

BEGIN AGAIN

Home in You Series
Book Two

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CHAPTER ONE

Enigma

The waves pulsing against Ocracoke's shoreline echoed every reason Drew Anderson should turn away from this door.

He raked a hand through his just-washed hair, wishing for the familiar feel of sand and salt instead. He should be in the water, chasing an answer he was running out of time to find. Not wasting an evening at a summer party.

For the twentieth time tonight, concerns about his daughter being away from home at a sleepover knotted his stomach. He rotated his neck. Maddie hadn't had a flare-up in weeks. She'd be fine. If anything came up, Winnie's parents had his number.

Checking his cell just in case, Drew scrolled to the text Maddie had sent earlier. Leave it to his carefree baby girl to urge him to have fun tonight.

Inside, conversations coming from a small den to the right competed with laughter and music trailing in from a sliding door leading to a pool. Drew took one look at both options and headed into the kitchen instead. Other than the

faint sound of a girl singing nearby, only the churn of the icemaker filled the quiet room.

He leaned against the counter, closed his eyes, and massaged his temples.

“You shouldn’t try so hard.” From behind a cute pair of glasses, blue eyes met his. A blonde in an off-the-shoulder, white cotton dress and an unabashed gaze stood in front of him.

Where’d she come from? Drew glanced behind him. To what, the wall? Of course she was talking to him.

When his vocal chords caught up, he cleared his throat. “Excuse me?”

A lot of good unclogging his voice did. If it got any more pubescent, he’d take that windpipe right out and knock some sense into himself with it.

She reached for his hand and lowered it from his throbbing temple. “De-stressing. You’re trying too hard.”

Drew stared at her warm fingers against his. “I’m sorry, and you are?”

“Ti Russo.” A series of bracelets jingled down her arm. “Pleasure.”

He’d never met a girl who went by an initial.

Looking down, she ran the back of her bare foot along her calf. Waiting.

Now would be the appropriate moment for southern hospitality. Or at a minimum, basic manners in returning the introduction. Yet Drew just stood there like a washed-up piece of seaweed languishing under a sunrise he couldn’t look away from.

She was probably a few years younger than him. Twenty-eight at best. But her eyes carried the experiences of someone twice her age, along with an artistic flair he knew better than to entertain.

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” He strode to the opposite counter.

“If you really want to work on something, you might try honing your lying skills.”

Drew turned, jaw slack. If the girl’s accent wasn’t enough confirmation she was from the Big Apple, her lack of a filter just eliminated any doubt. Unbidden, thoughts of New York triggered memories that’d been festering beneath the surface all day. He tamped them back down where they belonged.

Ti dipped her head in front of his, brow raised as if waiting for him to divulge his inner thoughts. Like that was happening.

“Don’t you have a hot yoga class to go to or something?” He scanned the kitchen for a drink. Or maybe a pail of ice to dump over his head.

“What do you know about hot yoga?”

Way to open himself up for that one. Drew pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek. “Isn’t that what you girls do on vacations?”

A trace of something unreadable passed her eyes before she batted it away. Fear? She covered a moon-shaped scar on her arm when Drew’s gaze strayed to it. “I might be here for business,” she rambled off way too fast.

“Then I’m sure you need to get back to it.” As he should’ve been doing.

Drew swiped one of the pre-filled cups of Coke on the counter, took a giant swig, and almost spewed it back out. Not Coke. Dr. Pepper. He pivoted around in search of something clear to wash out the aftertaste. The water filter on the fridge looked like the only option.

That reminded him. He remembered to tell Winnie's mom Maddie couldn't have soda, didn't he?

Right beside him again, Ti propped a never-ending leg against the fridge. "Rose."

"Sorry?"

"Rose. It's the queen essential oil for de-stressing. Expensive, but totally worth it. You should try it with a little lavender, maybe some bergamot."

Wow. He must've really looked pathetic if some hippie chick was trying to push herbal remedies on him. He snagged an empty cup from the counter.

"Ooh. Or how about a little painting therapy? I met a girl at Down Creek Gallery earlier. We talked about doing some acrylics one morning this week. You should come."

Her unassuming smile curled around him while errant strands of hair mingled with her long dangling earrings. Drew pressed the cup in the general direction of the lever, but he didn't tear his gaze from her until something churned louder than his stomach.

Ice. Tumbling over the cup and spilling everywhere. Great. Drew turned to the sink.

She followed. "C'mon, it'll be—"

Her high-pitched squeak spun him around in time to avert her collision with the scattered ice cubes melting on the

floor. She gripped his sleeve, and he secured one stabilizing hand to her waist, the other to the fridge. This close, heady fragrances swirled up from her hair and tangled around his voice again. “You all right?” he managed.

A hint of satisfaction gradually colored over the fleeting embarrassment in her eyes. “See what a little distraction does? Gives that uptight stance of yours an elastic stretch.” Her lips crept to the side. “Or is that from the yoga?”

Without answering, he let go, grabbed a towel from the sink, and knelt to the floor.

Ti was right behind. “Seriously, you should come tomorrow. It’ll at least get your mind off whatever’s got your forehead all scrunched like that.”

Not likely. Aromatherapy? Painting on the beach with a starry-eyed artist? Negative. The only thing he needed to do was get back to figuring out how to meet the bank’s deadline.

Drew dumped the ice in the sink and turned for the front door. “I hope you have fun on the island, but I really need to go.”

His momentum ushered him into the briny air, up the walkway, and into a breeze waiting for him like a friend. What was he trying to do by coming here tonight?

Hunched against the garage, Drew looked back at the house and released a long breath. He shouldn’t have been short with that girl. She wasn’t the one he was upset with.

Flashes of unwelcome memories stormed in. He glared at the dark sky until the call of the waves beckoned him to race the riptide. To taste the salty water, feel the rush of the surf,

and cling to the only consolation that'd gotten him through these last several years.

In the morning, a new day would begin again.

The memory of his dad's voice breezed through him. Trouble was, even with the sunrise coming, Drew was no stranger to how long a single night could be.



Ti stood in the kitchen with her heart lodged somewhere in her throat while the door closed behind Mr. Enigma.

His green eyes had gripped her the minute she saw the torment they held. She didn't have to know the specifics. She'd experienced enough turmoil of her own to recognize the signs.

The pain hit her dead in the chest again. What was wrong with her? She'd come to the party to fade into the background and forget what'd driven her all the way to North Carolina from Queens last night. She was supposed to be clearing her head, not clouding it.

So, maybe trying to get someone else to de-stress helped her do the same for a few minutes. Still, her impulsive decision to come was probably a mistake. She grabbed her shoes.

Outside, humidity fogged her glasses but didn't keep her from overlooking the dark-haired, tan-skinned guy from inside leaning against the garage. Their eyes met long enough to make it clear he thought she was following him.

Before Ti could alleviate his worries, a couple strolled up from the opposite direction.

The dude's white blazer, complete with brown chest hairs curling over his V-neck shirt, screamed *Miami Vice*. To top it off, his hair-sprayed do had about as much give as his haughty grin. "Drew Anderson. Joanna and I were just talking about you."

So, Mr. Enigma had a name. And clearly had a beef with the Don Johnson wannabe. Whatever was brewing between them was none of Ti's business, but something about the weary strain across Drew's shoulders made her want to take up for him.

Drew blocked the walkway in an obvious effort to shield her from the conversation.

V-neck Boy didn't seem to miss it. His gaze zinged past Drew to Ti before slithering back to its primary target. He curled an arm around the brunette at his side, his grin feigning confusion. "We'd love for you to clear something up. For the life of us, we can't figure out why you'd turn down my offer to buy your struggling shop."

"Not now, Marcus." Drew clipped the guy's shoulder on his way past him.

"Time's running out." Marcus turned. "I know you don't want to go another tourist season barely breaking even. Especially with your little girl needing—"

Drew was up in the dude's face in two seconds flat.

Without thinking it through, Ti sprang forward and wedged between them. "Easy, boys." She warned Marcus away with her best you-don't-want-to-bring-out-the-New-

York-in-me look. “Drew must not’ve told you yet. I’m a consultant here to help his business.” *Consultant? Um, okay, this could go bad fast. What am I doing?*

Drew’s raised brows obviously had the same question. She darted him a go-with-it expression. They’d figure it out later. Right now, they had to get V-neck Boy off his back.

“A consultant?” The guy looked her up and down and then dipped his chin. “Good luck with that.” Without the slightest bit of concern on his face, he prodded his date forward.

The minute they disappeared inside, Drew glowered at Ti. “What was that?”

“Um . . .” She twirled her earring around. “An intervention?”

“Thanks, but I already told you, I’m fine.”

Ti rubbed bits of gravel off the bottom of one foot while contemplating ten different ways to rid Mr. Enigma of his pride.

His guarded stance didn’t budge.

“Okay, fine. I’m not really a consultant, but I have my own business. I know what it takes to make things run. Let me at least offer some suggestions.” A project to keep her mind occupied would be a lifesaver right now.

“You don’t even know what kind of shop I have.”

Ti peered around the small beach town. “I’m gonna go with souvenirs for \$500, Alex.”

Drew cocked his chin. “I thought you were here for work.”

“Sort of.” She switched hands and let her slingbacks hang from her fingers. “I’m visiting a friend for a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“Haven’t decided yet.”

He edged in, as if proximity would burn a hole through the wall keeping her from telling him the full truth. Face right below his, Ti begged the heat mounting her body limb by limb to stop below her neckline.

Drew stretched a palm against the siding behind her. She glanced from his eyes to his ringless left hand and back. If he noticed her quick appraisal, he didn’t show it. “And you can just walk away from your business for an indefinite amount of time?”

This close, an unruly section of hair above his ear stole her focus. Probably an overlooked result of bed head. Ti pushed the visual away and accomplished another swallow. “Like I said, I know how to make things run.”

His hand dragged down the wall, his countenance with it. “I can’t pay you.”

“I wasn’t asking.” She matched his backward stride. “It’s fine, really. My business is pretty self-sustaining. And I happen to have some money saved up from another life.”

“Another life.” His mouth quirked. “Do I want to know?”

“You could guess.”

He turned to leave, bait untaken.

A group of four-wheelers zoomed down the beach with whoops and hollers trailing them. Slightly redneck-ish, maybe, but at least those guys knew how to have fun. Unlike *some* people.

All right, so the guy obviously wasn't the playing around type. Fine. Ti caught his arm. "Relax, Yoga Boy. I was just trying to feel you out. Look, I'm here for . . . *a while*. I need inspiration for new art pieces. Your shop obviously needs some new inventory—"

She didn't give him the chance to interject when he balked. "We're talking about a mutual benefit here." Along with a diversion. If she could keep the nightmares at bay for a few weeks, maybe she'd have a shot at figuring some things out.

Offering her best disarming smile, she swayed from side to side. "No harm, no foul."

The look on his face begged to differ.

"Drew." A shirtless guy in board shorts jogged up from the beach, carrying a surfboard with a strap hitched to his ankle. "You're not bailing already, are you? We're just . . ." A glance from Drew to Ti sprawled into a Cheshire Cat smile. "Sorry, hoss. Didn't mean to interrupt."

Drew looked like he was suppressing an eye roll. "You weren't. Cooper, this is . . ."

"Ti Russo." She extended a hand.

The door behind them opened, and her friend Livy joined them on the walkway. "Oh, brilliant. I get to introduce you all at once."

Hearing the random British vernacular Livy had picked up while living in the UK would've been funny if Downer Drew's expression weren't ruining it.

"You know this girl?" he deadpanned.

“We modeled together in London.” Liv curled an arm around Ti’s. “Been friends ever since.”

Drew rolled up his sleeves. “Why didn’t you tell us you had a friend coming?”

“Didn’t know. She surprised me last night.”

That was one way of putting it. Ti chewed her lip. “Couldn’t they talk about anything else?”

Obviously not.

Skeptical eyes led Drew a step closer. “You really did just pick up and leave your job.”

Ti raised a nonchalant shoulder. “Everyone needs a breather now and then.”

“Sure you’re not running away from something?”

Her heart thudded against her chest, but she kept her voice casual. “Aren’t we all?”

“Some of us have responsibilities.”

The pavement burned into her skin almost as much as his attitude. “Thanks for clearing that up. I always wanted to meet a real-life Paris Geller.”

Intense green eyes roved over her until a visible ache creased his face. Yet rather than respond, Drew backed up farther, turned, and walked away.

“Good talk,” she called to his retreating backside. “Uptight much?”

Livy squeezed Ti’s arm. “Don’t worry. It’s not about you.”

Could’ve fooled her. Didn’t matter, anyway. Her offer to help him was a means to an end for both of them. Plain and simple.

Cooper peeled off his surfboard's Velcro strap from around his ankle and looked her over again as though assessing the situation. "Why don't you crash at my place while you're here?"

Livy let go of Ti and whacked him in the bicep. "While *you* crash on Drew's couch."

His dimples sank in as he rubbed his arm. "Of course."

"Hold on a sec." Ti looked from Cooper to Drew's distant silhouette, their similar features just then hitting her. "Are you two brothers?"

"I got Dad's charm. Drew got his . . ."

"Anal retentiveness?"

Cooper laughed. "You pick up quickly." He rubbed the back of his hand under his scruffy chin, looking hesitant to say more.

He didn't have to. She'd already gotten a good enough picture. Which meant she probably shouldn't make things worse by being all up in Drew's space. Especially if she was going to follow through on this consultant deal. "Liv, you sure I can't stay with you?"

"Only if I want an ear-bashing. I already told you. Mr. Fiazza will flip if he knows I snuck you into my flat last night. No one but waitstaff is allowed in those quarters."

"Then I'll get a room somewhere else."

"Not this time of year, you won't." Livy shared a knowing look with Cooper. "Every motel on the island will be booked solid through August."

Fantastic. Ti peered across the sleepy town, the fear of going home closing in.

“We’re your best option.” Cooper dragged a piece of wax over his surfboard. “I have a trailer on Drew’s property. It’s not huge, but you’ll have your own space. And we’ll be close enough if you need anything.”

Ti studied him. Good-looking? Definitely. A charmer? Probably. But he carried a hint of the same integrity she saw under his brother’s armor. “If you’re positive you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” An assuring smile warmed over her.

“Smashing.” Livy stretched with a yawn. “Because I’ve got to call it a night.”

Ti peeked at her cell. “When did you start going to bed so early?”

“When I started having to get up at the crack of dawn to wait tables.”

Though playful, her tone hid a note of sadness. Regret, maybe. They’d kept in touch after Ti left London when her best friend, Cassidy, needed help with a camp she inherited, but Livy never explained why she ended up leaving, too. How’d she go from a high-dollar model career overseas to barely scraping by as waitstaff in North Carolina?

Maybe Ti wasn’t the only one with secrets to hide.

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