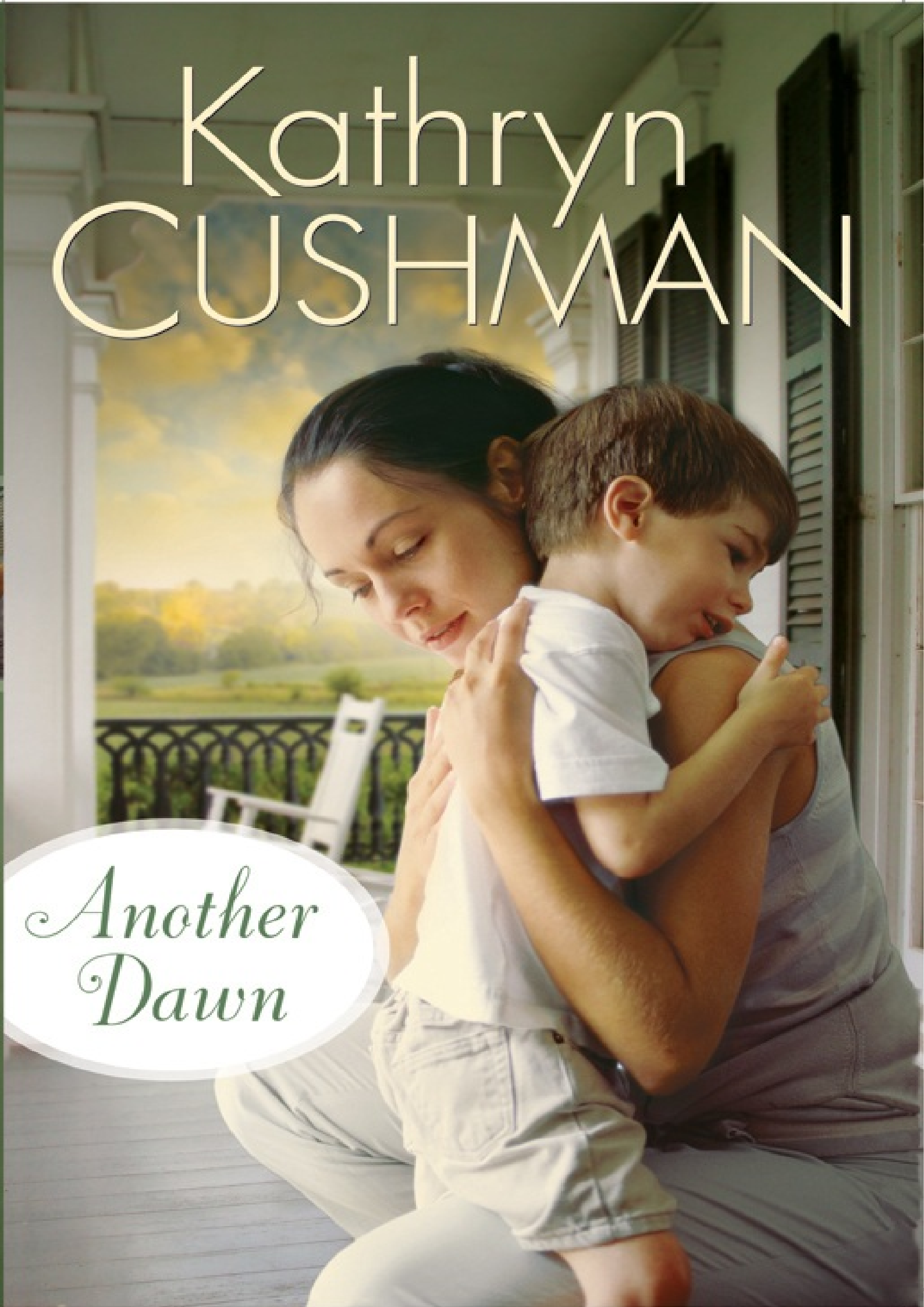


Kathryn CUSHMAN

*Another
Dawn*



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To Lee Cushman—

I'm glad I get to walk through this life with you.
Love you lots and lots!

In loving memory of Carl Parrish—

I'm grateful for every
single day I had with you.

Chapter 1

The Santa Barbara Wharf was the perfect place to get lost from reality for a few hours—the smell of salt air, the smiles of tourists, the Ty Warner Sea Center to enthrall my son, and the complete absence of anything resembling my normal life. We climbed out of my car and Dylan ran immediately to the safety rails lining the edge of the pier.

“Look, Mama,” he said as he pointed toward the churning water below.

My sandals made a contented scuffling sound against the wooden deck as I moved to his side. At the mouth of the harbor, a long blue sailboat was cutting through the water on its way into the marina, several people hurrying around its deck folding and securing the sails. Yes, this had been a brilliant idea. “Isn’t that awesome?” My mood was already improving.

“Yep, now let’s go pet a shark.” Dylan turned and started skipping in the general direction of the Sea Center, his dark brown hair bouncing with each step.

“Dylan, wait for Mama.” I hustled toward him, almost laughing with the lightness of the day. “Hold my hand, sweetie. We have to be careful of the cars.”

“Aww, Mom, holding hands is for little kids.” He said this with every bit of his four-year-old dignity, but he did hold up his hand for me to take. His head drooped just a fraction. “I wanted to skip.”

“Well, I can skip, too. Come on, let’s do it together.”

“Really?” He looked at me, the left side of his mouth curled under in doubt. So completely adorable. “How come I’ve never seen it?”

I skipped forward in response. “Come on, slowpoke.”

He laughed as he tried to skip faster than me. I was so intent on looking down and watching him that it was almost too late when I looked up and saw them.

Martin Bale and his wife, Juliana, were just ahead, their hands clasped as they looked into the window of a souvenir shop. Oh no. So much for escaping from my present reality. Well, I could still avoid it. I planted my feet, inadvertently jerking Dylan to a stop in the process.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” He looked up at me with those huge chocolate eyes. “Why aren’t ya skipping anymore? Is it too hard for old people to skip that long?”

Any other time I would have defended my twenty-five years as still being young. Right now, there wasn’t time. “I was just thinking . . .” I looked quickly around me, grasping for an excuse that he would accept quickly enough to get us out of here without being seen. The closest building to me was also the most likely place for instantaneous success. “How about some ice cream?”

“Ice cream!” Dylan squealed the words out in the way that only a four-year-old who rarely gets junk food can scream. “Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream!” He jumped up and pumped his fist in the air, effectively removing his hand from my grasp.

“We have to do it now. Right now.” I hurried toward the open door, knowing he would follow.

He didn’t, just passed me in a blaze of gray T-shirt and long blue denim shorts. By the time I hurried safely inside, Dylan had already begun perusing the double row of ice-cream selections through the window. “How many scoops, Mama? Three?”

“One.”

“Aw, come on. Two?” He tilted his head slightly to the side and looked up at me from behind his long, curly lashes. “Please? I’ve been a good bo-oy.” Dylan’s charm in full form was almost impossible to resist.

Still, we hadn’t even had lunch yet. “I think one is more than enough.”

“Aww, Mom.”

I glanced through the window and saw Martin and Juliana casually strolling in our direction. We just needed to stay in here long enough for them to get to the parking lot; it shouldn’t be difficult at all. Or at least it wouldn’t have been if a perky-looking redhead hadn’t come along. She hugged Juliana, and I could see them both talking at once like long-lost friends. This might take a while. I was going to have to stall.

“You know what, Dylan? Today’s a special day. Why don’t you have two scoops?”

“Woo-hoo!” He went back to looking through the curved glass. “Can I taste the pink one?”

“Sure, pardner.” The man behind the counter grabbed a tiny pink spoon and pulled up a sample serving. “This one’s bubblegum.”

“Ooh!” Dylan’s eyes grew even rounder.

I only allowed him to chew gum on special occasions and only under strict supervision. Of course ice cream and bubblegum in one package would sound extra especially like something he wanted.

“Two scoops of bubblegum, please.”

I ruffled the top of his hair, looking over my shoulder to check on the Bales’ progress toward the parking lot. I didn’t see them anywhere—probably still talking. “Dylan, why don’t you pick two flavors, instead of two scoops of one flavor?”

“I like bubblegum.”

“Dylan, the whole point of getting two scoops is to get two flavors. You need to choose a second flavor if you want the second scoop.” Personally, I couldn’t have cared less about whether he chose one flavor or two; I just wanted to prolong the process.

“Oh-kay.” His glum expression lasted about a millisecond, until he turned back to the man behind the counter with a gleam in his eye. “Can I taste the vanilla?”

“Sure can.” The man handed him another sample spoon. “You want to taste the berry blitz? It goes well with bubblegum, I think.”

“Sure. And can I try the orange sherbet, too?” Dylan didn’t dare look my direction, knowing that I usually shut him down after a couple of samples. Since I still hadn’t seen the Bales walk past, I wasn’t going to do that today.

I glanced over my shoulder again and saw them walking straight toward the door of the ice-cream shop. Oh no!

“Okay, Dylan, tell the man what you want. We’ve got to get going.” But even as I said the words, I knew it was already too late. I turned so that my back was to the door, blocking Dylan from view.

“Grace. Is that you?” Juliana’s question ended my last pretense at hope.

I turned slowly. “Hi, Juliana. Hi, Martin.”

“Doesn’t it just figure that the one day I play hooky from work, I run into half the people I know?” Martin reached out to shake my hand. “I guess I shouldn’t feel too bad, though, since you seem to be doing the same thing, hmm?”

Not wanting to prolong the conversation, I didn't bother to tell him that Jasmine had given me the day off to compensate for excessive overtime. I simply held up the palms of both hands and said, "Guilty."

"I always suspected there was a rebel buried somewhere in there." He nodded approvingly. "I've been telling Steve that all along, haven't I, Juls?" The question was hardly out of his mouth when his expression froze. He looked toward his wife, panic in his eyes.

Juliana's cheeks turned pink and she reached forward and hugged me. "I was so sorry to hear about you and Steve. I always thought you two were perfect for each other, didn't you, Martin?"

I held my breath with the question. I hadn't yet told Dylan that Steve and I wouldn't be getting married. This was certainly not the way I planned for him to hear about it. I turned toward him, only to find him happily sampling yet a fifth flavor of ice cream. I found myself rubbing my ring finger with my left thumb. It still felt strange to have nothing there, a sad reminder of all that had gone wrong of late.

Martin reached out to shake my hand. "Good to see you, Grace. I am sorry that things didn't work out for you two." Then, almost under his breath, he said, "And I'm *really* sorry things didn't work out with the Blue Pacific."

"What do you mean?" My voice got loud enough with this question that even Dylan and the ice-cream-counter guy stopped what they were doing and looked toward me.

"You know, the buyout. Now that you . . ." He paused, looked toward Dylan, and cleared his throat. "I thought Steve made clear that immediate family always had priority. Now that things have . . . changed with you guys, Roger's pushing the group toward investing in that boutique Phoebe wants. I hate it, because that girl has never worked a hard day in her life."

"But why won't you continue with the deal for Blue Pacific? It's a great idea."

He nodded. "I was excited about it. But once Roger got wind of what had happened . . ." Martin shifted his gaze just away from me and shrugged.

"But Jasmine has already begun making plans to move to Texas. Her son needs to be near that autism center." As the reality sank in, my panic began to rise. This was a disaster. A complete disaster. How could I ever explain to Jasmine that I had ruined everything for her, and her son?

Martin shrugged. "I know. I wish it could be different."

So did I. About a lot of things.



Dylan hurried through the door of our condo, excited to put his new dolphin snow globe on the shelf in his bedroom. The phone was ringing before I had the door closed behind me.

"Hello."

"You're never going to believe this one." Jasmine practically sang the words, something so out of character for her serious demeanor.

"What won't I believe?"

"I just had the real estate agent come look at my house, and he said that homes in this price range are starting to move right now. With a little bit of work, he thinks we should be able to get more than I was expecting."

“That’s . . . great news.” Jasmine obviously had not yet been told that the Blue Pacific deal had fallen through. That there was no reason to sell her house, because she was not going to be moving to Texas after all, no specialized treatment for her son. “Jasmine, have you—”

“Got to go. The Randalls just arrived. See you Monday.” The phone clicked before I had the chance to finish the sentence I didn’t want to finish. How could I possibly tell her that, thanks to me, her last hope for her son had just vanished?

I knew that intellectually she wouldn’t blame me for this—a business deal was no reason to prolong an engagement that was doomed to fail—but this had all been my idea. Selling the Blue Pacific Bed and Breakfast had never entered her mind. Until I suggested it two weeks ago.



It had been a quiet day at work, the bed-and-breakfast only three-quarters full, with most of the guests part of a big group from back east somewhere. The husbands left for golf early every morning, the wives a few hours later for shopping and trips to the spa. There was an unusual lack of workload.

“Look at this,” Jasmine had said while looking at something on her computer screen.

I walked over to see a screen full of writing, including the headline: “Full-Time Program.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a center in Texas that focuses on treating autism. It’s a totally different approach, but I just read an article about the success they are having. I’d give anything if I could take Collin there.”

“Why don’t you?” I supposed I already knew the answer.

“Can’t afford it. The full-time treatment option would require me moving to Texas—at least for a year or so. I’d have to pay someone to replace me here. It wouldn’t work.”

I knew she was right. The costs for her son’s therapy already were staggering. She couldn’t possibly take the extra time off work and pay an employee to take her place. “Oh, Jasmine, I’m sorry.” I stared at the screen, at the picture of a father lifting his smiling four-year-old over his head. A picture that parents of the severely autistic would give anything to attain. The problem was, Jasmine had already given more than she could afford.

Half an hour later, Steve walked into the office. “Greetings, ladies.” He nodded toward Jasmine, who barely looked up from the computer, still lost in her impossible dream.

“What are you doing here?” I stood from behind my desk and walked toward him, already noticing the crease in his forehead. “You look tired. Rough day?”

“As of this second, it just got a lot better.” He kissed my forehead and drew me into his arms.

“What was rough about it?” I nestled against his shoulder, the wool of his sports coat rough against my cheek.

“Will you two take it outside? Some people are trying to work in here.” Jasmine’s teasing sounded halfhearted at best. Steve pulled away from me and looked toward

her, then back at me, a question in his eye.

I shrugged in that it's-a-long-story way and took his hand. "What *are* you doing here, by the way?"

"The investment group just had a meeting at Daniel's office. I figured since I was in Ventura anyway, I'd drop in and see my favorite office manager."

"Roger still pushing for a boutique for Phoebe?"

He nodded. "Looks like it just might happen. Of course Darin and Mike would never vote against him, and the rest of us can't come up with a better proposal."

"Who knows? She's a bright girl; she could probably make it work."

"You're probably right, and there's nothing bad I can say about her . . . except she's never held anything close to a job. Everything's just been given to her. It feels risky to devote that kind of money to such an unknown."

"I see what you mean." I nodded, thinking once again what a fortunate woman I was to have landed a man who had the foresight to start an investment group straight out of college. There were eight of them, and every month they contributed money into the coffer. So far they had invested in a restaurant, which one of the partners and his wife were running, and it was doing well. Then there had been a catering facility that a couple of the wives were heavily involved in.

I looked at Jasmine and blurted out before I even thought, "Why don't you buy the Blue Pacific?"

"I didn't know it was for sale." Steve looked at Jasmine, who was just now cluing into our conversation.

"I didn't, either." She leaned toward me, resting her chin on her hand. "Do tell."

"Think of it—if Steve's group bought this place, you could move to Texas, closer to that place you've been looking at. The cost of living would be so much less expensive, you could sell your house and buy a new one with money to spare. And you wouldn't have to worry about hiring someone to replace you. I'd be ready to step in."

Jasmine offered a slow, sad nod, chin still in hand. "That's the stuff dreams are made of." She straightened up in her chair and picked up a stack of papers from her in-box. "Too bad I'm a little too old and a little too wise to believe in dreams." She picked up a pencil and made a point of looking studious over the current papers.

"Maybe I'll look into it," Steve said softly, his head tilted to the side in thought. He grasped my hand. "Shall I go pick up Dylan from preschool so you can go home and get ready for a special dinner out?"

I smiled at him. "Pizza?"

"You got it."

We both laughed.



The laughter faded from my memory, leaving behind it a gaping hole of what had once been. My engagement to Steve, Jasmine's dream of a new hope. Yep, it had been my big mouth that started this deal, and now my big mouth—or my big fight with Steve—had ended it.

Wasn't it enough that my heart was broken? Did Jasmine need to be crushed in the process? This was going to destroy her. She wouldn't blame me—I knew she wouldn't—but how could she not? She'd have to at least a little.

I suddenly dreaded going into work on Monday. Surely she would know the truth by then. It was Steve's investment group who'd made the overtures, and it was their job to tell her the bad news. I couldn't imagine having to tell her myself, or sit there and listen to her excitement growing, knowing that it wasn't going to happen. Knowing that her dream was lost.

My phone rang again. Probably Jasmine remembering something else exciting—something else that would have been wonderful if I hadn't messed everything up.

"Hey, Gracie." My sister's voice was lacking any hint of its usual perk. So unlike the Jana I knew, but it had become all the more common in the last few months. Still, I was so happy to hear her voice. She was the one constant in my life.

"Hey. You sound tired. Hannah got another ear infection?"

"Just getting over one."

Dylan had been a mostly healthy baby, but I still had vivid memories of the few times he'd been sick and up all night. Jana had lived that over and over again with Hannah. "You've really been through more than your share lately, haven't you?"

"Yes. Yes I have." There was a grim determination in her voice. "Grace . . . I didn't mean to just drop this on you, but I don't think I can do this anymore." Her voice choked for a moment. "That's why I'm calling."

A fleeting fear shot through me that she was about to tell me she was leaving Rob and Hannah and getting away from it all. I knew better, because Jana never gave up on anything, but something had changed. "What do you mean?"

"Dad's having his surgery on Monday. You remember that, right?"

"Of course." My father was having his knee replaced on Monday. Routine kind of surgery, and since Dad and I didn't talk all that much, I hadn't given it much thought.

"Well, here's the thing. He is not supposed to be home alone for a couple of weeks after. He can't stay at my house because there are too many sunken rooms and steps he'd have to go up and down. I was planning on staying over there with him, but Hannah's been sick again. All her stuff is here. I checked with a few people, but nothing has come through and I just don't have the time or energy to look anymore. Gracie, it's your turn. You need to pick up some of the slack around here. I've got more than I can handle." Her words became choked by the end of the sentence.

I'm not sure which shocked me more—my superwoman sister's need for assistance, or the fact that she'd even think to ask me. It wouldn't take a genius to know this would not be a good idea.

"Jana, I can't just take off work. I won't have any more vacation time coming to me until after September. And I think we both know that Dad and I in the same house for a couple of weeks would likely not be a pleasant mix."

"Gracie, I'm exhausted and I know this is going to come out harsh, but at this point I'm done denying the obvious. That's the problem we've got here. Every time things get unpleasant you turn and run, leaving the rest of us to deal with your part of the load. I've done it for years because I love you, but Gracie, I'm burned out and I'm fed up. You need to decide. Do you want to be part of this family or not?"

Stunned couldn't begin to cover what I felt. I'd never heard Jana speak so forcefully to anyone, especially not me. "Of course I'm part of the family. It's just—"

"Then start acting like it."

"Jana, I just don't think I can—" Hannah started crying in the background.

“I guess that means I can’t count on you for help. Thanks anyway.” My sister hung up the phone. Jana—the queen of sweetness and all things southern.

I’d never felt so alone in all my life.



“Um, Jasmine, I need to take a couple of weeks off work. Family emergency.” My tongue was so dry, I could barely say the words into the phone.

“Oh no. What’s happened? Is everything all right?”

No. Nothing is all right. Everything is ruined. “Yes, it’s just that my father is having surgery on Monday, and my sister can’t really stay with him afterward because my niece is sick. They just need me back there.”

“Of course, if you need to go, then you should go. Emergency surgery is definitely something you need family around for.”

I didn’t feel overly terrible about not correcting the misconception. Of course she assumed it was an emergency, because she’d heard nothing whatsoever about my father’s surgery until now. But in truth, there was an emergency. Just not the kind she thought it was. It was the patch-things-up-at-home-while-avoiding-my-boss-whose-life-I’d-just-ruined kind of emergency. The round-trip tickets at this late hour would cost more than I could afford, but at this moment, it was the least of my worries.

“Do what you need to do, but get back here as soon as you can, okay? With all this other stuff going on, I really need all the help I can get.”

“I think Dad’s going to need me for a couple of weeks, but I’ll come back as soon as possible.”

“A couple of weeks?” Jasmine choked and coughed for a few seconds. “Wow. That’s longer than I’d thought. But yeah . . . you should go help with your father.”

“Thanks, Jasmine. I’m . . . sorry.”

After I hung up, I thought about what Jana had said. About my running away every time things got unpleasant. Well, that’s not what I was doing here. I was going toward home, toward the unpleasant, to help my family. The fact that I was leaving unpleasant behind was just a coincidence. That’s all it was.

Chapter 2

His outline was barely visible on the dark front porch, but I knew he was there. A single point of red fire glowing from the end of his ever-present cigarette. I turned into the driveway, and for just a brief second my headlights slid across him, then skittered away.

Oh, how I wanted to turn the car around and drive in the opposite direction. But I didn't. This was only for two weeks. How bad could it be?

I already knew the answer. Downright unbearable.

Still, this was something I was obligated to see through. I was going to prove to Jana that she was wrong about me, and if staying with my father for fourteen days accomplished that, then so be it. Best to get on with it. Even as I climbed from the car, I would be lying if I didn't admit that a large part of me hoped that things would go well enough for me to perhaps leave a few days early. Maybe . . .

The faint glow of the TV from inside the house blinked an eerie shadow as he stood and limped around the porch, his feet clomping against the wooden slats in an uneven cadence. I had parked next to the steps and as I walked closer, everything within me wanted to turn and run. Yet I couldn't. I was propelled forward.

There was so much I could say to him—the man who killed my mother—but I wouldn't voice any of those things. Instead, I came to a stop a few feet in front of him.

"Hello, Dad."

"Hello, Grace." His voice rumbled from years as a smoker, but otherwise he looked unchanged. Until I looked closer. There was pain in his eyes. I could tell it hurt just to stand. He sized me up for a minute before he asked, "Where's Dylan?"

"Backseat. Asleep."

"You planning on leaving him out here all night, or you going to bring him in?"

"I haven't decided yet." It was sarcasm, and as much as we both knew it, we also both knew there was more than a little truth to it. "I think I'll bring in the luggage first." I pulled Dylan's duffel from the trunk and tossed it on the wraparound porch, then dragged my suitcase up the three steps until I stood beside my father. "What time do they want us at the hospital Monday morning?"

"Oh, they want me there at seven, which is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. I bet they won't even think about taking me back to surgery until ten or eleven. Don't know why I have to get there so early." He reached down and picked up Dylan's duffel.

"I can get that."

"So can I." He tucked it under his arm and walked toward the house.

"You're having surgery in two days. You shouldn't be carrying heavy stuff around."

"I'm having surgery on my knee. I'm not carrying anything with my knee."

"Well, it's all we need right now for you to throw your back out or something like that, just because you're being stubborn."

My father snorted. "I see you haven't lost your talent for arguing since I saw you last."

“There’s a pot calling a kettle black.” I rolled my suitcase toward the back door, taking a final glance toward the backseat of my rental. My son was still asleep in his car seat.

I walked into my old bedroom. It seemed so much the same as before—because of course nothing had changed. Nothing material, at least.

I heard what I assumed to be the thud of Dylan’s duffel as it hit the hardwood floor on the other side of the wall and figured I should make certain Dad hadn’t gone down with it. I opened the door to the adjoining bathroom, walked across the pink-tiled floor, and into Jana’s old room. I gasped when I saw the bed.

The pink quilt that had covered that bed for as long as I could remember had been replaced with a cheap bedspread emblazoned with brightly colored race cars. I looked at my father. “What happened here?”

He swiped a dismissive gesture in the general direction of the bed. “I saw this on sale at Wal-Mart the other day and picked it up. I didn’t want any grandson of mine sleeping under pink flowers.”

And I don’t want any son of mine sleeping under some redneck obsession with speed and recklessness. Somehow, I managed to hold back the retort that was screaming to get out. These two weeks were going to be long enough without starting out with a fight in the first five minutes. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate the thought.”

“Of course he will.” He paused for just a moment. “Unless you’ve turned him into one of those soft California sissy-boys like they show on the news all the time.”

Oh boy. This was going to be hard. Really hard.



My father hobbled over to his chair and settled in and tried to start a conversation with Dylan, who was being extra clingy. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, hasn’t it? What have you been doing since you were here last? Swimming? Soccer?”

Just then, the front door burst open, and Jana launched herself across the room toward us. “There’s my sweet Dylan. Oh, my precious, come here and give Aunt Jana a hug.”

Dylan shrank back into me. “No!”

“He fell asleep on the ride here from the airport and just woke up, didn’t you, sweetie?” I rubbed the back of his head with my left hand and reached for my sister with the right. She looked amazing, tired but thrilled. Motherhood, so long in coming, definitely agreed with her.

She took the hand and squeezed. “Thanks for coming. Sorry I got so . . .”

“You’re welcome and I’m sorry you had to.” There were still issues the two of us needed to talk about—that much was obvious—but at least we were starting in a positive place.

“Yeah, Jana, and now you’ve gone and frightened your poor nephew to death. No wonder Grace never comes to visit.” Her husband, Rob, laughed from behind her as he lugged the baby carrier through the front door. Just over six feet and broad shouldered, he had an accountant’s haircut but a comedian’s twinkle to his eye. He smiled at me. “Hey, Grace.”

“Hey, yourself.” I could scarcely breathe with Dylan’s arms wrapped so tightly around my neck. “Now, get that niece of mine over here right now so I can get a look at her.”

Jana was sitting beside us now, her face barely an inch from Dylan’s. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I really didn’t mean to frighten you.” Her voice was the perfect pitch, all honey and sweetness, and usually charmed anyone. Given the way he was squeezing the breath out of me, Dylan was one of the few remaining holdouts.

“Don’t leave me, Mama.” He put his head on the other shoulder, farther away from Jana, who smiled a sympathetic smile, but the look of determination did not diminish one bit from her face.

“Really, Dylan, it’s okay. I’m your Auntie Jana, remember?”

“No!”

Rob came to stand in front of us. I found it amusing that in spite of the fact he’d come in lugging baby and diaper bag, his khaki pants and blue broadcloth shirt remained as unwrinkled as ever. “I don’t blame you, kiddo. She scares me, too. I’m Uncle Rob, the normal one, and this is your cousin, Hannah Rose.”

“Hannah Rose?” Dylan lifted his head and looked at the sweet bundle of pink in the carrier. “That’s Hannah Rose? I’ve seen lots of pictures of her.”

“I’m sure you have.” Rob smiled and squatted before him. He reached down and unbuckled his daughter and lifted her into his arms. “Your aunt Jana’s been burning up the camera’s memory cards faster than we can download them.”

Dylan leaned forward and smiled at her. “Hi.”

“Brrrbr.” She began to make a razzing noise, complete with plenty of spit.

“She’s funny.” Dylan slid out of my lap and knelt on the floor. “Hey, Hannah Rose, hey, girl.”

Several minutes later, Rob, Dylan, and Hannah Rose were enveloped in their own little world of funny faces, noises, and excess salivation. Jana looked at the scene. “Isn’t this exactly what I’ve spent my whole life dreaming about?” She sighed a deep, contented sigh. Only the dark circles under her eyes gave away the fact that everything wasn’t perfect. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Yes, she is,” I said.

“Just like her father,” Rob deadpanned and braved a swat from Jana.

I was glad in that moment that I’d decided to come here. Perhaps this trip might be just what we needed to heal my little broken family. I watched Dylan beside Hannah, animated in a way I’d never seen. I hated for it to end, even when I knew it was getting late.

“Dylan, let’s brush your teeth and get your jammies on. It’s time to start unwinding.”

“I don’t want to.” Dylan whined all the way back to his room. “I want to play with Hannah Rose.”

“It’s her bedtime, too, but you can come back and play with her for just a few minutes after you’re ready for bed. Now, come on, let’s get you moving.” I looked over at Jana. “Be right back.”

I led my son through my room and into our shared bathroom. “I’ll go get your jammies and toothbrush. You go ahead and start getting undressed.” Dylan usually moved at a snail’s pace, so I knew he would likely remain fully dressed when I

returned. I walked into the room and unzipped his duffel, knowing I'd put his pajamas and toiletry bag right on top for just such a moment as this.

"Wow! Cool bedspread!"

I turned to answer my son, but he raced past me and was soon bouncing on the bed. "Awesome. Vroom, vroom."

I tossed his Thomas the Tank Engine pajamas toward him. "Now put these on and get your teeth brushed. Hurry up. Hannah Rose is waiting."

"These are baby p.j.'s." He grumbled as he pulled the crew neck over his head. "I want race cars, just like my bedspread."

"You don't need race cars."

"Do too. Jason has skateboards on his."

And Jason was going to grow up to be a thug, just like his big brother. "You like Thomas, remember? We rented some DVDs just last week."

"I was littler then." He jumped to the ground, and in truth the pajamas were a couple of inches too short for him now. "Where's my toothbrush? I want to get back to Hannah Rose."

It was the fastest I'd ever seen him get ready for anything.

After we'd finished brushing his teeth, he ran into the living room and dropped onto the floor beside Rob, right on the edge of Hannah's blanket. "Hey there, hey there," he spoke in high-pitched baby talk that I found to be adorable.

"Where's Jana and Dad?" I asked Rob.

He nodded toward the stairs. "Jana wanted to make certain he'd followed her directions explicitly in his packing, and well, you know how she is. She's up there making him show her that he really did it right."

I started up the front stairs. Memories of my childhood—sitting on these stairs, sliding down these stairs, lurking about outside my parents' room—assaulted me. I missed my mother every bit as much now as I did when she died seven years ago. Maybe more. I wanted to share the joys of motherhood with her, ask her opinions, enjoy the cute stories that only a mother can truly appreciate. When I got to the top of the stairs, the bedroom door was open. I heard my father's voice. "He seems pretty whiny, and until y'all got here he was holding on to a stuffed bear, like a girl with a doll or something. I hope she's not turning that boy into a fraidycat sissy. I mean, look at that hair. He looks like a girl; it's no wonder. Maybe you can try to talk a little sense into her."

I stopped just short of the bedroom door, holding my breath and waiting for Jana's reply. "Oh, Dad, I wouldn't go that far."

This was not exactly the defense I had hoped for from my sister. From any reasonable mother, for that matter. At this point I'd heard more than enough. I retraced a couple of steps, then walked noisily toward the door and walked through as if I'd just arrived and hadn't heard a thing. "Hey, you two. How's the suitcase look?"

Several wavy wisps of Jana's hair had come loose from her ponytail as she'd bent over Dad's suitcase. She straightened up, looking a bit embarrassed, I thought, brushed them out of the way, and shook her head. "All I can say is, it's a good thing I checked."

"Hmph."

"You'll thank me later."

“Right.”

The three of us made our way back down the stairs, Dad taking one at a time. We found Dylan on the blanket beside Hannah, tickling her chin with his finger.

“Hey, Grace and Dylan, I’m working in Hannah’s class tomorrow at church,” Jana said. “Do you two want to help me? We could spend some time together, just hanging out.”

Rob looked up. “Tomorrow’s a good day for it, too. Our pastor is out of town and Deacon Ross is doing the preaching.” He scratched his chin. “Maybe I’ll help in the nursery, too.” Rob tickled Hannah’s tummy and she giggled.

“Let me try, Uncle Rob.” Dylan reached over to his cousin’s stomach and soon she was giggling and snorting. In spite of the cuteness of the moment, my earlier optimism about somehow rebuilding this family had started to fade.

Jana was watching me with expectant eyes. If taking care of Dad was the first test, going to church seemed like the second. I wondered briefly how many more she would arrange for me. How many times I’d need to prove myself to her.

“We’ll be there,” I said.

The prodigal sister returned.

Chapter 3

“Look at me, Hannah Rose.” Dylan’s voice bounced off the pink-and-blue-striped wallpaper of the church nursery. He made a face, turned a somersault, then made another face—anything he thought might get a giggle out of his baby cousin. He was proving rather successful.

“Da da da da,” Hannah gurgled.

“Hey, Mama, I think she’s trying to say Dylan,” he called over to me.

Jana grinned down from the rocker where she sat giving Kelsey Whyte a bottle. “You know what? I think so, too. It’s amazing.” She waited until Dylan turned away before she whispered to me, “Better not tell Rob that Da-da is actually Dylan. I think he’d be upset.”

I laughed. “Yeah, the truth hurts sometimes.” I watched Dylan’s animated antics around the blanket. “I’ve never seen him like this. When he’s around Hannah it’s like a new, confident Dylan emerges from beneath his usual shy self.”

“Thanks for helping me in the nursery today.”

“I’m glad you asked.” All morning long I’d been trying to get the courage to start a deeper conversation but hadn’t yet found it. Until the phone call a couple of days ago, it had never entered my mind how Jana felt. But for now, we were doing what my family tended to do . . . carrying on surface conversations, pretending like nothing had happened. Jana and I would have lots of time to talk next week while Dad was in the hospital.

“It’s always good to have an extra set of hands when working with babies.” She looked toward Dylan. “Or two. He’s so cute with them, and I can’t believe how much he has grown.”

“Yeah, way too much, if you ask me. It’s amazing how fast it goes by. You keep that in mind and enjoy this time while it’s here.”

“Believe me, I am. I am.” Her voice, its cherubic sweetness, was intensified. “She’s such a gift, I’m not going to take one single minute for granted.” Jana and Rob had spent years and thousands of dollars, and more heartbreak than most people could bear, in an effort to become parents.

I looked at Hannah’s tiny fingers, her chubby little cheeks, and love welled up in me with the same intensity I felt toward my own son. “I’m so glad to finally see my beautiful niece in person.”

“I wish you could have come sooner.” Was there an inflection of accusation in her tone? She had asked me to come after Hannah was born and “help her figure this baby stuff out.” Jana had always been so self-assured, I’d never really considered that she might have been serious. Until now. I began to wonder just how many times I’d let her down over the last few years.

“I . . . wish I could have, too.”

Jana put Kelsey into a bouncy seat and began to twirl a butterfly on the bar in front of her. “So how’re things going with you and Dad?”

I looked at my sister’s too-innocent face. The usual wavy strands of blond hair had escaped from her ponytail and danced around her eyes as if they, too, were enjoying

the joke.

“Here, I’ll do it for her, Aunt Jana.” Dylan dove into position and began to simultaneously bounce Kelsey and twirl the toys on the rack. Kelsey cackled and Dylan worked all the harder.

“How do you *think* it’s going?” I asked, trying to keep my voice low enough that Dylan wouldn’t hear too much, but not so low as to make him think there was a secret and maybe he should pay attention.

He did glance my way for just a second before turning back to his charge. “Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy,” he singsonged as Kelsey cooed.

I leaned closer to Jana and whispered, “If he tells me my son needs a haircut one more time, I swear I’ll . . .” Truth was, I didn’t know what I’d do. Probably nothing, as usual.

She looked toward the door, the dark circles beneath her eyes not quite concealed under her makeup. “I wish Steve could have come with you. He and Rob get along so well.”

“Yes, they do.” I swallowed hard and pointed at my empty left finger. “Unfortunately, I can’t say the same about the two of us.”

“Oh, Gracie.” Jana put her hand to her throat. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice that.” I couldn’t believe it, either. The words *Jana* and *details* were practically synonymous. The poor thing really was exhausted. “You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“Yes I do, but still . . .”

I shrugged. “You’ve never seen me wearing it, so it wouldn’t seem that strange to you that it is missing, I suppose.”

She was shaking her head as if trying to return things back to their proper order. She reached over and took my hand then. “I am sorry. I had no idea. I wouldn’t have called and gone off on—”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you did. We need to talk through some things during this visit. I’m just glad you told my oblivious self that there was a problem.”

“Obviously, I fall into that oblivious category, too, although I’d never realized just how much so until this very moment. What happened? When did it happen?” Her voice had picked up a bit of its usual perk now. She was Jana the mender, ready to tackle my problems. It was good to see a bit of the old spark.

Knowing that she would pry the answers out of me eventually, it was likely better to go ahead and get it done with. I had finally told Dylan about the breakup, but I hadn’t shared details. At this point he was occupied with Kelsey, so it seemed safe enough to talk. “Monday night.”

Surprise overtook her. I knew what was coming, so I waved her off.

“I didn’t tell you because you would’ve let me stay in California. And as for what happened, well, let’s just say I’m just not sure . . . I don’t know if I can trust him. It makes me nervous.” I rubbed the back of my left hand. “You know me, when I get nervous, I tend to get a little crazy.”

“You tend to bolt, you mean. I played right into your hands, didn’t I? When I called and demanded that you come out here, it gave you the excuse you needed to run away from the problem.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not running away from the problem.” Not the one she was thinking of, anyway. “There’s nothing left to run from. It’s over.” The words hurt;

it was as if saying them made the situation undeniably real. Still, I found myself somewhat comforted that I was finally having this conversation with my sister.

“I don’t believe that. Steve loves you; anyone could see that.”

“I messed everything up and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“So you were mean and downright ornery?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Yes, you would. You have. If it were anything less than that, you would have already told me about it.” Cuteness. That is Jana’s quality that is the downfall of everyone around her. I looked at those big blue eyes, her hair with just the right amount of wave to it that it always looked a little messy, and her dimpled cheeks that were nothing short of angelic.

“You know me entirely too well.”

“Of course I do.” She looked smug.

“Hey, Paisha, what ya doing?” Dylan moved across the floor to the next baby.

Paisha was wearing pink pants, a pink sweater, and a pink hat. She was up on all fours, every ounce of pinkness rocking back and forth, poised on the brink of crawling.

Dylan knelt hands and knees beside her. “You just put one hand out in front. Like this, see?” He moved his hand out. “Now, move your leg forward, put that leg on the other side so you don’t fall over. See?” He moved his left knee forward. “Now, just repeat.”

Paisha rocked all the harder. “Hee, hee.” She gurgled.

“That’s right, you’re almost doing it. Now, just pick up your hand, see.” Dylan reached over and put his left hand under her stomach, to hold her up, then with his right hand, he picked up her right arm and moved it forward and set it back down. She propelled herself forward and fell, in spite of Dylan’s steadying hand.

“Come on, let’s try again. You almost had it, I know you can do it.” Dylan had his face only inches from hers.

Paisha looked at him for a moment, a sort of grin on her face, then rolled over on her back and started playing with pink-sock-ensconced feet. Crawling lesson over.

Emma Sanders began to cry, so I picked her up out of the baby swing and rocked her slowly back and forth. “What’s the matter now, sweetheart?”

Jana picked up Ryan and began to rock him, as well. “Start back at the beginning. What exactly happened?” She spoke in baby talk, the way most women do when they talk to babies, and although she never looked away from Ryan, I knew the words were directed toward me.

I glanced toward Dylan, who was now busy following Hunter as he commando-crawled toward the back wall. I whispered, “He’d been at the conference in Los Angeles all day. I was wondering if he was going to stop by for dinner on his way back to Santa Barbara that night, so I called several times. It went straight to voice mail, which is not surprising, since he was probably in a meeting. I never left a message, but he always calls me when he sees my caller ID on the missed calls. He never did.

“So, just as I was starting dinner, I called one last time. It was on the fourth ring and I was just about to hang up when he finally answered. There was a lot of noise in the background.

“I said, ‘Hi. It’s me. I’ve been trying to reach you.’”

“He said something to the effect of, ‘Really? I guess I haven’t even looked at my missed calls.’ His voice got really quiet. ‘It’s been a crazy day, I’ll tell you that.’ ”

She waited.

“And then I heard people cheer and a woman’s voice asking for some peanuts. He was at a Dodgers game. With another woman.”

“Oh, Grace.” She patted my hand, but then her eyes narrowed. “So he confessed.”

“He said a bunch of people from the conference were at the game. Including Daria, this insanely beautiful client of his. He got defensive when I asked what other people were there, and we yelled some—me mostly—and hung up.”

I looked down at Emma, whose eyes were closing with each downward stroke of the rocker. “Needless to say, the conversation the next day did not go well. He was mad at me for being so jealous all the time; I was mad at him for being . . . well, I don’t know, untrustworthy, I guess.”

“You’ve been together for a couple of years. Has he done anything that would lead you to believe you can’t trust him?” Jana bounced Ryan on her knees.

I shook my head. “Not that I know of. But the point is, I’m perfectly fine on my own. If we were to get married, if Steve really became part of Dylan’s life, and then he decided he was happier without us, well, I just couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t watch my son go through something like that. It nearly crushed me as a twenty-year-old. How can I expect a child to survive something like that?”

“Just because Chase was a jerk doesn’t mean every man is. Rob and I have been together through some really hard times. I mean, you know, you were there—at least on the other end of the phone line for hours at a time—during all the infertility treatment and the miscarriages. You know how hormonal I got. He was a rock through the entire time.”

“You” —I stood with Emma and carried her to the nearest crib—“did manage to land one of the only perfect men around. Unfortunately, that took one of them off the market and greatly decreased the odds for the rest of us.”

“Perfect? No. But wonderful, yes. I think there are still a few more out there. In fact, I’d go out on a limb here and say that Steve definitely qualifies.”

“Maybe he did. But, like I said, that doesn’t matter anymore. It’s over.”