



Better to bend in the wind than to break.
~ *Chinese Proverb*

Ben and I make a hasty exit before his parents, particularly his dad, can throw up any further objections or roadblocks to our impending ceremony. We arrive at the courthouse an hour before they close. Ready or not, I'm about to become Mrs. Benjamin Carrington.

"Can I help you?" The young girl behind the wooden counter asks when it's finally our turn.

"We're here to get married." Ben's voice is firm and doesn't carry the slightest trace of fear.

"I need to see your marriage license." She smacks her gums and holds out her hand.

"We don't have one yet," I inform her.

She rolls her eyes. "You'll need to go down the hall, show your IDs, and pay \$75 to get one. Cash or credit card."

"Okay, then what?" I quickly glance in the direction of where we're supposed to obtain permission. "Do we come back here to you when we're done?"

“No,” she cackles. “You have to wait 72 hours before you can officially tie the knot.”

“What?” Ben and I blurt in unison.

“No one told us there was a waiting period,” he says.

She taps a few buttons on her keyboard, then turns her computer screen toward us. “It’s all right here on the county website. You’ve heard of the Internet, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” I reply. “We just didn’t think—”

“If I had a dime for every time someone told me that, I wouldn’t have to work behind this desk to pay for college.” She cranes her neck past us. “Next in line.”

Shell-shocked, Ben and I shuffle over to a nearby bench.

“So, do you have any other ideas of how we can become Mr. and Mrs.?” I plop onto the wooden slats.

He takes out his phone. “We could catch a flight to Las Vegas.”

“Vegas?” I scrunch my nose. I’m not big on celebratory fanfare, but I refuse to get married by an Elvis impersonator.

“It’s the first thing that popped into my head.” He rubs his hand over his face. “I can’t believe I didn’t think to check the requirements beforehand. I’m sorry.”

I can see the frustration and regret in his eyes. “How were you to know? It’s not like you get married every day.” I grin, hoping to bring some lightness to the situation. “Or do you?”

“No, not every day.” He winks at me. “But I try at least every few months. I was in a drought until you came along.”

Once I’ve finished giggling like a schoolgirl, I ask, “Okay, so now what?”

Ben glances down the corridor. “Let me go see if I can find someone besides Miss Congeniality over there who might be able to help us. Maybe there’s a loophole to all of this we can work around.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll wait here.” I watch his large frame stomp through the corridors like a man on a mission. While it’s hard to not try and take matters into my own hands, it’s also nice

having someone to lean on in difficult times. I might even grow accustomed to this.

After fifteen minutes of waiting, Ben still hasn't returned from his conquest. Rather than focus on the worries tumbling through my mind at the moment, I reach for a distraction. From the pit of my purse, I pull out my phone and check my email.

The bold font with Director Wu's name causes my pulse to race. I forsake all other messages and open hers.

Nicki,

So nice to hear from you! I pray your travels went smoothly. Lei Ming is doing well. The doctor informed me that she is recovering nicely and plans to release her to the Recovery Unit at New Hope soon. Please don't worry. She's in good hands. I'm keeping a close eye on her for you. Remember the red thread! Be in touch soon.

I stop holding my breath and release a huge sigh. Finally, some good news. If anyone needs some positivity right now, it's me. I type out a short response letting the director know that we are doing everything we can to get married and return to China as quickly as possible. At least knowing that Lei Ming is okay makes waiting three days bearable, if necessary.

Once the whooshing sound lets me know my reply is on its way, I dig in my purse once more and pull out the red thread the director gave me a few days ago. Maybe seeing it every day will remind me that if this little girl and I were meant to be together, then nothing can break our bond. Nothing.

I fashion the string around my right wrist like a bracelet just as Ben drops down on the bench next to me. "Okay, I talked to one of the registrars, and there's nothing we can do to get around the waiting period." He unfolds the paper he's holding in his hands. "But she did give me a list of other states where there's no time limitation, and guess what's on there?"

Oh, no. “Connecticut?” My stomach lurches at the thought that the one place I’ve been avoiding may be our only option to seal the deal.

“Exactly.” Ben’s face lights up. “I found a flight we can take later tonight. If we make it, we can be married in the morning and celebrate with your mom tomorrow evening.”

“You want to go to Bridgeport ... tonight?” I can barely get the words out of my mouth.

“Yeah.” His forehead wrinkles. “Is that a problem?”

To take Ben home? Yes, it’s a problem. A big one. If we went back to Bridgeport, he’d expect us to go to my mother’s house. I’m not sure we’re at a point in our relationship yet for him to be confronted with the truth of her situation. There are some days when it’s still hard for me to wrap my brain around.

No, I need a little more time to bare my soul, and my mother’s illness, to my husband-to-be.

“Nicki?” he asks again.

“I ... I don’t know.”

“I don’t understand. Are you changing your mind?”

“No. Of course not.” I reach for his hands. “It’s just that if we go to Connecticut, then it’s only fair that we tell my mother about our wedding plans ahead of time since we told your family, and there’s no guarantee how she’ll react. She could be ecstatic or try to persuade us not to go through with it. I’m not sure I want any more parental discord.”

“Okay, then.” He holds up the paper from the registrar. “Certainly, we can find somewhere else on this list to get married.”

“Thanks.” I nestle my head against his shoulder and relax a bit.

But only for a moment.

As we study our options, our quiet searching is interrupted by Darlene’s voice blaring through the empty corridor. “Ben, Nicki, wait!”

Ben and I watch in horror as his parents, dressed as if they were attending a black-tie event, barrel toward us.

“Mom, Dad.” Ben leaps up from the bench. “What are you doing here?”

Darlene rests her hand on her chest, gasping for air. “You haven’t gotten married yet, have you?”

“No.” Ben grimaces. “We didn’t realize there was a three-day waiting period.”

“Well, maybe that’s a sign, then.” Hank lifts his cowboy hat before slapping Ben on the shoulder.

“Hank, stop it. We didn’t come to fight.” She straightens her sequin dress and primps her hair, ensuring that her up-do is still perfectly in place. “What are you going to do then?”

“We’re looking for alternatives.”

“What kind?” Hank scowls.

“Ones that will allow us to do what we came back to the States to do. Get married right away.” Ben crosses his arms over his chest. “I don’t understand. Why are you here?”

Darlene wipes the sweat from her forehead. “I understand why y’all are doing what you’re doing and why you didn’t want to tell us or Nicki’s mom. But since we do know, I was hoping we could get here in time to see you get married.” Her voice cracks. “It would mean so much to me.”

Tears pool in the corner of her eyes, so I stand and give her a Kleenex from my purse.

“Thank you.” She taps the tissue under her eyelashes so as not to smear her Tammy Faye mascara. “If I can’t give you two a proper ceremony, the least you can do is let me watch.”

Her gaze darts between Ben and me, pleading with us to let her be a part of this moment.

And that’s when it hits me.

Looking into her eyes, all I see is a mother’s love and the longing she has to be present when her child gets married. It’s the look I imagine my mom would have if she were here. And it’s

the same one I'm sure I'll wear when Lei Ming walks down the aisle.

With that recognition, my chest tightens. Now I understand what Darlene must be going through. It's the same heartbreak my mother will experience when I break the news that I wed Ben without her. The loss of celebrating a life-changing event with your child.

How could I—we—possibly rob them of that joy?

I can't, and, if I'm being honest with myself, I don't want to. But I don't want to delay making Lei Ming our daughter one second longer than necessary either.

As my inner turmoil builds and threatens to tear my heart into pieces, I catch a glimpse of the red thread dangling from my wrist. If I truly believed God arranged for me to go to China and placed Lei Ming in my life, then I had to have faith that He could make a way for us to be matched, even if we had to wait a few extra days.

"Your mom's right," I say.

"About what?" Ben shifts his stare from his parents to me.

"If we're going through all these hoops to be a family, shouldn't we consider our families and include them as well?" I gulp. "I mean, since we have to wait three days anyway, why not go ahead and do a small ceremony where everyone can be present? It really would be great to have my mom here with me, and clearly, it's what your mom wants too. We can catch a flight back to China immediately after the ceremony."

"And what about Lei Ming?" Ben's cheeks burn red. "Are you forgetting the whole reason we're doing this in the first place?"

"Of course not," I say. "Lei Ming means the world to me."

"Well, what if she has another setback or some other family wants to adopt her?" Ben's lower lip quivers.

"We have to have faith, Ben, and trust that it's all going to be okay." I roll my fingers over the red thread. "I just received an email from Director Wu saying she's doing great and will be

released from the hospital soon.” I open my email and flash it in his direction.

He plucks the device from my hand and reads the message out loud. When he finishes, his shoulders relax. “So, she’s really going to be okay?”

“Yes, and now that we know that Lei Ming is recovering nicely, it won’t hurt anything to delay the wedding a few days—maybe a week—and have a small ceremony where all of our parents can be there with us.” I cut a sideways glance at Darlene. “I think it would really make everyone happy. Including me.” I smile.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I am.”

“Okay, Mom.” Ben turns toward his mom and holds his hands up in surrender. “You’ve got a week to plan something small.”

She squeals in delight. “Oh, thank you.” She wraps her son in a bear hug. When she pulls back from him, she’s beaming. “Can I have ten days instead of seven?”

“Mom, don’t push it.”

“All right, all right.” She grabs Hank’s arm and drags him down the corridor. “We need to get home so I can start making plans.”

Watching them go, lightness overtakes me. For better or worse, we did what was best for everyone.

Once they’re out of sight, Ben looks back at me and shakes his head. “You have no idea the Pandora’s Box you opened up, letting my mother plan what will no doubt be the social event of the spring.”

“It won’t be that bad,” I narrow my eyes. “Will it?”

AFTER SEEING the joy on Darlene’s face when we told her she could plan a small ceremony for us, I decide to leave for Connecticut the next day to visit my mom. I want to give her

that same measure of happiness and tell her the news about my upcoming wedding in person, especially since she's been waiting for me to tie the knot for so long. But I'm going there on my own. Ben doesn't need to know about my mom's problems just yet.

"Why do you want to go alone?" Ben leans against the bedroom doorframe.

"It'll be easier that way." I throw my computer in my bag. "Heather was able to schedule a meeting with the O'Connor Foundation Board to review New Hope's grant submission early. That's scheduled for Monday afternoon. My mom and I will be back Tuesday morning. A quick trip, really."

"But I think it would be fun to see where you grew up."

"There's not much to it, and you'd just be bored hanging out in a strange place."

"I lived in China by myself, remember?" he chuckles. "I think I can handle Bridgeport for a few hours while you make your presentation."

"I appreciate the offer, but you should stay here and help your mom with the wedding. From the way she's talking, she's making a lot of plans, and I'm still not convinced your dad's on board and willing to help her." I scan the cottage for my computer charger. "Unless you're worried I won't come back."

"Very funny." He tilts his head. "I'm not concerned about that, but I do get the feeling you're hiding something from me."

I freeze. "What?"

"I think you don't want me to go with you because you've got a secret back home you're keeping from me."

"A secret?" I swallow the fear rising to my mouth.

"Yeah, some skeleton in your closet you're afraid I'll discover if I join you."

"That's ludicrous, Ben." I scurry around the room to avoid eye contact with him. It's not just a closet full of skeletons. It's an entire house.

"Is it?" He grabs my hand and pulls me toward him.

Standing so close to him, I can see that he hasn't shaved since we arrived back in the States. A scraggly beard has formed along his jawline, and I'm tempted to rub it. "What would I be keeping from you?"

"I don't know, a boyfriend?" He cracks a smile. "Some dude I'm going to have to fight for your hand?"

I belt out a hearty laugh. "I can assure you, there's no boyfriend. If you recall, I wasn't looking for a Prince Charming."

"No, you weren't, but he found you." His eyes bore into mine. "And he wants to be a part of whatever it is you're doing. Especially since we're planning to be a family."

My heart beats faster. While our arrangement, as Ben's dad so lovingly refers to it, is completely platonic, hearing Ben talk like that about our future family makes my insides quiver. In all the rush to get married, I didn't really stop to think about my feelings for him. Both now and in the future. Could we grow to love one another someday and truly be a family?

"I appreciate that. Really, I do." I take a step back from him, not only to protect my heart but to avoid seeing the disappointment in his eyes. "But you don't need to go. Like I said, you'd be bored."

"You're right. I don't need to go. I want to go." He gentles his voice. "I'd like to ask your mom for permission to marry you."

"You would?"

"Yes. One day when Lei Ming's boyfriend ..." He shakes his head. "I can't believe I'm actually saying those words, but when the time comes for our little girl to get married, I want her husband-to-be to do what's right by her as well and ask me for her hand in marriage."

A shiver runs down my spine, hearing him talk about Lei Ming that way. In just a short time, she's not only managed to capture my heart, but it seems she's done quite the number on him as well. It's also proof that the sacrifices we're making – and the craziness of it all—are worth it. If that's the case, then I need to be completely honest with him. No more secrets.

“Fine,” I concede. “You can come to Connecticut with me—”

“Great, I’ll go pack.” He drops my hand and heads for the door.

“Ben, wait.” I swallow. “I need to tell you something.”

He stops and turns back toward me. “Ah, so there is a mysterious boyfriend.”

“I wish it were as simple as that.”

My legs go weak, and I drop into a low-back chair in the living room. Divulging the truth about my mom isn’t going to be easy. Other than my organizing colleague who’s been assisting Mom avoid eviction by getting things in order, I’ve never told anyone about her hoarding. But now I don’t have a choice. If he’s going to accompany me back home, he’s going to see it all for himself, and it’s best if I warn him ahead of time.

He plops into the matching chair across from me. “Okay, go ahead, tell me all about him. I can handle it.”

When I don’t reply to his joke, Ben scoots forward in the seat, deep concern etched on his face. “Nicki, what is it?”

“It’s my mom.” I take a deep breath and lower my gaze. “She’s, well, she’s a hoarder.”

“You mean like the people on that TV show? The ones who don’t get rid of anything?”

I nod.

“Oh.”

A heavy silence falls over the room, leaving each of us lost in our own thoughts.

Finally, Ben speaks up. “I can see why you wouldn’t want me to come, Nicki. It would be hard to hide that, but really I’m more confused than anything.”

“What’s there to be confused about? My mother loves to collect needless and worthless things to the point that her home is basically unlivable.”

“I get that.” He perches on the edge of his chair. “What I don’t understand is how is it you’re so organized, but your mom

isn't? Has she been like this your whole life? And why did you not want me to know?"

"You're asking me to give you my whole life's story."

Tenderness flickers in his eyes. "Well, it's probably a good idea for me to know about it, don't you think? We are going to be husband and wife soon."

His words speak volumes. He's not mad. Even though I kept this from him, he still wants to marry me. What did I do to deserve someone like him?

"You mean you're not upset that I kept this from you and intended to keep it from you as long as I possibly could?"

"I told you my dark secret about Katie's death, and you didn't run. Why would I be upset that your mom has an illness?"

"I don't know, I just thought ..."

Ben springs from his seat and squats down beside me. "Nicki, we've made a huge commitment without really knowing each other that well. There will be things we learn about one another along the way that may be a jolt to our system. It's to be expected." He places his hand on mine. "But the only way this is going to work is if we're open and honest with one another. No secrets."

"Agreed, no more secrets." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "So, you want me to tell you the whole story then?"

"I do." He stands. "But save it for the plane ride. I need to go pack so I can meet my future mother-in-law."