

Chapter Two



Four Years Later

July

Olivia

After parking in my driveway, I open my car door to the high-pitched screams of children in my neighbor's backyard. Then the shrill voice of my nine-year-old daughter, Mia, yelling, "Stop. That hurts."

In my rush to see what's happening, I leave my car door open, my purse and bag unattended on the passenger seat.

Racing to open Sarah's backyard gate, I'm met with utter chaos.

Sarah and Mia stand with their arms outstretched and legs braced, trying to capture preschool-aged twin boys in the yard's far corner. The two little blonds zigzag out of reach, each clutching one of Sarah's cardboard photo props in their chubby, dimpled hands. They're using them as weapons to smack each other over the head.

Across the yard, a man and woman stand in front of the gazebo. The woman's hands rest on her hips, her eyes flashing as she lectures the man. He remains silent, his arms folded and face flushed. I can't make out her words over the twins' screams.

Sarah spots me at the gate. "Help, Olivia. They're too fast for us."

Just home from class, I'm not dressed to run, but my friend needs

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help. I kick off my three-inch wedges and hike my maxi skirt to my knees.

Mia and Sarah close in on one twin, so I run toward the other.

His big blue eyes sparkle as he giggles and tries to evade me. I pretend to dart left. He runs to the right. I change course quickly. He looks over his shoulder and laughs harder as I shorten the distance between us.

I almost have him within reach when he trips over the landscaping bricks surrounding a raised flower bed.

The boy falls, tumbling through Sarah's prized tulips.

Long green stems lie broken. Multicolored petals scatter across the flower bed, landing on the white rock around the now crushed plants.

He whimpers, clutching his elbow.

I gently lift him into my arms. The rocks prick the bottoms of my feet.

He struggles to escape, but I don't let go. I glance over at the two adults, who are glaring at me as the toddler twists in my arms.

The dad strides over and snaps his fingers once.

The boy stills.

I set him on the ground, and he shuffles impishly over to his mother.

Mia has the other twin pinned in a "hold" on the ground. Apparently, she's picked up some moves from her brother's junior-wrestling competitions.

"Let him go," I say.

She scowls, then nods, her bangs damp and pushed aside. Sweat glistens on her forehead as she releases him.

He scuttles over to join his parents and brother.

Sarah's eyes lock with mine. She mouths, *Thank you*. Drops of sweat trickle down her temples.

I smile, then we both turn toward the family.

They stand expectant, ready for pictures as if nothing happened.

Sarah shakes her head.

I walk over to gather the mangled aqua-colored props. A quiet giggle escapes when I read the big, bold white lettering: "Blessed" and "The Reason I Breathe."

"Do you want these?" I can't resist asking Sarah.

Janell Goodrich York

Sarah rolls her eyes, then shakes her head.

I'm on the verge of giggling again, but both parents' scowls stifle me.

"Can I help with anything?" I ask.

"No. I think we're good. Unless Mia needs to go home?" Sarah tilts her head and smiles at my blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter.

"Oh, Mom, can I stay?" Her eyes plead.

"If you're sure, Sarah?" I don't want to burden her.

"Of course. Mia's a big help. Plus, I enjoy her company," Sarah says.

Mia lifts her chin and beams at Sarah.

The woman with her family clears her throat and taps her watch.

Sarah smiles politely. We exchange glances, then Sarah arranges the family into place.

"Come home as soon as you're done helping Sarah," I call to Mia.

She gives me a thumbs-up.

Sunshine streams down on the crown of her head, revealing the natural highlights that frame her small, delicate face.

After finding my heels, I pick them up by the straps and pad barefoot through the open gate.

"Now, tilt your head toward your left shoulder," Sarah directs her client.

I glance once more at the family next to the gazebo.

Sarah's camera shutter clicks repeatedly.

The family has transformed from the chaos earlier. The father's arm encircles his wife's shoulders in a loving embrace, and angelic smiles have replaced the boys' ornery grins.

Sarah will edit out the grass stains on their khaki pants and the cuts and scrapes on the boys' arms. The heated argument and tension have disappeared. The parents' smiles are bright. Sarah will work her magic to create a perfect family portrait.

My gaze shifts from the family to Mia, and I smile.

She stands on a wooden step stool, holding a silver reflector angled toward the family, still as a statue. She's wearing her signature pink tee and matching shorts. Her feet are bare, probably because her light-up tennis shoes interfere with the photoshoot lighting.

Sarah pays her for assisting, though Mia would do it for free. She loves spending time with Sarah.

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I do too. Sarah's more than a friend. She's a lifeline, watching the kids while I finish my teaching degree.

I should have finished a few years ago, but my ex-husband wanted me to stay home with the kids.

I'm grateful for that time I had with them.

After he left, finishing became non-negotiable.

If it weren't for my parents helping me with my mortgage and Sarah stepping in more times than I can count, we wouldn't have made it.

I lean against the fence, the noise behind me fading.

Mia adjusted well to moving here. I wish I could say the same for Liam.