

Chapter Three



Tessa left him alone all night and put together a cold plate of cheese, crackers, and grapes for herself. Fuming for most of the evening, she ate on the balcony of her top-floor crow's nest room. Like the top tier of a wedding cake, the bedroom crowned the peak of the house. It boasted cool architectural angles, a sweet view of the ocean, plus a bonus space she planned to finish in the new house plans.

She'd claimed this room her first night in the house—thank goodness—never dreaming she'd have a roommate. Wyatt hadn't complained when she suggested the first-floor master bedroom for him, eliminating stairs to maneuver with his booted foot.

This morning, after plenty of alone time, a smidgen of pity for him wafted into her consciousness. When she left the kitchen with her make-shift dinner, his face resembled the color of a bleached-out shell. A silent half nod between both of them had sufficed for words.

Her manners won over the pique still pinching her for having to share this marine paradise with a grump like Wyatt Henry. She acknowledged his presence by making double the coffee. Although it was close enough to walk, she'd also offer to drive him to the station.

I promise to do my part to be a good housemate.

From down the hall, the sound of a door opening bunched her shoulders. Yesterday, he was in a bad mood from exhaustion. He'll be better today after a restful night's sleep.

Please let him be better today.

"Good morning." Gripping her mug with both hands, Tessa forced her shoulders to relax.

"Mm-hmm."

"I made coffee if you want some."

"Mm-mmm."

"Not a morning person, ey?"

"Not today." He poured himself a mug and sipped.

Black. No frills.

"S got legs." He sipped a longer drink this time.

A tiny zing of happiness tripped her insides. Her coffee was delicious, and she knew it. "What's the point of coffee if it isn't strong?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Is that your thank you that I got up early and made coffee—"

"I didn't ask you to. I could've—"

"I'm sure you think you could do anything, but I was trying to be helpful." Gritting her teeth, she managed to keep other words at bay.

He sighed. "The coffee is good. Very Good." He took another long pull.

"Yeah. I bought a pound from the coffee shop down the road. It's a cute little place—"

"Mm-mmm."

Okay. Too much talking about coffee. "I got a text from Officer McKnight."

"Yeah. Me too."

"I can drive us. It's five minutes to the station."

"I can drive myself." He rotated his neck from side to side, a couple of pops adding to the tension in the room.

"Again. I'm trying to be helpful. You drove for seven hours

yesterday. I figured you'd be glad to turn over the reins. Also saves gas and exhaust fumes, thereby saving the planet—"

Wyatt muttered over his mug, "A tree hugger too."

Huffing, she set her mug on the counter, ready to defend her environmental leanings. "So you got a problem with saving the planet? I prefer nature-lover, by the way."

He rubbed his forehead. "If you stop talking, you can drive."

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As Wyatt swallowed the delicious coffee—and points to her for brewing good coffee—he groaned inwardly at her reference to saving the planet.

Yes, saving the planet was noble, but just those words were enough to cause flashbacks to his mother's craziness. When Margie missed electricity payments, she fluffed it off with the explanation of "we're saving the planet." When the water was shut off, the same explanation. She hadn't had a problem, however, with sending him to a neighbor's house at night to fill a saved milk jug with water to boil hot dogs over a backyard fire.

Grand. She's got the artsy vibe, plus the tree-hugger vibe. Excellent summer roommate material. Thanks so much, Petey.

He gazed out the sliding glass doors facing the ocean, and his mind jerked back to Ivy Springs and the not-quite-tumbledown house on the edge of town. Their few belongings sat in the middle of the front room waiting to be unpacked, while Margie cracked open her paint box, ready to put her stamp on the walls. A tree in one room. A sunrise in the other. Never a sunset.

Sunrises signal promise, she always said.

He didn't want to set up another bedroom only to take it down in a few months, or a year if he was lucky, when she couldn't make rent, and they snuck away in the dark. Instead, he walked onto the stoop and noticed the neighboring house down the road.

A dog slept on the porch, and he'd always wanted a dog. He

navigated the weeds in his yard, crossed the ditch between the two houses, and stopped midway in the next yard. The dog picked up his head and barked at the same time as a whiff of something sweet and chocolatey taunted his nose, making his mouth water. He and his mother had shared a pack of orange peanut butter crackers for breakfast.

Breakfast was a long time ago.

The front door opened, and a lady wiping her hands on a towel stepped out onto her porch. Locking eyes with him, she patted the dog's head. "Hey," she had called to him. "Are you my new neighbor?"

"Yeah."

She dipped her chin. "Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I expected new neighbors today, so I made my new neighbors a treat."

He hoped the welcome treat had something to do with that heavenly smell.

"I'm Mrs. Applegate, but call me Ms. Ruth, if you want to. Come on in for milk and cookies, and tell me your name."

And that's how it'd started. Mr. Applegate, or Mr. B.G. as people who knew him closely called him, would sometimes be home, or sometimes he'd be building a ramp for the wheelchair ministry at their church. Whether or not Mr. B.G. was home, Ms. Ruth always welcomed Wyatt and always had food. And plenty of it.

A chair scraping on the wooden floor brought him back to the beach house.

"Sound okay?"

Facing the room again and the squatter—no, Tessa—he peeked over his mug.

"Ha. I knew you weren't listening. Let's leave at eight forty-five. That gives us time to park and hobble into the station." She smiled. "Maybe we'll earn brownie points for arriving early."

That smile ... something shifted way down deep inside ... a

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feeling he hadn't expected and didn't like or want. He grunted acknowledgment of the departure time, topped off his mug, and headed back to his room.

Away from that smile and, hopefully, memories of his childhood.