
Chapter 2



“Supper’s ready.”

Hannah paused, anticipating the change that would come when she moved out. Soon—very soon—she would have her own kitchen.

“Coming, Mom.” Hannah pulled the towel off her head and shook out her straight, dark blonde hair. Wet, it appeared positively brown. “Mousy,” she muttered, with a wrinkle of her nose. Putting it in a messy bun meant it would probably look worse when it dried.

So, what? It’s not like Prince Charming is going to show up at the dinner table on spaghetti night.

The smell of cheesy garlic bread drew her, though. In less than two months, she’d be on her own, finally, and responsible for her own cooking.

Hmm ...

Existing on what she knew about cooking troubled her more than the lonely locale of the house.

Mom bustled around, getting the food on the table. “Want to fix the drinks? We’ve got sweet tea and water.”

“Sounds good.” Hannah dropped ice cubes in the three glasses—two normal-sized and one a little bigger—on the counter. “Dad, tea or water?”

“What do you think?”

Hannah chuckled. “One extra-large sweet tea, coming right up.”

As they came together at the table, Dad held out his hands and they both took his instinctively as he said the blessing over the food.

Taking a deep breath, she whispered a little prayer of thanks for her family. She’d been blessed.

As soon as their heads were up and the dishes were being passed, Mom started talking. “How was Mandy? Has she got an engagement ring yet?”

Here we go.

“No engagement ring—yet. And she’s fine. I think she likes working for the county attorney.”

“I’m glad. I was sure we’d lose her to the big city before Clay came along and declared himself.” Mom picked up the plate of bread and handed it to Dad. “Here, have an extra piece.”

“What happened to me needing to watch my waistline?” Dad winked at his bride as she waved him off.

“I’ll be glad to watch it for you.” She blushed slightly.

Oh, my.

Hannah choked a little on the laugh at the amorous glances passing between her two parents.

Time for me to empty this nest.

“I can’t believe that girl is a full-fledged lawyer. How’s her mama and daddy?”

“Good, I assume. We didn’t talk about them.”

“I don’t know how you know anything about anybody. Any time I ask about something connected to a friend, you

don't know. What do young people these days talk about, anyway?"

Hannah grinned. "We talk about things we like, about what our friends are doing. You know—stuff." She took a bite of the pasta with Mom's homemade marinara. "This is so good, Mom."

Maybe she'll stop asking so many questions.

"Have you decided about Del and Darcy's wedding?"

"I hate going to weddings by myself."

"Don't be silly. You wouldn't be alone. Dad and I will be there."

Hannah leveled a frown at her mother

"What?"

"Mom, Dad, I love you dearly, but most girls my age—make that *women* my age—are married or at least dating. They don't go to functions with their parents."

Dad shook his head. "Sweetheart, your dream man will come along when you least expect it." Winking, he glanced over at Mom. "That's how I found your mom."

Hannah hoped her inward sigh didn't show on her face as she braced for the story she'd heard umpteen times.

"I know. When you plowed into the back of Grandpa's Buick after the homecoming parade in ... what year was it?"

"1984."

"Ah yes, the '80s." Hannah giggled a little. "How big was your car again?"

"As big as a boat." Mom laughed. "But I never worried about getting hurt in it."

"Nineteen seventy-five Buick Electra. Now, *that* was a car." Dad sighed, staring off in the distance, then grinned, winking at Hannah. "I didn't win her over immediately, but I sure got her attention."

“YOU’RE SERIOUSLY THINKING about moving to Clementville?”

Trace’s twin brother Eli’s stare, and just about everything else about this conversation, irritated him.

“What’s wrong with Clementville? Dad grew up there, and he turned out all right.”

Eli sat across from him at Culver’s, shaking his head. The cheese curds, usually amazing, tasted like sawdust to Trace.

“You couldn’t pay me to live there. Summers at Grandma and Grandpa’s and the occasional Christmas are enough.” Eli took a long drag of his Pumpkin Pie Milkshake and considered Trace. “Of course, I like people.”

“So do I. In limited doses.”

“You move to Clementville, there will be expectations.”

“Of?”

“Family.”

“They’re the only people I tend to like.” Trace’s ire was growing. Wasn’t it enough that Eli—friendly, outgoing, life-of-the-party Eli—had it all? A great job, amazing apartment, girlfriend, buddies to hang out with. He had a life.

“Listen,” Eli started, leaning toward him. “You’ve got to do you. If moving to the sticks is appealing, go for it. I’ll be behind you—I might give you down the road in front of everybody, but deep down, I’ve got your back.”

How was he supposed to stay gruff in the presence of that? Trace stared down at his food, then up at his brother. “Thanks.”

“Just know, with Mom and Dad down there, and Samantha waffling back and forth between staying and going, I’ll miss you.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anybody.” Usually preferring to

hide behind his full beard, Trace felt his whiskers twitch into a smile.

“Better not. I’ll deny it.” Eli—clean-shaven, always-in-a-good-mood Eli—winked and sent Trace his mega-watt smile. His phone buzzed and distracted him. “Sam. She wants me to put in her order.” He stuffed his phone back in his pocket and got up. “I’m going to get another shake. Want one?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Trace went over and over the situation in his mind. Besides his brother, what held him here? He liked the church he grew up in, but once his contemporaries paired off or moved on, he didn’t feel the same connection—with his friends or with God.

Where had he felt the most at home?

Grandpa’s workshop.

Maybe that was why the idea of moving down there had a modicum of appeal.

“Sorry I’m late, guys.” Sam arrived just in time for Trace to claim shake number two. “Where’s mine?”

“Don’t worry, it’s on its way, along with the usual burger and cheese curds.”

She sighed. “I love my big brothers.”

Trace regarded Samantha, suppressing a smile when he noticed a smudge of paint just above her eyebrow.

She scooted into the booth next to Eli. That’s how it often was—Sam and Eli on one side and Trace on the opposite. It wasn’t that they were against him. It wasn’t their fault that they seemed to lead charmed lives.

“No biggie. Just telling Eli that I’m thinking about moving down to Clementville.”

“What? You’re going to move in with Mom and Dad?” Her mouth settled into a distinct *O*.

Trace’s laugh came out as a snort. “No way. I’ll be applying for jobs and finding a place of my own.” He rubbed the back of

his neck. "I'm going to stay with Grandma and Grandpa until I land somewhere to live."

Eli laughed. "And whose idea was that?"

"Grandma's." He felt the heat creep up his cheeks. People with freckles should try not to ever get embarrassed. "I guess Dad said something to her about me coming down, and she called me. Said she knew I didn't want to move in with my parents at twenty-eight."

"And moving in with your grandparents is so much better?" Samantha chuckled, then shook her head and sent him a loving look. "It'll be great. We've not had much opportunity to spend time with Grandma and Grandpa on our own."

Trace gave her a half-smile. "I'm kind of hoping there'll be time for Grandpa to teach me more about woodworking. Summers were never long enough to do more than be his assistant." He quirked a brow at his twin. "Somebody was always rushing to get in front of me whenever we went out there."

"Sorry. At least I stuck with it and became a carpenter." Eli grinned.

They all had memories of time spent with their Grandparents Reno.

"I might come down a few days before Christmas, when the break starts." She took in a breath. "I'm so ready to have a few weeks without students. Maybe Grandma will share her sugar cookie recipe with me. I understand Mandy snagged it last year."

"Hey, if there's a bake-off, I'll be glad to judge." Trace smiled, and Eli muttered an "Amen."

"What about Del's wedding?" Sam leaned her chin on her hand and munched on cheese curds and French fries from her brothers' trays. "Mom said RSVPs are due this week."

“Did it last night. What about you two?”

Eli shifted in his seat. “I think I’m going to pass. Carrie wants me to go to her parents’ house for Thanksgiving.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Maybe.” Eli’s slow grin gave him away. Yeah, the guy had found his girl. Why couldn’t Trace?

“Isn’t she from around Indy?”

“Yeah. She mentioned wanting me to meet her grandparents.”

“Oooo, meet the parents *and* the grandparents?” Samantha leaned back and considered Eli. “Got that ring ready?”

Eli held his hands up in front of him. “Not yet. You guys are going to jinx it.”

“Oh, brother, I figure you don’t need my help for that.” It was a good day when his brother and sister laughed at *his* jokes for a change. In other groups, he could never think of a comeback quick enough for it to not be awkward.

“Very funny.” Eli turned toward his sister. “Sam? Are you going to the wedding of the year?”

“Planning on it. I wanted to go down for Thanksgiving, anyway.” She clasped her hands on the blue Formica table in front of her. “Is it totally weird that Mom and Dad aren’t just down the road? I feel like a baby bird that’s been shoved out of the nest.”

“You haven’t lived with them since college.” Trace arched a brow at her.

Sam twisted her lips and frowned at her brother. “Yeah, but it was nice to know they were here if I needed them.”