

CHAPTER TWO



“G et a life.”

Dave’s words replay on a continuous loop in my brain. What does that even mean?

I’m so mad at him for ruining my good mood. I take a few deep breaths. One, two, three, four, and exhale. Emma will be here soon. I need to be at my best.

Sitting on the living room floor, I pull the large plastic bin of family pictures onto my lap. Hundreds of photos of all sizes are stacked on top of each other. I regret never taking the time to put them in albums. Some of the photos show unfamiliar faces with no names written on the back—pictures inherited from my dad after he passed away.

Most of the photos are of Emma at different stages. Her first time walking, her first taste of baby food, learning to ride her bike, her kindergarten school picture. There are photos of Dave, Emma, and I posing in front of Cinderella Castle at Disney World, swimming in the ocean, and building sand castles on the beach. Emma’s soccer photos start when she

was four and continue every season until she graduated from high school. Nostalgia evokes an unspoken, wistful longing. Then a glimmer of hope flutters in my chest as I think of how many hours going through the stacks of photos with Emma will take. The thought of selecting the best pictures for the father-daughter dance video lifts my spirits.

Get a life.

“This is my life, Dave,” I shout to the empty room filled with framed pictures of Emma’s growing-up years.

An engine purrs in our driveway. My pulse quickens. Joy-filled adrenaline jolts me onto my feet so fast I drop the box of photos. Pictures scatter across the floor. Shaking my head, I throw my hands in the air. I’ll deal with the mess later.

I run out the front door, reach her silver compact car, and wait for her to exit. Emma smiles. My heart melts as I wrap my arms around her in a big hug. The strawberry fragrance from her shampoo surrounds me.

After a long embrace, I release her and examine her from head to toe. Has she been taking care of herself? Eating right?

She blushes as she scans our neighborhood. “Can we go inside, Mom?”

“Of course. I have so much to tell you.” My heart races. “I’ve made your favorite dinner, and there’s dessert.” I wink, then loop my arm with hers, mentally skipping down the sidewalk.

“I have a lot to tell you too.”

Is it my imagination, or is she nervous? I frown, then dismiss the thought.

Once inside, Emma scans the living room much like Dave did earlier. She bites her lower lip as her warm brown eyes dart from one area of the room to the next.

Uneasy with her reaction to the wedding paraphernalia, I

try to ignore the anxious churning in my stomach. Dismissing the warning signs in my head, I grab the newly purchased wedding planner from the coffee table. “Look what I bought us. The lady at the wedding boutique store said it was a ‘must have’ to plan your wedding. Isn’t this going to be so much fun?” I hold it out to her.

Emma stares at the planner but doesn’t take it. Instead, her eyes slowly rise to my face. “We won’t be needing that, Mom.” She throws her left arm out toward me and wiggles her fingers. “Philip and I eloped last weekend.”

My stomach drops. A blast of heat travels up my chest and neck, making me uncomfortably hot. I hear Emma’s words, but comprehension eludes me. A knot lodges in my throat, so big I might choke on it. My mouth gapes open, but no words come out. All I can do is stand there staring, waiting for the room to quit spinning.

Once it does, I take her soft, youthful hand in mine to get a closer look. Her engagement diamond catches the light. It sparkles next to the newly acquired gold wedding band. My gaze travels from her ring to her face. Emma’s big brown eyes stare at me, wide and unblinking as she presses her lips into a thin line.

“Congratulations,” I say.

She releases a warm breath and lifts her lips into a half smile.

The excited adrenaline from a few moments ago has vanished. Tiredness overtakes me. I want to sit down, but my feet won’t move.

“As you know, Mom, Philip graduated this spring.”

Though numb, I nod for Emma to continue.

“Two weeks ago, he was offered a job in Phoenix, Arizona.” My chest tightens. Dread fills my heart.

Emma plasters on an enthusiastic smile and squeezes my hands tightly. “It’s a really good job. He couldn’t pass it up.” She pauses. Then taking in a deep breath, she swallows hard.

My stomach lurches, knowing what she will say next but praying I’m wrong.

“We leave for Phoenix this weekend.” Her words drop like a boulder. She stands staring, seemingly waiting for my reaction.

I flinch. My stomach lurches as the bottom falls out, and my happy expectations for the summer turn to dust.

My shallow breathing makes me lightheaded. My ears ring. I hope I don’t pass out. My voice strains to ask, “What about college?” The words burn my throat. “You only have one more year to go. Couldn’t you have waited another year?”

Emma releases my grip on her hand and takes a step back. Crossing her arms over her chest, she says, “Mom, I plan to finish, but that’s for Philip and me to figure out.” Color rises in her cheeks. She stands rigid and unyielding. “I know you had a lot of plans for us this summer, but the thought of living long distance from Philip for a whole year ...” Tears fill her eyes. “I couldn’t do it.”

“What about living long distance from me?” My chin trembles.

She drops her arms. “Can’t you just be happy for us, Mom?” Her voice softens.

Taking her face in my hands, my lips quiver as I try to form a smile. “All I want is for you to be happy, but—”

The blare of the smoke alarm in the kitchen fills the house.

“Ugh.” I huff. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.” I spin and dash to the kitchen, leaving Emma standing in the middle of the pointless wedding mess.

I forgot I had set the stove burner on low to keep the marinara warm. What was once a colorful, flavorful red sauce is now a charred black lump stuck to the bottom of the pan.

My nose burns from holding back tears. This is not how I pictured today going. One tear escapes, trickling down my cheek, then another and another. Grabbing the dish towel nearby to dab at my eyes, I take a few deep breaths in and out—one, two, three, four—willing the tears to stop. Knowing I need to rejoin Emma, I swipe under my eyes one more time and return to the living room.

She sits cross-legged on the floor, a stack of photos on her lap. Her ebony hair is pulled up in her usual messy-bun style. Quiet, I stand in the entryway and watch her pick up one photo, then another, examining each one. A faint smile forms on her lips as she places them on the floor beside her.

Hot, heavy tears form behind my eyes again. I can't catch my breath. Two emotions war inside me—an overwhelming love for the girl sitting in our living room and the crushing disappointment that she's creating a life without me. An unexpected snuffle reveals my presence. Emma's eyes rise to meet mine. I plaster on a fake smile, hoping to hide how dismal I feel on the inside.

"I may have burned dinner." I blush, giving a hollow laugh.

Emma laughs too.

"How about pizza?" I suggest. A flood of memories cascades through my brain—us sitting around the kitchen table on Friday nights, sharing our day and laughing at silly things while stuffing our faces with pizza. A genuine smile replaces the fake one. We may not have all summer, but we can make the most of tonight.

Emma's gaze returns to the picture in her hand. Meekly, she says, "That sounds great, but ... Philip is meeting me at his parents' house. They want to take us out to dinner to celebrate."

My smile fades as I process what Emma said, letting her

words sink in. They knew before me. Nausea overtakes me at the realization.

The floodgates open. Tears stream down my cheeks.

Emma jumps to her feet and takes my hands in hers. “Mom, I know this isn’t how you envisioned my wedding or this summer. Everything just happened so fast.”

“It’s not only the wedding. You’re moving so far away.” I cry harder.

“I know, but we can talk on the phone. You can come visit me when we’re settled. I’ll be home for the holidays. It will be like I never left.” Doubt flickers in her eyes.

I nod. What more can I say?

“I love you, Mom, but I really have to go. Philip and his parents are waiting for me. I will call you later.” Emma leads me by the hand like a child, out our front door, onto the sidewalk, and back to her car. She gives me a quick hug, then slides into her driver’s seat, leaving me standing alone in the driveway. After backing out of our driveway into the circular part of our cul-de-sac, she rolls down her passenger window, leans her head out, and yells, “It will all work out.” Then she looks straight ahead and drives away.

I stand in a stupor, staring until the glow of her taillights disappears.

I walk mechanically back into the house. My cell phone chimes in my pocket. Now what? Irritation replaces numbness. Begrudgingly, I pull it out to check the screen. *Michael Tiller*. Why is Dave’s boss calling me? Has something happened? Is Dave okay?

“Hello?” My hand trembles as I answer.

“Sarah,” Dave says.

“Are you okay?” I sputter, struggling to speak. “Why are you calling from your boss’s phone? Did something happen?”

“No, no, everything’s fine. I’m fine,” he assures me. “I

forgot my phone at home. I wanted to let you know our plane landed. I didn't want you to worry."

"Oh, okay, that's good." I sigh in relief. There's a long pause between us. The thought of telling Dave about Emma's elopement fills my heart with dread. He will be so disappointed. He was looking forward to walking Emma down the aisle. With a mournful tone, I say, "Emma left."

Dave lets out a long sigh. "How are you doing?" Before I can answer, he adds, "I knew the news would be hard, but I wanted to check on you before my client meeting."

It takes me a moment for his words to sink into my overwhelmed, muddled brain. My body slumps onto the nearest kitchen chair. "Did you know too?" I pray I misunderstood what he meant.

"I did. But let me explain." His voice grows urgent. "Emma told me right before their elopement because Philip wanted my blessing."

I close my eyes and rub my temples. My head hurts from all the new information I'm processing.

"She made me promise not to tell you," he continues. "She knew you would try to talk her out of it."

I can't respond. The ringing in my ears is deafening.

"Sarah? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here," I say flatly.

He sighs again. "I hate to do this to you, but my boss is holding the taxi for me. I'll be home tomorrow night. We can talk about this then." He pauses a moment. "Please don't be upset. Try to stay calm. I promise it will all work out." He repeats Emma's words back to me. "I love you," he says, and the phone clicks.

I sit quietly, crushed.

My head pounds more intensely now, threatening to burst. After a few minutes of holding my head in my hands, a rush of

angry energy wells up inside me. Who will everything work out for?

I rise from my seat and grab a glass from the cupboard. Once I've filled it with water, I search for the Extra Strength Tylenol bottle. After throwing back two pills with a swig of water, I wrinkle my nose at the burned spaghetti-sauce aroma permeating the air. I eye the table. Two clean, empty plates wait to be filled.

Disappointment and betrayal prompt me to leave the kitchen. Before I go, I pull the trash can out of the pantry. I drag it across the tile, through the entryway, down the hall, and into the living room.

In one big sweep of my arms, the wedding invitation samples go into the trash can with a loud *thud*. The throbbing pressure at my temples builds, along with my momentum. A fresh burst of adrenaline drives me.

The wedding planner rests on the coffee table. Visions of writing in dates for cake tasting at Sunny's Bakery, choosing floral arrangements at Suzie's Blooming Flowers Shop, and selecting bridesmaids' dresses and groomsmen's tuxes at Bonnie's Wedding Imperium whirl in my thoughts like a dream. But reality crashes into my fantasy. Grabbing the planner, I step a few feet back from the trash can, aim, and throw it through the air. It hits with a loud *clunk* into the tall white plastic bin. "Two points, and the crowd goes wild!"

The pictures are strewn on the carpet in front of the couch. Averting my eyes from the faces in each photograph, I stack the photos in the tub and carry them back to the corner of the basement where I found them.

After straightening the living room, I grab the trash can and work on the kitchen. Along with the charred spaghetti sauce and dried-up noodles, the French bread has hardened, making it inedible. Our "special" dinner tops off the garbage

can. Out of breath, I sit, overwhelmed with today's events. Soft music plays from the radio on the counter. I forgot to turn it off earlier. I listen as one song ends and another starts. A guitar begins playing a familiar melody. I recognize the song before the artist starts singing the lyrics to "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac. My vision blurs. Needing to be anywhere but here, I grab my purse and sprint to my car.