

Prologue

(Five years ago)

He felt like he'd jumped in a time machine and traveled back two decades.

Oh my God it's Grace! It has to be!

Sitting at an end of the long conference table, Jacob Wetzel's heart pounded as he stared at the blond woman leading the meeting. She was beautiful, no doubt about it, but that wasn't what made his pulse race. It was the way she scrunched her nose every time she sneezed. The way she pursed her lips when she concentrated. And especially the little scar under her chin—which he remembered happened when she fell off a sleigh.

She must've changed her name; but it has to be her.

An avalanche of memories from childhood flooded his mind. He could hear the sound of her laughter as he pushed her on the tire swing. He felt the summer wind on his skin as they ran together to jump into Lake Michigan. He could see the green fireflies float around them as they lay in the tall grass at night, watching stars.

He made no effort to follow her words as she talked. The anger he'd carried into that office evaporated. He no longer cared that his father had dragged him into this small, coastal Florida town he'd never heard of, and forced him into this meeting.

Slow down. It's not the first time you've thought you found her.

She made no attempt to look at him from across the table—for which he felt thankful. For the first time he realized how much he'd let himself go. He felt self-conscious about the weight he'd gained, his wrinkled shirt, his unkempt hair and ungroomed beard.

But also, for the first time in years he felt a semblance of joy and hope in his soul.

But how can I ever approach her looking like this?

Chapter 1

“I’m sorry, but if I see one more couple kissing this week, I’ll throw up.”

Allison Connors unloaded her armful of folders and handouts onto the passenger seat of her gray Mercedes. She placed her phone in the dashboard holder and took the driver’s seat while continuing her FaceTime call. “Emery, it’s no fun being the last sane woman standing, surrounded by lobotomized, syrupy couples.” After unbuttoning her sky-blue jacket that matched her skirt and eyes, she fastened her seatbelt and drove away from the Fort Sunshine Women’s Shelter. “But also, I never attend weddings as a matter of principle. I won’t partake in a ritual that forces women become the property of men.”

On the screen Dr. Emery Love’s narrow green eyes glistened, and her full lips trembled. “But, Allison! You can’t miss Fe’s wedding! It’s bad enough that you skipped the rehearsal dinner and refused to be a bridesmaid.”

Only the Botox immobilizing her face prevented Allison from cringing. She clutched the steering wheel and kept calculated coldness in her voice. “Bridesmaid duty is a sadomasochistic practice. The same goes for weddings—and the oppressive institution of marriage.”

“Please, Allison,” Emery begged. “All the girlfriends are here, helping Fe get ready. She’ll be devastated if you don’t come wish her luck on her big day.”

The ethical dilemma—principle versus sisterhood love—was killing Allison. And she felt exhausted after her intense group session with abuse survivors at the women’s shelter. It didn’t help that her volunteer work had to be squeezed in later in the day, when she was tired from her day job as a psychotherapist and her side job as a feminist activist and self-help writer.

But she couldn’t disappoint her girlfriends.

With a groan, she turned the car and headed to the Beachfront Crowne Plaza. “Alright! I’m on my way. But I’ll just wish Fe good luck and then I’m out of there.”

Emery cheered and clapped with delight, telling Allison about all the fun they’d have together. Taking advantage of a red light, Allison shot her a warning look. “I’m *not*

staying for the wedding, so don't even dream of introducing me to one of the groom's—and your—two-hundred cousins.”

Disappointment flashed on Emery's face. Newer in the group of friends, she still hadn't lost hope of pairing Allison off. But if Allison knew anything about her it was two things: Emery was stubborn, and she thought life was a soap opera.

“Allison, it's modern times; there's no shame in admitting it, so tell me the truth.” Emery leaned closer to the screen and her lustrous auburn waves curtained her face. “You're gay, aren't you?”

“Unfortunately not,” Allison mumbled, continuing on at the green light.

“Then why?” Emery threw her free hand in the air. “Why do you dislike men so much?”

Approaching the beachside, Allison lowered the window to let the fresh ocean breeze play with her golden hair. “Why do I hate men? Because they did nothing to deserve their good luck. Winning the genetic lottery of a Y chromosome was all it took for them to get world supremacy, freedom from the period, and the benefit of all double standards.”

“Aaaand...” A voice sounded in the background. “...you can tell she's never met a man who knows what he's doing in bed.” Wearing only lacy black lingerie, their friend Hope joined the screen with foam curlers in her caramel-highlighted hair. “Don't bother, Emery. If the perfect man fell from the sky and landed on Allison's windshield, she'd turn on the windshield wipers to get him off her car.”

The girls giggled and Allison's lips twitched, resisting the urge to curve. Too late, she realized she'd missed the hotel entrance. She kept driving down the A1A highway, admiring the hints of ocean between hotel and condo buildings, while looking for a place to make a U-turn.

As Allison pulled into a parking lot, Hope teased, “If the perfect man fell from the sky in front of Allison's car, she'd make sure to run him over with her Mercedes, *flattening him* on the pavement...” They tittered again. Hope gestured to move an imaginary shift stick. “...And then she'd hit reverse to run him over again, backwards.”

“Are you guys done torturing me?” Allison asked, steering the car around. “Contrary to you I don’t need to spend my life glued to some guy, smooching, giggling and whispering secrets like third-graders.”

Hearing a clicking noise from the phone, she glanced down and saw Emery tapping the screen. “No, miss! You’re not off the hook until you admit that your refusal to be part of Fe’s wedding is nothing but sour grapes. Deep inside, you want to find love too.”

Allison was outraged. How dare Emery insinuate she wasn’t happy by herself? She’d written a bestseller, teaching women that they could be!

As she drove off, she opened her mouth to protest, but something held her back.

Emery had a point.

Now that all her friends were pairing up and having less time, being single wasn’t that fun anymore. She felt left behind.

Ouch.

“And I totally get that a woman may choose to remain single on behalf of freedom. But what good is freedom for in *your case*?” Emery insisted. “You never travel, you never date, you don’t even go out unless we drag you...all you do is work.”

Ouch again.

Clearing her throat, Allison straightened her shoulders. “I teach my clients to walk away from energy-draining situations. So I won’t waste more time in this pointless chat. See you soon.”

The damn phone refused to disconnect the call and Allison had to tap on the screen repeatedly. As she finally succeeded, a distant yell startled her.

“HEY! STOP!”

Whipping her head up, she caught a glimpse of a skateboarder speeding across the street.

She stomped on the brakes and the tires screeched. The seatbelt pulled against her chest and the pile of folders flew from the passenger seat onto the car floor.

It was too late.

She heard a thumping sound against her car hood and, simultaneously, the sound of something cracking under the tires. The blue-and-red shadow of a human figure collided briefly with her windshield; then, in an acrobatic-like move, bounced off, and jumped away to the road shoulder, rolling on the ground before stopping.

As the car jerked to a halt, her heart stopped for a second, then raced.

Oh God! I killed someone!

She turned on the emergency lights. As she hurried out of the car, thousands of terrifying scenarios flashed through her mind. The victim could be dead or paralyzed. And it was all her fault for being on her cell while driving. She saw herself in jail, her career finished, her life plagued by guilt.

The first thing she noticed was the cracked skateboard under the car tires.

Oh no! I hit a kid!

As she rushed to the figure lying facedown on the side of the road, her brain registered that the victim was too tall and muscular to be a kid. The person shifted. *At least he's alive!* "Don't move!" she snapped, "I'll call nine-one-one and—"

The figure rolled over and the next words died on her lips.

That was not a kid. That was a man.

And what a man!

Chapter 2

Allison's gaze slowly slid up from red sneakers to firm calves, then muscular thighs partially covered by black spandex shorts. For a few seconds her eyes remained glued to the generous bulge under those shorts until she managed to peel them away to

take in a royal blue jersey stretched over a flat abdomen, an expansive chest, and bulky arms. Under wrap-around sunglasses and a red helmet, she could guess at an attractive, tan face, set off by an angular jaw covered in fine stubble.

“Can you hear me talking?”

His clear, deep voice startled her and for a moment she couldn't understand.
“Excuse me?”

“Can you hear me talking?” he repeated the question.

She hesitated. “Yes, I can hear you.”

“Good!” He exhaled. “That must mean I'm still alive.”

She was still making sense of his strange words when he made an attempt to get up. Quickly, she knelt next to him, not minding her expensive pencil skirt.

“Wait, don't move! I have to call an ambulance!”

He took off his glasses and she met a pair of dark, thick eyebrows and green-hazel eyes, which widened when meeting her face. “Oh, my God! I *am* dead! I'm in heaven!”

Before she processed his words, his hands reached out to her, touching her face, shoulders, and her chest through her white silk blouse. Surprise gave way to the strangest feeling of arousal, quickly replaced by anger.

“Hey!” She slapped his hands.

He gasped. “You're not a hallucination! You *are* real!”

She opened her mouth to reply when his next words startled her. “Allison Connors!”

Taken aback, she studied his face. “I'm sorry. Have we met?”

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes flicked to her hands, then came back to her face. "I work with your boyfriend."

Confused, she stared at him. "What boyfriend?"

Briefly closing his eyes, he pumped a fist in the air. "Yes! You don't have one!" A grin lit up his face. "Would you have dinner with me tonight?"

Before she could shake off her astonishment, he jumped up from the ground with amazing agility.

"Wait! What are you doing?" She stood up, surprised that he didn't seem injured. "You might have a concussion! You could get permanent brain damage!"

He stopped brushing the dust off his jersey and looked up to her with a blank face. "Is that a bad thing?"

She was stunned. Was he really such an idiot? Before she could answer, his grin returned and he laughed.

"Come on!" He said between chuckles, opening his arms. "I don't even get a smile out of that joke? God, you are wound tight!"

She was about to answer coldly when he shouted, "Shit! I'm bleeding!"

"Oh no! You're really hurt!" She took a hand to her chest, noticing for the first time the blood covering his left elbow.

He reached for the hem of his jersey to take it off and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Oh, please. What's up with men wanting to show off their—*

The next words died on her brain. In a flash his shirt was off, and she was facing the most beautiful torso she'd ever seen.

There was nothing over- or underdeveloped in the gorgeous male specimen before her. He had perfectly defined chest muscles, a flat, strong, ridged abdomen and beautifully rounded shoulders to go with his bulging arms. Only the faint, dark body hair covering his chest, getting thicker near the waistband of the shorts, made him look real and not like an airbrushed picture. Allison felt something twinge in her lower pelvis and sudden heat spread through her body like a hot flash.

What on earth is happening to me? She was the woman who found men nearly disgusting. Why was she finding this stranger so attractive?

The man was using his saliva to wipe the blood from his elbow, trying to assess the source of the bleeding. The view of his tongue licking his own hand again and again threw her into another hot flash. She forgot her initial wonder about how he'd survived a crash like that.

"It's only a scrape," he said. The way he flexed his arm to bring the elbow to his eyesight contracted his arm muscles, making them bulge even more. "But it's already getting swollen. Ow. That's gonna hurt when I cool down."

Making an effort to keep her eyes on his face and not his torso, she exclaimed, "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Holding his elbow, he squinted and tilted his head, as if trying to recall. "Not *recently*."

She pressed her temples with a growl. "I mean, what kind of grown up man runs around on a skateboard?"

"One who's in touch with his inner child." He smirked.

She glowered at him. "Well, someone better tell your inner child that this is *a highway* and not a skating rink."

His eyes moved from his elbow to her and ran slowly from her eyes to her lips, to her breasts, and down the rest of her body, then returned to meet hers. His voice was silky. “Maybe someone should volunteer to give my inner child a spanking.”

His gaze was so intense Allison’s words stuck in her throat and refused to come out.

His voice snapped her out of her trance. “I think I blew my ankle and I’m not sure I can walk,” he said. “Would you help me try?”

With a nod, she rushed to his side.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and, before she knew it, her arm whipped back, elbowing him in the chest.

“Ow!” he complained, rubbing his sternum.

“Sorry! It’s a reflex,” she apologized. “I don’t like to be hugged.”

She positioned her left arm around his waist and offered her right hand for him to hold, serving as a cane. Limping, he took a few steps. She felt his solid body weighing her down and suppressed a grunt. She was a tall woman, and it was unusual for her to run into a man tall enough to make her feel small.

She was deeply aware of the strong naked torso under her arm. A vision of that torso rubbing against her breasts in bed took her completely by surprise. There was something highly enticing about this man’s smell and her body was betraying her with all types of strange, primal reactions.

In the midst of her confusing feelings, her psychologist brain was fascinated. *So, is this what people call physical chemistry?*

“Should I drive you to the Emergency Room?”

“I’d rather not; I’m between health insurances right now. If I can get some ice and ibuprofen, I’ll be fine.”

“Can you drive if I take you to your car?”

“I got here on the skateboard.”

“Can I get you a taxi or an Uber?”

“I could call one myself, I have my—” He stopped mid sentence. “My cell! Where is it? I had it in my hand when—” He turned abruptly, gazing at the highway and cussed.

His cussing startled her. She followed the direction of his eyes to a flattened silver rectangle lying on the middle of the highway, being run over again and again by the speeding cars.

“My phone!” He sprang out of her arms and dashed into the middle of the street, to pick up the phone before running back. “Damn it! It’s pulverized!”

“I’m so sorry!” She mumbled. “I’ll be happy to refund—” She stopped. “Wait a minute! *You can run?* Why were you making me help you?”

With a soft smile, he looked at her from under his eyelashes. “Because your arm around me felt so good.”

Anger rose inside Allison like an erupting volcano. She held it in and kept her voice cold. “Well, since you’ve proven that you’re perfectly fine, I’m out of here.”

She spun on her heels and strode away, heading for her car.

“Wait!” he called out. “Are you seriously leaving me in the middle of the highway, injured and without a cell phone to call for help?”

She stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly.

He seemed exhausted and overwhelmed, holding his broken cell phone in one hand and his jersey in the other one. Pressing his lips together, he fluttered his eyelashes, as if begging for mercy.

She exhaled sharply. “Fine! I’ll drive you home!”

His grin returned and his chest shook with laughter. “That was easy! I thought therapists were immune to guilt trips!”

Before she could process his words he ran to her car and got in the passenger seat.

(End of Sample)