



Chapter 1

She swore it had happened overnight, a shift from hot days and comfortable mornings to a noticeable chill in the air. It was earlier than usual, this very distinct change in seasons from summer to fall. Emily preferred easing in gently, being given time to adjust, over always feeling as if she was on a roller coaster ride and couldn't get off. But this was her life, and if given a choice between this one or one completely different and easy—well, she wouldn't change it for anything. She was human, though, and there were days she wished for nothing but peace.

She could hear the creak of floorboards upstairs where she'd left her husband, Brad, sleeping. He would be wondering where she was when he reached for her. That was just the way it was between them in the mornings, even though they slept curled against one another, his legs entwined and twisted with hers. There wasn't a part of him she didn't love to touch and feel against her. He was the first man to truly have her heart.

He loved her, she loved him, and their children meant everything to them. This was her family, and it was good—better than good. It was amazing. She loved them all: their little girl Becky, the one child Brad and she shared together, and Katy and Trevor, who were their children from their first marriages. Now she was Trevor's mother, and Brad was Katy's father.

He was on the stairs now. "Em?"

She still loved the sound of his voice; after all these years, he still had the ability to turn her insides to putty. It was so deep and masculine and sexy that she had to fight the urge to run to him, which was something people might call her crazy for if she ever admitted it.

He pushed open the screen door, and she took in his frown from where she leaned against the pillar, bathed streaks of pink and yellow from the rising sun. "Why didn't you answer me?" He slid his arms around her from behind, pulling her to him, running his flattened palm over the cotton of her nightgown, rubbing against her stomach.

She leaned back into him. He was so warm, and she couldn't imagine ever tiring of the way he held her and how she fit so easily against him. The strength in his arms...she loved running her hands over them, feeling the contrast of the muscle and soft skin and dark hair. He made her feel so secure, as if nothing bad could ever touch her. She sighed in his embrace. He had pulled on a light blue shirt, and its freshly laundered scent mixed with his warmth soothed and stirred her at the same time.

He swayed with her, holding her. She could feel the cut of his biceps, triceps, and pecs, his solid abs pressed against her back. She pictured the feel of them as if they were burned into her memory. She loved to run her hands over all that hardness. She barely passed his shoulders, and he leaned his chin against the top of her head. They rocked together.

“What’s wrong?” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, and she breathed him in again. His scent always grounded her.

“I don’t know,” she replied—and she really didn’t. She had woken early and hadn’t been able to go back to sleep. An odd stirring feeling had unsettled her. She could feel Brad try to pull back, so she held more tightly to his arm. “No, just hold me like this.”

“Are you not feeling well?” He wasn’t going to let it go, but then, Brad wasn’t a man to just ignore things, not with his family and never with her.

Any fights they had stemmed from him not letting things go. He pushed at times, never letting her hold on to things and sulk. Not that she did. He prodded, always knowing when something was bothering her. They were so in tune with each other. He had such a need to protect her and their children, to the point that she sometimes worried about what would happen if she ever had to stand on her own two feet.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “Maybe I’m just overthinking things, with school coming up. I’m just…” She couldn’t figure out how to put into words this unsettling feeling that kept coming at her over and over. Something wasn’t right, but she couldn’t put her finger on it or explain it to Brad in a sane way.

“You’re doing too much again,” he said. “I told you to stop planning everything. The kids are back in school. Just let them go.” He always made it sound so easy—typical man, thinking everything that worked out wasn’t the result of some hardworking woman behind the scenes, planning, organizing, and doing.

“Our little girl is going into first grade, and she’s going to be gone all day.” Emily’s throat thickened.

He didn’t laugh at her, and she was so grateful for that. Maybe he understood. “We could have another baby if you want, and then you’d have your hands full again.”

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t thought about it. “I don’t know, Brad. Do you want another?” They hadn’t tried to have another baby after Becky was born, and she had been completely unplanned. It wasn’t that they were being careful or anything now—just that it hadn’t happened since.

“You know I would love a houseful, but you’re their mother, and most of the work falls to you, honey.”

She knew he loved children and he was their protector, but he had a ranch to run, too. She didn’t know if she wanted to start over again with diapers and toddlers and not a moment to herself. Although she wouldn’t trade one moment of the time she had with her children, she also realized she had more freedom now, and she didn’t want to give it up. “Katy is in gymnastics twice a week now, and Trevor…we need to meet with the school again. His consultant is coming out next week to meet with his teacher to get everything started for the new year. There’s just so much to do, Brad.”

“Hey, Trevor is fine. You see how far he’s come, Em. School’s going good. Don’t start finding things to worry about. You have everyone so organized that nothing can go wrong,” he said. At times, she thought, he didn’t worry enough.

“Brad, every year we’ve had something with the school…some problem, some new teacher who wants to change how we do things, and I have to start at the beginning. Remember two years ago when we had that new teacher who refused to work with our consultant or to make any changes in her teaching methodology to accommodate Trevor? She refused every one of the suggestions we made. I thought you were going to lose it,” she said.

She could feel him tense behind her. Sitting with Brad in that meeting room at the school, that had been the first time Emily ever thought he could come unglued. She’d made an excuse to get

him out of there: “Don’t you have a golf game you’re going to be late for?” He didn’t golf, of course, but he was sharp enough to pick up on her meaning, and he had nodded and left. When she got home, she had barely walked through the door before he gave her an earful, cursing that teacher with every imaginable fate as he paced the kitchen like a wild beast. He’d calmed down eventually, four hours later. Then the principal had phoned, apologizing profusely and assuring them he’d find a way to make it work. He had, but only when he was teaching. It had been a lost year, and without the education assistant who worked with him in the classroom, Trevor would have learned nothing.

“You don’t know that, Em. Besides, we already met the teacher, and you said you liked her.”

She could feel her heart tightening. She knew it was just her anxiety working overtime, but maybe he could feel it too, as he kissed her ear and slid his hand up and over her heart, her breast, pressing her closer to him. “I know,” she replied. “And I’m sure I’m just expecting the worst, all these back-to-school anxieties. It’s just that Trevor has come so far. He’s independent in so many things; I don’t want someone coming in and screwing it up.”

He actually chuckled in her ear, and this time she slid around, taking in the humor in his amazing whiskey-colored eyes. They reached inside her, and they had a connection so deep that she couldn’t hide anything from him, even if she wanted to. He had this way of making her feel...better.

“Why are you laughing at me?” she said.

“Em, our kids are so lucky to have you for a mother, and God help any person who tries to come in and mess with them.” He slid his hand over her cheek, pressing in, and his fingers brushed her ear. She couldn’t help leaning in closer. He kissed her, holding her other cheek, pulling her to him as he deepened the kiss, which brought that stirring deep inside her that happened every time he touched her. She needed to connect with him, skin to skin, and only he could satisfy her.

“Why don’t we go upstairs for that good-morning wakeup you denied me?”

He kissed her again and started leading her into the house, but she pulled back and whispered, “Don’t you have cows to feed?”

“They’ll wait,” he said, and he had her halfway to the stairs when they heard the first sounds of little feet jumping out of bed.

“Yeah, but the kids won’t,” she said with a groan, leaning into him.

He patted her bottom and then tilted her chin so she was forced to look at him. “I may have to tie you to the bed just to make sure you’re there in the morning.”

She rolled her eyes. “As if you’d ever do that.”

“Hey, if I wake up and my wife isn’t in bed with me again—I may consider it!” he said, and he kissed her just as she heard the pitter-patter of their three kids hitting the stairs.

Chapter 2

“See you later, Dad.” Trevor had finished packing his backpack and was now zipping it up as Emily raced around the house after the girls. She was fast on Katy and Becky’s heels, calling out first for them to get dressed, then to brush their hair and teeth. Then Becky couldn’t find her hairbrush, and Katy’s pink shoes—which she had to wear, or her first day back would be a disaster—disappeared. Emily still had to get them to organize their supplies and help them pack their lunches. With Trevor, it was easier now that he understood his routine, which, as of late, he had been picking up faster.

“Katy, if you’re planning on going to gymnastics after school, I suggest you pack up your body suit. Don’t forget a ponytail tie for your hair, either, and a water bottle.” Emily snapped her fingers as if just remembering something, or maybe she was sifting through a mental list in her head. “I’m not running to the school because you forgot something!” she called out as she zipped up Katy and Becky’s lunch kits after finally packing their lunches herself.

“I know, Mom,” Katy yelled from upstairs.

“You got everything you need for school packed?” Brad strode over to Trevor, who was standing beside the kitchen table with his stuffed Spiderman backpack. Half the dishes from breakfast were scattered, as everyone had eaten and was now rushing around to get ready, everyone except Trevor, who was calm and appeared ready to go. It was always a transition, the first day back to school, from the lazy days of summer.

“Yes, Dad, all done.” He always sounded so happy.

“Show me what you packed, bud.” Brad rested his hand on Trevor’s shoulder, and his son smiled that easy smile of his as he lifted out his lunch kit then gestured with the flat of his hand to the supplies he’d stuffed inside the backpack: folders, paper, and an orange pencil case. “What about your lunch? You made it yourself today. Show me what you did.”

It took Trevor a minute, and then Emily rushed into the kitchen. “Trevor, come on, we have to go. Let me see what you packed.” She reached for his lunch kit just as Trevor was about to unzip it.

“Em, I got it, honey. Go get the girls ready.”

She gave him one of her harried looks as she ran around, trying to get everything done and everyone organized. As if right on schedule, frown lines appeared between her eyebrows.

“Aren’t you the one who keeps telling me we have to let Trevor do it for himself or he’ll never learn?” Brad said.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “How about I trade with you? You deal with the girls, I’ll take Trevor.”

Trevor unzipped his lunch kit. “See here?” Again he gestured with the flat of his hand, looking up at Brad. His eyes had a sparkle of love that was so genuine. Emily went to reach in and lift out the two lunch containers and a Ziploc bag of broccoli.

“Em, let him do it,” Brad said. “Besides, I’m taking the easy one today. You deal with the girls.”

“Mom, I can’t get the brush out of my hair,” Becky cried as she raced into the kitchen, half dressed in a red skirt and pajama top, her long hair tangled in a round hair brush.

“What did you do?” Emily cried out as she touched the brush and tried pulling the knotted hair that was wrapped around the bristles.

“There’s tuna, carrots, broccoli, an apple...” Trevor started just as Katy raced into the kitchen in her too-tight skinny jeans and a black and red floral shirt.

“Mom, my shoes! I can’t find the new ones you bought. Someone took them!”

Emily looked as if she was going to lose it as she pointed to the back door. “Go and look in the shopping bag that’s still sitting exactly where you left it four days ago. I told you I’m not your maid—”

Brad put his fingers in his mouth and gave a loud, sharp whistle. Everyone stopped. Even Trevor looked up at his dad, still holding the container with a rice wrap stuffed with tuna salad. “Katy, you’re responsible for your own clothes and shoes,” Brad said. “Your mom already made your lunch. Get moving. Becky, what did you do to your hair?”

“I wanted it all curled in ringlets for school, so I used Katy’s gel in my hair and was blow drying it.”

“You used my gel?” Katy yelled as she dragged a shopping bag from the back door, but she took one look at Brad’s face and sighed. Maybe she knew she was skating on thin ice. Brad wasn’t a pushover, and he certainly wasn’t a mom. The kids thought they could vent and Emily would always be there to take it. “Okay, I’m going,” Katy said.

“You’ve got less than five minutes, and then you go as you are,” Brad called out after her. He set his hand on Trevor’s shoulder. “Good job, Trevor. Pack it all back up, but you forgot an icepack for the sandwich. Where do you find those?”

Trevor smiled brightly as he looked up at his dad. “In the freezer?” he said, a twinkle in his eyes. Brad swore, at times, that Trevor was making fun of him.

“Yeah, go get it,” he replied, shaking his head. He watched as Emily tried to untangle Becky’s hair as the little girl screeched, “Mom, that hurts!”

“Can you get it out, or do you have to cut it?” Brad asked.

“I don’t want my hair cut!” Becky was almost in tears.

“No, I won’t cut it. I almost have it.” She pulled the last piece out, but Becky’s hair was a mess. “Go upstairs—we need to rinse this gel out. Of all the times to do this, Becky, when we’re late to get out the door?”

Brad’s calm and organized wife was quickly losing it. She sighed as she took Becky by the arm and hurried her upstairs, and Brad took in Trevor standing beside the table, happy.

Trevor gestured again to his lunch kit when Brad glanced his way. “There’s the icepack. Can I zip it, Dad?”

Brad rustled his son’s dark hair, which was brushed back on one side and forward on the other. He was neat and tidy in blue jeans and a green and blue striped shirt. “Well, at least you’re ready for school. Pack it up, and let’s go fix your hair. Remember to brush it back on both sides. Let’s go try it again.”

“Okay, Dad,” Trevor said, and Brad followed his son—the easy one, who grabbed hold of a routine and followed it without fail and without arguing. But everything he did had to be taught, and some days were easier than others. There were some days when Brad wondered whether he’d ever get it.