
Chapter 3



Pulling up to the Reno homestead, Trace stopped the truck and stared. This was the house his dad grew up in with his brothers. Three guys who couldn't be more different. Steve, the oldest, a contractor. Uncle Ed, retired Ag teacher and short-term missionary. And Tom. Dad to Trace, Eli, and Samantha. When asked what he did for a living, Tom always said, "I'm just a farmer, like my dad."

Each Reno brother had things in common, and things that were theirs, exclusively. Same as Eli, Sam, and him.

It was interesting being the oldest child. He identified with Uncle Steve, somewhat. Of course, Trace was only three minutes older than Eli, but for some reason, he felt older.

Years older, sometimes. He never wanted to disappoint. He felt it was the least he could do.

Does that mean I have to be perfect?

It sounded dumb, he knew. Somebody had to be, didn't they?

Deep-down, he knew the answer to that. *Unattainable.*

Was it? In his black-and-white, rule-oriented engineer

brain, it should work. If he worked hard and did things just right, things should go his way. Shouldn't they?

Even I know you don't necessarily succeed by following all the instructions.

Trace shook his head and grabbed his bag as he got out of the truck. He'd packed light, leaving his furniture and household goods in the apartment for the sub-letter and storing the rest of his stuff in a locked storage unit in Marion until he figured out his next steps.

The front porch light came on, and the door opened.

"There's the boy!" Grandpa stood on the porch, waiting for him, hand in his pocket. "Grandma was about to send me out to look for you, but I talked her down."

"Usually she calls me about the time I turn down Cotton Patch Road, convinced I'm late or lying on the side of the road somewhere." He hugged Grandpa, relaxing a little when he got an extra squeeze. "Hi, Grandpa."

"Good trip?" Grandpa ushered him in the front door where he dropped his bag.

"Yeah, a little construction on Forty-one going through Evansville, and then I hit the Ohio River bridge—down to one lane—in Henderson at rush hour."

"Forgot to warn you about that one."

"It wasn't so bad."

"Good."

Trace heard the oven door slam in the kitchen and breathed in the smell of Grandma's meatloaf. "She made my favorite, didn't she?"

"Of course she did." Grandpa shook his head.

"She didn't need to go to so much trouble."

"That's what I said, and she told me to get out of the kitchen and leave her alone. She had it under control."

Grandpa stepped closer and whispered, “She’s been like a kid in a candy store ever since she found out you were coming.”

“I heard that.” Grandma rushed into the room, wiping her hands on her apron, and headed straight to her grandson. Her hugs were magical. “I’m so glad we’ll be able to monopolize you for once.”

Trace smiled. If anyone had asked what a genuine, honest Trace Reno smile resembled, he couldn’t have described it, but he knew this was the real thing because he didn’t even have to think about it, didn’t have to tell himself to smile.

“It’s good to be here.”

“Stay as long as you want.” Grandma winked. “I think your mama might be a little jealous.”

“I figured, but I knew they’d be crowded when Eli and Sam come in for Christmas.”

“And you weren’t ready to move back in with the parents, eh?” Grandpa chuckled.

“Exactly.” He picked up his bag. “Where do you want me?”

“I’ve changed the sheets and cleared out the dresser in the room Tom and Ed shared.”

He winked. “I’ll put on my blue plaid flannel shirt and blend into the decor.”

Grandma swatted his arm. “Oh, you. I keep thinking I’ll change the wallpaper when it starts peeling off, and it never has.”

“Hey, no need to mess with a classic ...”

Her smirk was one of her more endearing expressions. She was a boy-mom through and through, so it was well-practiced. “Go put your stuff up. Supper will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“Anybody else coming?” *Please say no.*

“Just us, tonight. Tomorrow Lisa and Mandy are coming over to help me get a start on Thanksgiving. I can’t believe Del

and Darcy are getting married this Friday.” She shook her head. “Let’s cram as much into a holiday weekend as possible.”

Trace put his arm around his grandma. “I’m here to help.”

“I’ll take you up on that unless your grandpa steals you away from me.”

“Now, sweetheart, we men are only here to serve when it comes time for Thanksgiving dinner.” Grandpa dodged when she swatted at him on the way back to the kitchen.

“You two are incorrigible. Make sure to wash up before you come to the table.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Trace and Grandpa shared a smile as they spoke at the same time.

HANNAH WOKE to the smells of Thanksgiving. The turkey was in the oven and cornbread was cooling on a rack to be crumbled into dressing, along with a few biscuits and some toasted bread.

Christmas was great, especially since baby Vi came. Last year’s Christmas morning with a two-year-old? Heaven.

But Thanksgiving was her favorite. Always had been. No gifts, no parties, no over-the-top commercialization of what should be a sacred holy day. Just family and a time to stop and remember the blessings all around them.

And Del and Darcy had to go and ruin it by planning a wedding, of all things, on the same weekend.

The sounds of Dad putting wood in the stove reminded her it was probably still a little chilly, except in the kitchen. She grabbed her fuzzy robe and slippers before she left her room. The heavenly aroma of coffee with a side of wood smoke pulled her down the hall.

“Good morning, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie. Sleep good?” Mom already had flour on her apron and her graying hair was pulled back with a clip. She’d been busy.

“Like a log.” She pulled out a box of cereal and poured herself a bowl. “When are the rest of the gang getting here?”

Mom glanced at the clock, which read 8:15. “Probably a little before noon.” She grinned and peered over her readers at her daughter. “There’s plenty of time to child-proof the house before Vi gets here.”

Hannah laughed. “She’s getting to be something, isn’t she?”

“Grandbabies are the best.” Mom sighed. “When you were born, both sides of the family were enthralled.”

“Well ...” Hannah winked at her mom. “It was pretty cool being the first grandchild on both sides. I guess my kids won’t have that to look forward to.” She shrugged and poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the island across from where Mom was working. “But then I’d have to have prospects of marriage to make that happen, wouldn’t I?”

When did I get so cranky about it?

Mom twisted her lips in a wry grin. “It’s fine to be picky. Never think we want anything but the best God has for you.”

“What if He doesn’t have anybody for me?” Chin in hand, Hannah slumped a little on the stool.

“I don’t think you need to worry just yet.”

She munched on her cereal, gazing off into space. “I don’t know, Mom. I’ve prayed. I’ve tried to keep an open mind. Think about it. I work with mostly men, and nobody—and I mean *nobody*—has indicated the slightest bit of interest in me.”

“Have you been interested in anyone?”

Hannah thought for a minute and chuckled. “Come to think of it, no. Not really.”

“Then there’s the answer. You just haven’t met him yet.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it would be just as well if I didn’t find anyone. I can be happy by myself. Being single isn’t like having a disease or something.”

Mom shook her head. “Of course it’s not, dear. You’re overthinking.”

Overthinking? Maybe. She tended to do that. In her line of work, she had to think things out. Had to make sure things were done in a certain way and a certain order. Without order, houses could catch on fire, appliances would burn out, and many other issues that bad electrical work caused.

Mom broke into her thoughts. “Oh, Hannah, what about your RSVP to the wedding?”

Ugh.

“I did last night.”

“Good. It’ll be fun. Mandy and Caryn will be there ...”

“With Clay and Ben. I know. I love being a fifth wheel.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. They’re your friends.”

If they really loved me, really were my friends, they’d ... What? They’d what? Ditch their boyfriends in an act of solidarity in the realm of singleness?

“I know.” Hannah leaned her chin back on her hand and studied her mom. “How did you know Dad was the one?”

“We’ve told this story a thousand times,” Mom said, shaking her head as she continued tearing bits of dry bread into a bowl.” She laughed out loud. “It took a while.”

Dad walked in about then. “What’s so funny?”

“Hannah wanted to know how I knew you were ‘the one.’”

Dad wiped his hand down his face. “Here we go.”

“I thought your dad was an arrogant, self-absorbed—”

Dad stopped her. “We get the picture.”

Mom went to him and slid an arm around his waist. “Hey, at least I don’t think so now.” She kissed his cheek, then turned back to Hannah. “I wasn’t crazy about him, but I had a little

crush on his car, once I got over being mad at him running into mine at the parade.”

“It was a great car, wasn’t it?”

“Nineteen seventy-eight Mustang Mach One. Much nicer than my hand-me-down seventy-five Buick.”

Dad leaned down and kissed Mom on the lips.

“Do I need to leave?” Hannah huffed. This made twice in two days she’d had to witness their dove-eyes.

Mom waved her hand in dismissal and returned to crumbling the dressing ingredients.

“Your mom was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. She was working at the café, way before Roxy owned it. I finally figured out her schedule and kept showing up until she gave in and went out with me.”

“He just happened to be there the night I needed a ride.”

“I was Johnny-on-the-spot.” He grinned. “After that, I don’t think a week went by that we didn’t see one another.”

Mom grinned, a slight blush on her cheeks. “Once I had him all to myself, I realized he wasn’t as self-centered as I thought from seeing him with his friends.”

Dad winked at Hannah. “She had this idea they were a bad influence.” He laughed. “Those Reno boys might have an opinion about that.”