing it alone. And Adrian was alone. Zo was hardly ever there, and Adrian’s parents were out of the picture, as far as I knew. And Adrian wasn’t close—either physically or emotionally, for my parents to be of much help. I was just happy I could be there to do this for him. I was happy he let me help in small ways.

“Sure.” I wrapped my arms around Adrian, enfolding him in a hug. I’d known Adrian for almost fifteen years. He and Zoë had been dating off and on almost four years when she got pregnant. He’d always felt like family. But holding him now, feeling him hesitate a second before he wrapped his arms around me, felt kind of...awkward. I didn’t really know what to call it. It just felt weird. Not like hugging my almost older brother.

“You go nail that interview.” I pulled back as soon as politely possible and pasted on a convincing smile. I didn’t

know what that hug was, but I refused to spend any time thinking about it.

"Thanks, Shell." Adrian raised his hand in a quick wave and walked out the door, promising to return in a couple hours to pick up Ben.

"That looked awfully cozy." Mamie sneaked up to me, startling me.

"Don't do that!" I shrieked, my hand resting on my chest, keeping my heart tucked securely in my rib cage.

"He left for his job interview?" Mamie stared at Adrian's retreating figure.

"Yep." I scanned the shop, noticing two tables that needed to be cleaned. Taking my rag and cleaning spray, I made my way over there.

"You know, he's handsome enough to do the job."

"You do realize this is the father of my nephew, the guy that had a kid with my sister, right?" I pointed out.

"The sister that left almost ten years ago. The one that isn't in either of their lives?"

"No, she isn't," I agreed.

"Right." Mamie's Cheshire cat grin doubled in size.

"Right," I shot back, feeling like a petulant child.

"I'm just saying." Mamie's grin grew wider.

"He's Ben's father, Zo's ex. Sure, he's good-looking but it's beside the point. He's off limits. Besides, I'm done with men. Remember?" Heat bloomed in my cheeks, burning hotter and

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hotter the longer I talked. I couldn't believe I even needed to explain this to Mamie.

"Sure, Shelley." She crossed her arms and jutted out her chin. "Whatever you say."

"I'm going to wash these dishes and check on Ben." I didn't wait for her reply as I loaded up and walked to the back, her snickering laugh trailing in my wake.

CHAPTER 3



ADRIAN

“THANK YOU FOR COMING OUT HERE TODAY. WE SHOULD get back to you with more news in a day or two.” Mr. Sanders stood up from his seat and extended his hand.

“Thanks again for your time.” I shook his hand, my shoulders relaxing the slightest bit.

“Speak to you soon, Adrian.” Mr. Sanders held the door open for me to exit.

“Thank you, sir.” I gave him another nod before stepping out and releasing the breath I held. The interview had gone a lot better than I had expected it to go. Turned out Mr. Sanders was a huge soccer fan. We’d hit it off immediately after I noticed the signed and framed Zinedine Zidane shirt on his wall.

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Of course, I didn't have much experience with job interviews. I'd taken on the very first job that paid the bills when I found out Zoë was pregnant. Luckily, working construction turned out to be something I was good at. All those years of high school soccer had left me fit to work long, exhausting hours doing heavy lifting and manual labor. I was fortunate enough to have a foreman—Larry—who saw something in me. He taught me all the different trades he knew, teaching me patiently over the years I worked for him until I perfected the different skills needed to build and renovate residential properties.

But I wanted more. When Shelley e-mailed me this job posting, I had to apply. And Larry understood. He'd written me a glowing reference letter. The job held a lot more responsibility than the hands-on work I was used to, but it was time for me to work my way up and offer Ben a better future.

I had a good feeling about the interview. After discussing the job details with Mr. Sanders, I was even more convinced it was the job for me.

I pulled out my phone and sent Shelley a quick text.

A: DONE WITH THE INTERVIEW. BE THERE IN 25 MIN.

THE THREE DOTS APPEARED IMMEDIATELY.

. . .

S: HOW DID IT GO?

A: GREAT! I THINK I NAILED IT. THANKS, SHELLEY.

S: SURE. WE'RE AT MY PLACE. MAMIE'S CLOSING UP.

A: ON MY WAY.

I HOPPED INTO THE CAR, AND TYPED SHELLEY'S ADDRESS from my contacts into the navigation app. When my stomach grumbled, I checked the time. Almost 6 p.m. I'd skipped lunch earlier, too nervous to eat.

Before shifting the car into drive, I sent another quick text.

A: I'LL BRING DINNER.

I DIDN'T WAIT FOR HER REPLY, JUST HIT THE GAS, EAGER to pick up some food and get back to Ben.

I COLLECTED THE BAGS OF CHINESE TAKEOUT AND walked up Shell's drive. Balancing the food in one hand while I knocked on the door with the other proved much harder with all the food I'd picked up. My empty stomach and high from the interview had possibly made me overeager when I placed the order.

"Hi." Shelley swung the door open. Her long, blonde hair, which had been tied up earlier, hung in loose waves around her shoulders. "Come in." She took some of the food out of my hands, and as our hands brushed, that funny sensation from when she hugged me earlier buzzed up my arm. I still couldn't identify what it was. I wasn't sure I wanted to, either.

"Benny Boy," I said as I walked inside and spotted my son on a chair at the kitchen counter. "What up, dude?" I ruffled his dark mop of hair and bent down to drop a kiss on the top of his head.

"Dad." Ben dragged each letter as he shook his head. "You know I hate it when you call me that."

"You didn't seem to mind when Auntie Shelley called you Benny Boy," I teased, enjoying how his cheeks heated.

"That was different," he said, dropping his chin to his chest.

"No, it wasn't," I taunted him, enjoying the way he squirmed in his seat.

"Dad." He looked me in the eye, his face still a shade darker than usual, but a determined set to his features. He

was at that age where he wasn't old enough to be a man just yet, but he didn't seem like my little boy anymore either. I wasn't ready to let go of that little boy. Time was going too fast. If I got this new job, I would have to leave him more and miss out on a lot of time with him. I wasn't sure I was ready for that. But college wouldn't pay for itself.

"All right." I ruffled his hair, enjoying how his lips pulled up in a wide grin. The dimple in his left cheek appeared, showing more of his boyish charms and less of the teenager that was slowly emerging.

"I hope you picked up some spring rolls." Shelley pulled a hair tie from her wrist and swept up her hair in a high ponytail. She opened up the kitchen cabinet to her right and pulled out plates and glasses.

"Can you fill these with water from the fridge, Ben?" Shelley handed Ben the glasses. "Can you grab the forks?" She tilted her head in the direction of the utensil drawer. When I made my way over to take the forks, I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket. Pulling it out, I recognized the number.

"I'm going to have to take this." I drew my lower lip between my teeth.

"Sure, no worries." Shelley smiled, causing her whole face to light up. Feeling the phone buzz in my hand once more, I hit the green circle, and held the device to my ear.

"Hello, this is Adrian."

"Hi, Adrian. This is Scott Sanders."

My gut tightened. Why was he calling me so soon after the interview? Was he calling to give me good news or bad?

“Hi, Mr. Sanders. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Great.” I felt that knot in my belly twist tighter the longer he took to get to the point.

“I’m actually calling to talk about your interview.”

“You are?” I sounded like an idiot, repeating everything the man said.

“I talked to my partner, and we both feel like you are the right man for the job. Could you come in Monday to go over the details and look over the offer we have for you? Say, eight o’clock?”

A thousand thoughts ran through my mind. Was I ready to make the move Ben and I had been considering for weeks now? Could I leave my life in Arizona behind?

“Uhm... Sure. That sounds great. I’ll be there.” My voice grew stronger with each word.

“Great. And please, call me Scott.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sanders. Scott, sir.”

“Bye, Adrian.” Mr. Sanders chuckled.

“Bye.” I heard Mr. Sanders disconnect the call, and I held out the phone, staring at it.

“Was that good news, or bad?” Shelley’s voice interrupted my scattered thoughts.

“Um...Good news.” I wrinkled my nose.

“Okay?” Shelley sounded unsure.

“No, really. Good news.” I paused, still mulling over the conversation. “I got the job.”

“You what?” Shelley squealed at the same time Ben called out, “We’re moving?”

“Yes,” I blurted, the corners of my mouth quirking up in a broad smile, answering both of their questions at once.

“Yeah!” Ben launched himself in my arms, almost knocking over a glass of water in the process. He wrapped himself around me, holding tight for longer than usual. I hung on, needing to share both my happiness and deal with my anxiety over this news and all its implications. All of a sudden, things felt really real.

“Wow. Congratulations, Adrian.” Shelley stood back, grinning. When Ben let go, she gave me a hug. My hands reached out to her, and when they connected with her back, my fingers flattened, spreading out over the thin fabric of her shirt, and soaking up the warmth of her skin through her shirt. That same ripple coursed through me, catching me off guard. What was *that*?

“Thanks, Shell.” I coughed, clearing my throat. This was Shelley, Zoë’s baby sister. What was wrong with me?

“You know what this means, right?” Shell bent down at eye level with Ben, resting her hands on her knees. “You and I get to spend loads of time together. A-L-L the time!” Her voice grew louder and more animated with each word, her whole face lighting up.

“All right!” Ben shot into Shelley’s arms, squeezing her tight.

“No more painful good-byes, Benny Boy.” Shelley’s eyes closed as she squeezed him back with just as much force.

I wasn’t sure who was more excited about the news.

“Let’s eat,” I said, needing to lighten the mood. When my stomach growled, Ben laughed and took my hand, leading me to the table and the waiting food.

“LET’S CLEAR THIS UP.” SHELLEY GOT UP, STACKING THE dirty plates and collecting the glasses.

“What do you want to do with this?” I pointed to the half-empty containers. We’d made a real dent in the load I’d picked up, but there was still a lot left.

“Let’s put it into the fridge.” Shell didn’t wait for me but headed into the kitchen.

I followed her, the sweet and sour chicken and fried rice cartons balanced in my hands away from my shirt to avoid any stains. I knew firsthand I didn’t want to have to scrub the grease out of my lucky shirt tonight.

“Auntie Shell, can I use your charger for my tablet? It’s almost dead.”

“Sure. It’s in my room. Second door on the right, down there.”

“Thanks.” Ben dashed off in the direction Shell had pointed, leaving us alone in the kitchen.

“No problem, bud. We can take care of this by ourselves,” I called out after him.

“He’s probably tired from the long drive.” The corners of Shelley’s eyes crinkled.

I observed her. The way her ponytail hung lopsided on her head, the carefree smile on her face, and the way her eyes lit up when she spoke of Ben. It wasn’t something I was accustomed to. I was used to making all the calls where Ben was concerned. I didn’t mind her letting him off the hook. Not at all. It just felt different. Unsettling.

“What?” She lifted her eyebrow, dropping the first plate into the dishwasher.

“So.” I walked up next to her, helping her with the task and ignoring the foreign emotion poking at my train of thought. “This is the kitchen I get to see each week, right?”

Shelley’s face flushed as she bit her lip. It surprised me that someone that had her own baking channel with over a million subscribers was still so shy talking about it.

“I can’t believe you follow me.”

“What are you talking about? Ben is your greatest fan. He insists on watching every single episode.”

Ever since he figured out how to access the videos on the website, and later on the tablet, he had watched every single one of his auntie’s videos at least three times. Not that he ever tried any of her recipes, he just loved to watch her in action.

“I do love his comments each week. And he has been great at making suggestions for new content. The other followers love Ben, too.”

“You really followed your dreams, didn’t you?” My gut tightened, remembering all the dreams I’d left behind all those years ago. Sure, I had Ben. I didn’t regret that at all. But I ached for all the missed opportunities. All the hopes I had for the future. Shelley wasn’t stupid, like Zo and I had been. She had worked hard, and gone after what she wanted in life.

“I don’t know if I’d say that this,” she lifted both her hands up to the side, “was all I ever dreamed of as a child. I didn’t even think such a thing was possible. But I love what I do. I never thought I could turn what started out as a hobby into a full-time career. But here I am.”

“Here you sure are.” I refused to dwell on my failures. Shell had done amazing for herself.

“But look at you. Ben is such a great kid. I’m so excited I get to spend more time with him. Christmas isn’t nearly enough.”

I chuckled. “No, I guess not.”

“And now this new job. You have got to be excited, right?” Remembering my interview from this afternoon, I couldn’t deny the sense of belonging I felt when I spoke to Mr. Sanders. Scott. He had made me feel at ease when he explained the new project they were starting. Construction of a new residential area bordering an already developed area sounded like enough of a challenge as a first-time superinten-

dent. I hoped it wouldn't be too much for me to handle. The extra pay would help with Ben growing up. I refused for him to miss out on college, like I had.

"Right?" Shelley placed her hand on mine, and I felt something swirl in my gut. Had I eaten one too many spring rolls? When she squeezed my hand, I looked into her eyes, and something in my chest squeezed.

"Right," I said, coughing to clear my throat. I wasn't sure what we were talking about anymore.

"After everything that happened." Shelley's forehead furrowed. "All the sacrifices you've made. Ben is one lucky kid. This job." She paused, her eyes searching mine. "This is your lucky break. You deserve this, Adrian."

She had no idea how much I hoped her words were true. How much I wished, after all this time, that this was the break I had been waiting for.

But first, I'd have to let Zoë know we would be moving to California.