

MARY CRAWFORD

Joy and Tiers

A HIDDEN BEAUTY NOVEL
BOOK 3

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To all of the men and women who serve: There simply aren't enough words in any language to say enough thanks for what you do.

To the families who hold their whole world together while they're away, you give the term heroic a whole new meaning.

Chapter 1



Tyler

It's hard enough to try to work in this shoebox-sized food truck while slamming my head on the ceiling every ten seconds, but right now I've got an overly helpful witness dogging my steps like a bloodhound. "Gidget, dammit. You have to let me do my job here. Do you go out of your way to annoy everybody or is it just me?" I glare at her, trying to get her to back away from the broken glass. True to form, she's entirely fearless and crazy bossy. It's always more difficult to be out on calls for people you know, especially when they are pretty little spitfires who make your blood boil—and not necessarily in totally negative ways.

"Hold your horses, Cowboy!" Heather argues. "Those may seem like a bunch worthless junk strewn all over the counter to you. It took me a week to make all those flowers by hand for a wedding this weekend. I'd like to save as many of them as possible before you go in there with those overgrown tennis rackets that you call hands and smash everything to

smithereens.”

“Do you mind if I go ahead and take some pictures here? The evidence team is tied up doing a huge drug bust,” I ask, as I pull my camera out of my gear bag.

“Fine, knock yourself out. Not that it’s going to do a whole lot of good. We did all this last time, and all it did was make my insurance rates go up. The punks messed up my truck and got away scot-free. This sucks rotten moose-balls,” Heather laments.

I smile at her colorful use of language. “Hey now, Gidget, are you casting aspersions on the county’s finest?” I ask, tossing the question over my shoulder to keep the mood light.

“Well, Lord knows someone has to. Otherwise that head of yours would get so huge that your ratty ole’ cowboy hat wouldn’t even fit on it.”

Heather grabs a broom and a garbage bag from a small cubbyhole behind the driver’s seat. She’s about to start sweeping up the glass when a glint of metal catches my eye.

“Stop!” I reflexively bellow.

Heather freezes mid-stride, her face set in a thunderous frown. She raises her eyebrow at me as if she’s daring me to continue. Under any other circumstances, this little power game would have been fun to explore, but this is no game. It’s now a matter of life and death. The time for fun and games is over.

“I think you forgot to say Simon Says,” Heather responds sardonically.

“Heather, I wish this was a game, but it has just entered the world of deadly serious. So, I’m going to need you to play the most serious game of Simon Says you’ve ever played. Can

you do that?”

A myriad of emotions crosses her face. Fear, shock, anger, and curiosity flit across in rapid succession. I have to suppress a grin of my own when I consider how terrible she would be at poker. Scratch that—she wouldn’t need skills to clean up at poker, she could just bat those beautiful baby blue eyes and show off her pin-up figure and men would be falling at her feet.

“I have a hunch that I should be concerned that you actually bothered to use my real name.”

“Well, it is true that I have to talk to you about serious things, but I can call you Gidget if you’d prefer.”

Heather blushes as she stammers, “Heather works just fine, thank you.”

“Heather, I told you to stop because I found two bullet casings on the floor next to where you work,” I explain. This part of my job is never pleasant. I hate shattering someone’s formerly safe, orderly, sane world, by turning it upside down and telling them their world has become a living nightmare.

Heather’s eyes are wide. “Next to *me*?” she asks, “What could they possibly want from me?”

Oh, Hell. I don’t want to answer that question. Unfortunately, I fail to mask my expression quickly enough, and she reads the answer in my eyes.

She sways a little in her impossibly high heels as her face blanches to a frighteningly light shade of white.

Instinctively, I reach out to steady her, placing my hands around her waist. “Easy, I’ve got you. I’ll keep you safe,” I murmur to try to soothe her trembling body as she wheezes to catch her breath in my arms.

Apparently, something I said must have rubbed her the

wrong way again because she draws herself up to her full height and spins in my arms. “Really, Superman? I suppose you’ve got some special kryptonite in there that helps you dodge bullets? Because the last time I checked, bullets are bad for *your* health too. So, how do you intend to dodge bullets and come out unscathed when the rest of us can’t?” Heather demands, glaring up at me. “What makes you so special?”

The question takes me by surprise. It’s something I’ve thought about a lot over the past two years. In fact, it pretty much torments me. I just didn’t expect to hear it from her. “I guess when it comes down to it, nothing. Nothing but a goddamn lucky streak makes me special,” I practically spit the words out because they have such a bitter taste.

Heather looks a little shocked at the venom in my voice. “Whoa, Cowboy, it sounds like there’s a story there, and I might even want to hear it someday. However, don’t we have bigger fish to fry here?” she comments as she points to the shell casings she has now spotted on the floor. I notice her voice is a little shaky.

She’s right; we do have bigger fish to fry than ghosts from my past. I kick myself for my lapse in concentration. I never used to lose focus this easily. I need to get her out of here because I don’t even know if the shooter is still at large.

“Heather, why don’t you come sit in my squad car? It’s warmer in there, and it provides a little more protection. We don’t know when these bullets were fired or who fired them. It could just be some kids doing target practice, or it could be something much more serious. Either way, I’d feel better if you were out of the line of fire.”

“Do you think there’ll be more shots fired? What am I going to do? I have a wedding cake to do!”

I’m trying not to make light of her predicament, but in

the grand scheme of things, it seems pretty inconsequential. “Can’t they find somebody else to make their cake?” I ask what I think is a relatively reasonable question.

“Who do you think I am? McDonald’s? I am an artist!” Heather yells, her eyes sparkling with rage. “People come to me for my skills with food. You can’t get what I make just anywhere. Obviously, you’ve never been married; otherwise you’d know that you have to book this stuff months and months in advance. People design their cakes with their cake artists. People like me spend days, weeks and sometimes months making flowers and other decorations for cakes; it’s not something you just slap together in the drive through.” Heather points to a schedule on the wall, which shows that she is indeed booked out for at least the next year.

“I guess, I never really thought about it—” I start to explain.

“Exactly!” Heather interrupts. “Geez, Tyler, way to respect my career and all that. I could understand remarks like that if you’d never eaten my food. But since you have, I’m going to take it as the complete dis that you meant it to be,” she says, sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

Sometimes I’m slower than a rodeo clown who has been kicked in the head far too many times. I know Gidget’s a really good cook. Her passion for cooking is one of the first things I noticed about her. I didn’t mean any disrespect, but sometimes my brain doesn’t work quite as fast as my mouth. I’m not sure how to explain all my mental stumbles to her without getting into my whole life story, which she doesn’t need to know in the next five minutes. Crap. How do I get myself into these fixes?

“I’m sorry, Gidget, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I’m trying to be helpful and take some of the pressure off of

you because I know all of this is stressful. I thought maybe all of you bakeries trade jobs if you have emergencies or something.”

“It may work that way for the big guys, but doesn’t work that way for me. Food trucks may be the up-and-coming thing, but people still don’t see them as truly respectable places to get quality food—especially high-end things like wedding cakes. I have to fight to get every customer. Even if it weren’t a despicable business practice to dump a bride at the last minute, I couldn’t afford to lose her as a customer. I need each one, and I need the word-of-mouth every satisfied customer brings.”

I look around the cramped food truck as I ask, “Do you bake wedding cakes in here?”

Heather smirks as she replies, “Now, that would be quite the talent, wouldn’t it? No. I rent a commercial kitchen when I need to bake a large cake. But I do most of my sugar work in the truck. Can you please do your best to protect as many of these leaves and petals as you can? I’d rather you didn’t get fingerprint dust all over them. It took me days to get them finished, and I’m not sure I’ll have time for new ones to dry.”

“Heather, I won’t make any promises. I can’t compromise the scene to save your flowers. I won’t destroy anything I don’t have to. However, now that we found bullet casings, I will have to bring the full forensic evidence team in to go over your truck. I have a forensic background because I’ve worked as an MP, but you want more than just my basic background on this, trust me. We want to catch this guy.”

“Okay, I get that. But, can’t I at least stay and watch? If I did, I would be able to tell you if you’re about to destroy something really important. I don’t think you understand the

deadline I'm on here. It's not like my client can just postpone her whole wedding because I'm running a little late on her cake. I'll be as quiet as a church mouse."

I have to let out a breath of exasperation. Generally speaking, I'm a pretty laid back guy. Six years in the military and two years as a reserve officer with the Sheriff's office has taught me to roll with the punches. But, for reasons that I haven't quite figured out, Gidget always finds a way to get under my skin like a burr under a horse's saddle. She's a beautiful little spitfire who has no idea the effect she has on me. She's got enough sass in her to fill two people, but she also has the kindest heart I've ever seen. We had one of the most clichéd meetings ever since she is the best friend of my best friend's wife. Regrettably, she seems far less impressed with me than I am with her. I'm working on that. But my progress has been painfully slow. Most days, it seems she can't stand to be in the same zip code as me. This little fiasco certainly isn't going to help matters.

Unfortunately, I'm not here to be her friend. I have a job to do. So I have to literally and figuratively put my Sheriff's hat on. "I'm sorry, Miss LaBianca. I'm going to have to evacuate you from the premises for your safety. Additionally, we have to sweep this location for evidence. All efforts will be taken to disturb as little of your personal effects as possible," I state in my best detached police-academy-trained voice.

Much to my surprise, Heather reels back as if I've physically slapped her. All the animation in her face suddenly disappears, and an eerie formalness settles over her as she primly replies, "Yes sir, Officer Colton. Just let me grab my purse and car keys, or are those considered evidence as well?"

"I don't know. Were they in your food truck at the time

the vandalism occurred?” I ask, pulling my notepad out to write down her statement.

“No, I had those with me. I just went to the craft store to get some more floral wire. When I came back, the truck was like this. I don’t even know who knew I had the truck in the area. I just parked here to help out because Mindy has a few days off from school. Yet, this is the second time it’s been vandalized when I parked it here. Maybe somebody doesn’t want me to work in this area,” she responds with a defeated sigh. It breaks my heart to see her this way.

If you were to look up the word *optimist* in the dictionary, Heather’s picture would be prominently plastered there. She is a glass half full kind of gal. Wait, I take that back. She’s a great cheerleader for everyone *else*. When it comes to promoting *her* strengths, she’s far more critical. I’ve tried to toss her a few compliments over the last few months, and she’s either rejected them outright or deflected them with a joke that she’s usually made herself the butt of.

“Well, if you brought them in, then they aren’t considered part of the crime scene. Can you show me where you walked and what you touched before you noticed something was amiss?”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Ty! I’m *not* an idiot,” she says as she rolls her eyes and blows a curl out of her eye. It’s the first time I haven’t seen her dressed to the nines. She’s wearing a retro bowling shirt that has ‘Earl’ emblazoned on the breast pocket and she’s wearing a pair of well-worn Levis with a patch made from a bandanna on the butt. Her hair is tied back with a matching one. It all works except her high heels. Those, I don’t understand at all. Why do women do that to themselves? Sure, they’re sexy sometimes but does an arts and craft session on a Sunday morning call for risking a sprained

ankle?

Heather catches me scoping out her choice in footwear. “What? Jeff’s demon dog, Lucky, ate my tennis shoes. It’s not like I had a whole lot of choice this morning,” she explains.

I chuckle as I reply, “I feel your pain. When I house sat for Jeff and Kiera, Lucky got my favorite pair of boots. I think the real reason he flunked out of bomb detection school doesn’t have anything to do with his alleged hearing issues. I think it’s his appetite for contraband.”

Heather flashes me a small smile as she agrees, “I think they just fudged his service record so he’d get adopted right away. He’s like a serial shoe killer. Speaking of killers,” she segues gently into the next topic, “like I told you, I am not an idiot. I watch enough *Forensic Files* and *The First 48* to know I’m not supposed to touch anything. The second I noticed something was awry, I went out to my car and called 911. Voilà, here you are interrogating me like I’m some criminal.”

Wearily, I scrub my hand over my face. “Look, Gidget, I mean, Ms. LaBianca, this isn’t personal. For us to catch this person, I have to do things by the book, even if it means inconveniencing you. I know you’re not an idiot, I never meant to suggest you were. Still, I have to document what happened, for the file. Little things like whether or not your purse was present can make a big difference in how the scene is processed. If you were sitting in your truck when shots were fired at it, we would be having a whole different conversation. I’m simply trying to protect you,” I clarify, trying not to let my frustration show.

Heather meets me toe to toe and verbally pushes back, “Maybe I can take care of myself, and I don’t need you to protect me!”

“All evidence to the contrary, Darlin’. Now, are you

going to do what I asked you to do—like half an hour ago—and go sit in my squad car, or do I have to arrest you?” I ask, with a little tilt of my hat.

Once again, Heather’s spine straightens out as if a rod is being placed through it, and her speech becomes clipped and frosty as she asks, “Fine, no need to be pushy. But would it be okay with you if I take some supplies from the cupboards?”

I ponder her suggestion for a moment and then shrug as I reply, “I don’t see why not. Let me make a log of what you’re going to take just to be sure.”

Heather rolls her eyes at me again as she comments under her breath, “How nice of you to give me access to things I already own. There’s your crime-fighting dollars at work, America.”

“Hey now!” I protest. “That was a low blow. I don’t tell you how to do your job, please don’t tell me how to do mine.”

“Well, Cowboy, it just so happens, I don’t like big strong men telling me what to do, and I don’t like being treated like I’m an idiot,” Heather argues.

“For the record, I wasn’t treating you like you’re an idiot. Nothing could be further from the truth,” I reply, my voice rough with emotion. This conversation is hitting more hot buttons than she could ever imagine. However, I can’t take the time to explain them to her right now. Right now, she needs to get the hell out of here. For all I know, there is still a shooter at large. She needs to get her pretty little butt out of the picture. “I’m sorry I don’t have time for a long, drawn-out debate over this, but I’ll say it once again. Heather, please—for your safety—get into my car so that I don’t have to worry about you. If I have to worry about you, I’m not watching my own back, and it makes it more dangerous for me.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that in the beginning?”

Heather replies. “I don’t want to do anything to put you at risk.” She silently picks up her purse, and her keys. She regally walks over to my squad car and gracefully climbs inside as if it’s something she does every day.

I shake my head in disbelief. That’s classic Heather. She’ll balk at anything designed for her well-being, but if it’s to benefit someone else, she’s on it faster than ticks on a wet dog. I radio the call into headquarters and go to the trunk of my car to get my thermos.

“You want some coffee? It’s cold out here,” I offer, handing her the metal lid of the thermos.

She nods as she says, “Thank you, that’s sweet of you.”

She takes a tentative sip and wrinkles her nose at the bitter taste. “I take it back. What is this? A new interrogation technique? Who taught you to make coffee? Just a small chef’s secret...you shouldn’t be able to chew your coffee. The next time we’re together, I’ll teach you to make a decent cup.”

“Wow! Way to be grateful—” I tease, but then I take a sip of my coffee, and I have to admit that she’s got a point. It’s beyond terrible. “I’ll have you know, Uncle Sam taught me to make coffee. You can blame it all on him. The swill doesn’t have to be good; it just has to keep you awake and alert. I guess I just never got out of the habit of making it that way. You don’t have to drink it if you don’t want to.”

“No,” Heather replies after she takes another sip. “It’s not so bad after you know what to expect. I’ll need the extra caffeine anyway. It’s going to be a long night for me. I have a hunch I’m going to be making flowers—lots and lots of flowers. After drinking this ... um ... coffee, I’ll be up for three days straight. It’s a win-win for everybody.” Heather shoots me her trademark smile, complete with dimples.

Before I can say anything else, the evidence van pulls up

into the driveway. I'm relieved when I see who the technicians are. Javier is one of the best guys we've got on latent fingerprints and ballistics, and he takes some of the clearest pictures in the business. If this ever goes to court, the evidence will be rock solid.

As the forensic team starts to walk up to the house, I hear Javier call out to Heather, "Hey Miss H. How are things in your world?"

For some reason, his casual familiarity with Heather raises my hackles. He's already got the perfect family at home. What more does he want? But then I remember back to the day that we all met. It was an unforgettable day to be sure. There was a big verbal dust-up with Jeff's soon-to-be stepfather.

No one got hurt, but I did assist in the arrest that would ultimately lead to the unraveling of Jeff's family life, as he knew it. Surprisingly, Jeff seems totally okay with the outcome. At the time, though, it was plenty dramatic. It totally slipped my mind that Javier had also been there.

Heather's eyes light up when she sees Javier. "Javier!" She exclaims. "I haven't seen you since move in day. Mindy loves her new computer, by the way, in case Kiera somehow forgot to tell you. Thank you so much for such a thoughtful gift. Mindy's been researching things left and right. She has never been the same," Heather explains.

Javier's face lights up like a Christmas tree as he replies, "Good! I'm so glad somebody could use my daughter's old computer equipment. Otherwise, it would've still been in the corner of our storage unit. What are we doing out here today?" Javier asks looking around.

Before I can launch into my clinical explanation of what happened, Heather thrusts some random pieces of paper into

his hand.

“What’s this, Miss Heather?” Javier asks.

“It’s just some notes that I took throughout the day as all this was happening,” Heather explains, with a small shrug.

“You’ve been taking real-time notes and this is the first time you’ve bothered to mention them to me?” I ask, overwhelming fatigue suddenly seeping into my bones.

“Well, yes,” she explains patiently. “But you never bothered to ask because you were too busy assuming I am the world’s biggest bimbo. I figured the small details might be important, so I started writing them down as soon as I noticed the break-in.”

Something about the way she matter-of-factly describes the way I dismissed her opinion tells me that it happens to her quite a bit. I want to kick myself in the head for being so stupid.

“You’re right. I should have asked you what you did next instead of assuming,” I admit, as I dig around in my gear bag for evidence markers. Suddenly, today is feeling like the world’s longest day. I really wish someone else would have caught this call—it would have been a whole heckuva lot less complicated.

“Look, Cowboy, there’s something about us that seems to react like oil and water. I’m not usually such a witch, either. Of course, I know it’s your job to tell me what to do because you are a police officer. Normally, I wouldn’t even give it a second thought. But somehow, coming from you, it feels like criticism. I don’t even know what to make of that. It makes me sound like I belong in the loony bin,” she admits.

I feel a strange sense of relief. At least I’m not the only one that feels completely off balance when she’s around. It’s

strange. I feel like I've had some bizarre personality transplant. One that makes me regress to my inner third-grader. I'm tempted to metaphorically pull her pigtails and throw earthworms at her to show her that I like her. Not a positive development when you're almost thirty.

"Now that the evidence team is here, why don't I take you down to the station where it's warmer? I can take your formal statement there. It will be faster, and I can even stop by Starbucks on the way so you won't have to drink that tar I call coffee," I suggest.

"There's no way I can get back in there and show them how to handle the flowers?" Heather pleads.

Well, I have to hand it to her, the lady is persistent. I softly chuckle as I reply, "No, Gidget, I'm sorry I can't let you do that. But Javier is extremely careful in his work. He'll take really good care of your babies. I promise."

Heather dramatically sighs as she replies, "I sort of figured that was going to be your answer. But it was worth a shot in case you were feeling more charitable. I guess I'll just have to trust Javier. But it's okay to take this bucket of gum paste and my tools, right because they were in the cupboard?"

Now, it's my turn to sigh under my breath. "Yes, I've already logged that stuff out for you, so you may take it," I advise.

"Thank you very much, Officer Colton. I appreciate your help with this matter," Heather replies primly, but there's a sparkle in her eyes that wasn't there the last time she addressed me by my last name.

"Now, is that a yes or no to my offer of decent coffee, Miss LaBianca?" I tease as I pull the seatbelt over her and latch it.

“Here I was giving you all this credit for being a smart guy, Cowboy. Don’t ruin the illusion. What do you think?” Heather asks with a raised eyebrow.

After Heather completes her statement and I hand her case off to the local detectives, I decide to go for broke. I have this little theory that she doesn’t hate me, any more than I hate her. We just seem to have a special talent for pushing each other’s buttons. Under the right circumstances, it could be really hot. I just have to figure out what those circumstances are. So far, the closest I’ve ever come to making Heather happy was at Jeff and Kiera’s wedding reception.

The wedding was something straight out of a fairytale. I felt like I had been cast as the lead in some romantic comedy. Usually, I’m the guy who keeps the barstool warm all night, and the barkeep well stocked with tips. Because I’m a big guy, I tend to get drawn into fights that aren’t even mine. But I am nearly always the one to stop them. I suppose it’s why I ended up as an MP until I switched my MOS to logistics. Not too long after I graduated from high school, I went to college on a football scholarship. But, I was young, dumb and thought I was invincible. When my grades slipped because I spent too much time being the big man on campus and not enough time studying, I lost my scholarship and joining the Army was plan B.

I had a girlfriend back then, but she was only interested in being my groupie if I was a jock. She wasn’t interested in a soldier. She said she was going to stick by me through thick and thin, but her promise didn’t last much beyond Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training, better known as AIT. My college buddy Galen, who still played running back, was more her speed. The whole situation was a mind-bender and a half. I carried her engagement ring in my pocket for two years, before I finally sold it at a pawn shop and got myself a

sweet little motorcycle. I ended up having to leave my bike in the Iraqi desert, but that's a whole other story.

Unlike what's-her-name, Heather is incredibly loyal to her friends and family. But she doesn't take any crap from anybody. If you tick her off, you'll know about it—usually in some pretty creative language. She uses such unique colloquialisms, and she has a vividly funny story for any situation you could ever run across. I swear, that woman never forgets anyone she's encountered anywhere, anytime or anyplace. Her comedic timing is brilliant. If she were not such a phenomenal cook, she could give stand-up comedy a run. If comedy isn't her thing, she could have a career in fashion design. I've never seen a woman pull off as many looks as she does, and always look impeccably polished. The first time that I met her, she looked like she had just walked off the pages of a vintage copy of *Life Magazine*, and as much as she looks like a vintage pinup girl like Betty Grable or Veronica Lake, there is an innate wholesomeness about her. Heather's refreshing lack of guile and diminutive size compared to me, earned her the nickname Gidget. As an added bonus, it seems to annoy her and bring out her sassy side.

In truth, I've been thinking about asking Heather out for months. I've just never worked up the nerve to do it. There's been so much darkness in my world lately that I feel like it might be unfair to bring someone like Heather into it. She's irresistible to me. I don't know if Jeff and Kiera are playing matchmaker, or if it's just coincidental. Still, every time I turn around, Heather seems to be there, dancing around under my nose like forbidden Christmas candy.

This time, I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to answer at least the fundamental question of what happens when we're in a room together for more than a few minutes alone. It'll go very well, or it will be an unmitigated

disaster. But first things first, I have to get her to agree to go someplace with me without threatening to arrest her first. I think this time I'll shoot for someplace casual.

After I've finished my formal interview, I grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator in the break room and walk to the bench where she is sitting in the reception area. As I hand her the bottle, I casually ask, "Are you hungry? I feel like pizza tonight. I know this great Italian place where they toss the dough by hand. I'll even let you pick the toppings."

"Ouch, you sure know how to find a girl's weakness. I'm starving, and pizza is absolutely my favorite food. Unfortunately, I need pizza like I need another hole in my head," Heather says wistfully.

I flop down beside her on the outdated vinyl bench. Turning toward her, I just shake my head in disbelief. "Gidget, I know we've had this conversation before. But could you please explain it to me again. Why would someone as bright and pretty as you are, deny yourself something you clearly love when you freely admit that you're hungry? It just doesn't make any sense to me."

"Tyler, don't tell me you haven't noticed that Tara is about the size of a half a toothpick and Kiera isn't much bigger," Heather points out.

"So? Kiera has red hair, and you have blond hair. Tara is about 11 feet tall, and you're not. So, what's your point? I don't know how many different ways I have to tell you I think you are knockout gorgeous. You are pin-up worthy all on your own. Don't you realize women everywhere are having surgery to have bodies like yours?"

Heather laughs out loud. "I think you have me confused with someone else. Either that or my clothes hide a lot more than I thought. I have a lot more in common with a

Weight Watchers ‘before’ poster than a pin-up girl.”

I have to will myself to relax. This woman doesn’t need anyone to beat her up. She does a fine job of it herself and it totally pisses me off. I just want to be able to magically show her how she looks through my eyes. Maybe that would shut her up. So, I try again...

“Gidget, do I look like a man who doesn’t know what I like?” I ask, not bothering to disguise the frustration in my voice. Man, this woman can frustrate me faster than a kitten with a ball of yarn.

Heather smirks and tilts her head sideways, inspecting me. “No, I’d say you’re the type of man who pretty much has it all figured out,” she observes.

“Well, I’m not sure I’d go that far. But I do know that I like what I see. So, are you saying I don’t know what I’m talking about, or are you calling me a liar?”

“No, I don’t mean it like that. I just mean that you and I view the situation very differently. When I look at myself in the mirror, I hear every fat joke my family has ever told at my expense,” she continues. “I also hear every PE teacher and trainer’s voice in my head. They would say, ‘Heather is a pleasant girl; however, she might actually have some friends if she were thinner.’ Even the voices of well-meaning strangers echo in my head, ‘You’re so pretty, honey. If you would just lose some weight, you could catch yourself a real handsome man. I try not to let it affect me. But after a while, it just kind of wears you down and changes who you are on the inside.’”

“It doesn’t help that I’m often surrounded by perfectly skinny friends and family. I feel like I’m part of that Sesame Street game—‘One of these things is not like the others’. I’m always the thing that’s not like the others. Most of the time, I can ignore it and let it roll off my back. But sometimes it gets

to me. Being asked out by a cute guy is one of those unavoidable triggers for me. I wonder whether you want to go out with me because you like me or because dating a fat girl is such a novel experience, you want to check it off your bucket list.”

I cringe at the idea that she considers herself a fat girl. “Have I ever given you any reason to believe I don’t find you totally, off-the-charts-attractive?” I ask, laying it all on the line. “In fact, I think that you’re so hot, for lack of a better term, I was having a hard time concentrating on my job today in what could’ve been a life-and-death situation. I spend a lot of time thinking about you, and I can tell you that not a single, solitary moment of that time is spent thinking about whether or not you eat too much pizza,”

Heather blushes a pretty shade of pink and then stammers, “Really? You think about me even when I’m not around?”

“Yes, and I don’t waste a single second of that time wishing you could fit into smaller jeans, that you would eat more salad, or any other related nonsense,” I answer.

“Do I even want to know what you *do* wish for?” Heather asks, a dubious expression on her face.

“Probably not,” I answer, after a long beat of silence. “Even if you asked, there are certain things a gentleman really shouldn’t share.”

Unbidden, some of the dreams I’ve been having over the past few months flood my brain. None of them are exactly tame, and virtually all of them are wildly erotic. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. Good God, if the mere thought of her makes me react this way, I’m going to combust if and when I get to touch her.

“Heather, I’ll ask you one more time. What are you

really craving? Not what you think you should be eating. Not what society thinks is politically correct for you to be having. Not even what your parents would wish you were going after. What are you, Heather Lydia LaBianca, hungry for?”

“Honestly, I would love a deep dish sausage and pepper pizza topped off with a root beer float,” Heather admits, the words spilling out in one large breath.

“Sounds good to me. How do you feel about Hawaiian pizza?” I answer.

“I can take it or leave it. The only thing I’m not a big fan of is barbecue pizza. Barbecue sauce on pizza doesn’t make any sense to me. Make it a traditional red sauce or traditional white sauce—anything else to me is pizza sacrilege.”

“What about pesto?” I tease.

“Darn it. You got me there. I like pesto sauce on my pizza, especially if there are artichoke hearts involved.”

“I don’t know about that combo. Might be too much green stuff for me,” I reply. “Whatever happened to good old pepperoni?”

“Pepperoni doesn’t have enough green stuff for me,” Heather challenges. “You’re asking for a stroke before you turn thirty if you eat it very often.”

“Well, I doubt any pizza can be called health-food, but I suppose vegetables would help the cause. I guess I like pepperoni because it reminds me of my childhood,” I explain. “Every time we had an accomplishment at school or in church, we always went out for pizza to celebrate. So, I always associate pizza with happy times. If I’m having a bad day, I’ll opt for pizza as a way to focus on the good things in life. I know it’s corny. When you’re a soldier stationed overseas, you

spend a lot of time reliving all the sentimental parts of your life and wishing you could re-create them.”

Heather holds up her palms. “Okay, okay, I surrender. Who can hold firm in the face of really good pizza and an emotional story like that? I’ve got no choice. I have to cave. At least, that’s what I’m going to tell myself when I step on the scale in the morning.”

“Remember what I said about scale stepping? I like you the way just as you are. If I wanted to date a twig, I would. But I don’t. I want to date *you*. In case you haven’t noticed over the past few months, I kind of fancy you,” I say as I help her with her coat.

“Well, you could’ve fooled me. I was pretty much sure you hate my guts,” Heather responds. “In fact, I wasn’t even sure you cared enough about me to learn my name.”

CHAPTER 2



Heather

“What do you mean, you don’t like pasta? Everybody likes pasta!” I exclaim. I can’t even wrap my head around the concept. I have pasta water running through my blood. “You don’t like any pasta? No Fettuccine Alfredo with tons of garlic, or spaghetti with meatballs? Not even the Kraft macaroni and cheese with the weird yellowy-orangey-powdered cheese that isn’t cheese?” I ask, incredulous at the thought of someone excluding an entire food group I consider essential to daily living.

Tyler leans back in the wrought-iron chair and stretches out his long, lanky legs in front of him. “Nope. Sorry, I just can’t do it. That stuff is just downright nasty. Library paste comes to mind.”

“Library paste? Good Lord, Ty! I’m beginning to wonder about the caliber of cooks in your life. First we had the issue with the coffee, and it’s becoming abundantly clear that you’ve never had decent pasta. Properly cooked pasta could never, ever be confused with library paste.”

“Whatever you say, Gidget. I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it. I’m a grown up now, and I don’t have to eat stuff I don’t like,” he pouts.

I can’t disguise my giggle. “Real mature approach there, Cowboy. Are you running late for recess or something?”

“What?” he asks defensively, then shrugs. “I’m a grown ass man. If I haven’t earned the right to eat what I want after serving two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, I don’t know when I’ll ever be able to.”

“Okay. You have a point. But what if I told you that I can make you pasta you’ll love? In fact, I’ll bet it becomes one of your favorite dishes.”

“Oh, Gidget, you don’t know this about me, but you just said a couple of really dangerous words. I never turn down a bet.” Ty challenges with a wicked gleam in his eyes as he rubs his hands together with absolute glee.

I suppose I should be nervous right about now, but Tyler doesn’t know me very well either. Competition is a huge deal in my family.

It may be my hunger, the stress of the day, or the fact that I’ve been drooling over this sexy lawman for several months; but I decide to throw caution to the wind. “Hmm,

that's interesting because I'm not the kind of lady who backs away from a wager either. Might be fun," I quip with far more bravado than I have. "What are the stakes?"

Tyler examines me for a moment and tips his hat down over his forehead. "Gidget, I'm not sure I know you well enough to assign the appropriate wager," he announces. "I want to make sure that when you lose, you know you're paying a penalty. Otherwise, it's no fun to play the game. So let's do a wager with stakes to be named at a later date."

"See, I find it interesting that you think I'm going to lose. That's a fascinating approach. You don't know me very well if you think I'm going to surrender easily. I don't enter competitions I don't plan to win. Therefore, after I fix you the best meal you've ever eaten, you're also going to be eating some crow, and I'll be collecting an appropriate marker. You might be surprised at how creative I can be," I retort boldly.

"You know, I'm finding this conversation to be very enlightening. I always wondered if we would find common ground if we ended up in the same room together. It seems like we might have done just that. If we choose our wagers wisely, this could be some good clean fun—unless of course you don't want it to be," Ty quips as he gives an exaggerated wink. Although his offer is made in a teasing tone, something tells me, given the right circumstances; he might just be dead serious.

"Consider me forewarned, Cowboy. Although, I'll be sure to choose my reward carefully because I wouldn't want you to get too—"

I pause for a second before adding 'cocky.'

"'Cocky'? Me? Never! As I recall, you're the one who promised me the best meal I've ever eaten. If anyone is cocky in this situation, I would think the word cocky applies to you."

I brush my fingertips across the front of my bowling shirt as if I'm buffing my nails. "Nah, it's only cockiness if I can't deliver. I'm not bragging, I'm merely stating facts. You'll see."

Ty just grins like a Cheshire cat. "I think I should probably tell you that unless I was ordered to eat it by my drill sergeant, I haven't had any form of pasta since I was about seven. There's a great deal of ingrained stubbornness involved. This is not a faddish vegan diet choice we're talking about here. At this point, you can pretty much consider it a part of my personality."

"Oh, I see. You think I can't rise to the challenge." I respond as I poke him in his well-defined chest. "Well, prepare yourself to be shocked. I might even find a sophisticated palate under all those baloney sandwiches, microwaved hot wings, and pork rinds. What would you do if I did?"

Ty chuckles as he shakes his head, "Can't be done with pasta Darlin', I'd faint first."

"Well then, you should probably brush up on your first aid skills," I tease. "Because your diet is about to undergo a major overhaul. You might even find that you—gasp—like real food. Wouldn't that be a novel concept?"

Tyler winks and announces, "Well, I'm going to put this conversation in the win column for me. It shows you pay uber-close attention to what I eat, so at least I'm on your radar."

"Don't flatter yourself too much, Cowboy. It's an occupational hazard. Food is my job."

"Not to disparage the food truck or anything, but I have had your food before and—believe it or not—my little aversion to pasta aside, I did enjoy most of it. I don't think

you're going to convert me to hummus anytime soon. I just have a texture thing with garbanzo beans. You are far too talented to slave away in a space that's only 4 x 6 feet. I have to wonder why you do it."

"How long do you have?" I grimace.

"Take as long as you need. I just came off my third twelve-hour shift in a row. I've had my pizza and caffeine. I'm all yours for the foreseeable future," Ty assures me as he grabs his large glass of Coke and moves over to a well-worn leather couch in the quietest corner of the restaurant. He motions for me to sit beside him.

Suddenly, all I want to do is curl up beside him and tell him the whole sordid story, but that's not the way I operate now, thanks to lessons learned the hard way. There was a time in my life when I would have freely shared every last detail, but not lately.

"I'm pretty sure you could find a thousand more interesting things to do with your time than listen to my sad, pathetic tale of woe," I warn as I shrug defensively, curling into myself.

"I wouldn't have offered if I weren't interested," Tyler insists. "Come on. Take a load off those feet and tell me what's going on."

It may be the compassion in his eyes, my overall fatigue level, or simply a chance to share my story with someone who seems to care, but I can't turn down his invitation.

The relief must be clear on my face because Tyler's body language changes as he watches me cross the room. He immediately stands and, without a word, he opens his arms and gathers me in a warm, comforting hug. It's all I can do to fight back my tears. Tears I didn't even know I needed to shed. Abruptly, I remember why it feels so nostalgic. It's been

a full decade and a half since I had a hug quite like that. In a strange twist of fate, the man who I thought I could have nothing in common with wears the same cologne as my favorite Nonnino and even tucks me under his chin the same way. I shouldn't make assumptions about people without knowing them. Ty may be less like my dad and his cronies and more like my grandfather.

As I blink back my tears, I realize Tyler is whispering something under his breath. I struggle against the blanket of the past so I can concentrate on what he's saying. "Hush Darlin', there can't be anything so bad, it won't be better if you spread the load."

The sweet sentiment under his rough voice is enough to make me come close to losing it again. I take a deep breath and swallow hard.

"Well, this isn't easy for me. I'm guessing that you probably already think I'm a pretty big bimbo, and this is only going to confirm your suspicions. Well, yours and everyone else's," I confess.

Ty puts his hand up to stop me. "Gidget, you have me all wrong. I never said I thought you were a bimbo. In fact, it's pretty much the opposite. I admire people who can be artists. I think some of the smartest people on the planet are artists."

"Anyway," I continue before I lose my nerve. "I'm never really sure where to start this story. I'm not sure where it all begins. It might've started when I was a really little girl trying to compete with my athletic superstar big brother and model-perfect little sister. I never fit in with my stereotypical upper crust suburban Italian family. No one knew what to do with me—except my grandparents. My dad was grooming me to be his next administrative assistant because girls could not be truly responsible CPAs—in his opinion. He wanted my

brother and me to run his business for him eventually. However, my Nonna could see I had the heart of an artist and the palate of a cook from an early age. She allowed me to bake at her knee almost from the time I could walk. I owe my career to her. Anything I know in the kitchen today had its start in what I learned from her. My grandpa, or Nonnino, was my biggest cheerleader. He was brave enough to try every dish I ever made. Let me tell you, some of those early dishes were very, very scary. Yet, he never seemed fazed.”

“That sounds great, it sounds like your family supported your dreams.”

“Sadly, that’s where it gets dicey. *Part* of my family supported my dreams; I always seem to be a disappointment to the rest of my family. I felt stuck in the middle. It never seemed to matter what I chose to do; I was always disappointing somebody. I guess that’s how I became really good at trying to please everybody. I don’t want people to be upset with me. I pretend to be happy when I’m not. I pretend not to be hurt when I am. I’m often nicer to people than I should be because I’m afraid they might be disappointed in me. The craziest thing of all is that I expect more of myself than others ever think of asking of me.”

Tyler puts his arm around my shoulder and gives me a gentle squeeze as he murmurs, “Ah, Gidget, don’t be so hard on yourself. Being a nice person is a good thing. It’s what sets us apart from the barbarians and the bitches of the world. At some point, all the good you put out in the world is going to come back to you.”

“I wish it were that easy. Unfortunately, not everybody lives by that code. I had somebody totally take advantage of my generosity and essentially rob me blind. In the process, he destroyed my trust in people—specifically in men—and

seriously damaged my relationship with my father. My dad doesn't believe I can be trusted to make smart decisions about anything anymore. It doesn't seem to matter to him that before I decided to change my major to culinary arts, I was a business major with a solid grounding in accounting. One serious mistake made all of it count for nothing. I feel like such a fool."

"Well, I haven't known you for years, but I have known you for several months, and I do know that you are bright, intuitive, and you're nobody's fool. Everybody makes mistakes. Your parents have probably made more than a few of themselves. So, it's not fair for them to be judging you so harshly," Tyler says sternly.

I'm dumbfounded by his quick defense of me. If I were to guess based on our previous interactions, I would've told you Tyler Colton could barely stand the sight of me and thought I was one of the biggest flakes on the planet. So, this apparent about-face is a stunning development.

"Wow, at the risk of sounding like Sally Fields, I think you like me. You really, really like me," I stammer.

"I think I've mentioned it a couple times today, at least," Ty replies. "For the life of me, I can't figure out why it's so hard for you to take a compliment."

"Maybe it's because I don't know what I've done to deserve one," I answer with more honesty than I intend.

"Whoever told you that you have to earn compliments?" Ty asks, an incredulous expression on his face. "I was always taught compliments are like gifts with no expectation of anything in return. It's like finding an extra dollar in your pocket you didn't expect. A complement is something that you give someone to brighten their day. They don't have to do anything special to earn it or deserve it—it's

just there.”

“But—” I start to argue.

Tyler softly presses the tip of his finger against my bottom lip to silence me as he continues, “But, if you want to look at it from your frame of mind, I can think of many things you do to deserve compliments. You are friendly to everyone from the person who delivers your newspaper to the meter maid who gives you a ticket. In my opinion, being nice to someone who just slapped you with the fine is going above and beyond the call of duty.”

“It’s a hard job and nobody likes them,” I argue. “They aren’t like teachers or nurses.”

Ty chuckles as he responds, “See? You’re good to the core. Definitely compliment worthy. You cook with a passion for every meal. Even something as simple as grilled cheese sandwiches or peanut butter and jelly are special gourmet treats when you make them. I confess I come over at mealtime just so I can see what you make from the leftovers and Jeff and Kiera’s fridge. I know you stop and talk to Harry, the homeless veteran who lives behind the carwash. Not only do you stop and talk to him on a regular basis, you often bring him food. Not just a little food either, but enough to feed several of his friends. Many people in your situation with a restaurant would look at that as an opportunity for free publicity, but you don’t,” he continues.

“Tyler, every decent human being would do the same. It’s nothing special. It doesn’t even deserve a compliment. I would feel guilty if I didn’t do that stuff,” I reply as I shrug my shoulders defensively. This is the kind of argument I get in with my dad all the time. My dad thinks charitable agencies should do this type of stuff and that I should just mind my own business, which is why I never tell anybody what, I do. I

am shocked that Tyler, who barely knows me, has taken the time to notice what I do in my spare time.

“You’d be surprised, there are some pretty cold hearted people out there. Unfortunately, I seem to specialize in dating most of them,” Ty jests. I am familiar with the strategy of hiding a little bit of truth in your jokes so that the truth doesn’t sting quite so much.

“I’m sensing you have your own ‘not so happily ever after story’ to share. The offer is reciprocal you know, I have pretty big shoulders too,” I offer.

Tyler runs his hand through his short-cropped hair as if it’s a sensory memory.

He shrugs his shoulders and loosens the muscles in his neck. “To be honest, I would just as soon forget about that time in my life, but if it would help you understand me better or build our friendship, I’ll trot out the grisly details for you. Put simply, I trusted someone to be there for me. She wasn’t even though she promised she would be. Period. End of sentence,” he explains curtly. Though now that he’s started, the story continues to burst from his lips like water through a burst levy.

“She had a lot of flimsy excuses as to why her behavior was okay—but it sucked. My best friend’s behavior sucked too. But, then he went and got leukemia so, I couldn’t even be mad at him anymore. I just had to be mad at God and my ex-girlfriend. Well, them and terrorists, insurgents and other random bad people that I got to shoot at until they blew up my people and tried to blow up me. Then, my life got craptastic. But, that’s a topic for a whole ‘nother day or maybe even a whole other year, but we don’t need to talk about it today,” he sighs as his monolog trails off.

“See, I knew my problems were petty and stupid

compared to real problems,” I lament.

Ty puts his hands on my shoulders as he says, “May I remind you that you were shot at today. I believe it gives you a little bit of leeway. In fact, I think that qualifies as a very real problem.”

“Speaking of things I’d rather not remember,” I remark as I roll my eyes. “Really, Cowboy did you have to go there? I was doing a pretty good job of forgetting why we were stuffing our faces with pizza,” I chastise as I sigh heavily. “By the way, I’m not giving you a free pass on telling me the rest of your story. You don’t need to tell me everything, but I think you left out some key details that it would be helpful for me to understand. Fortunately for you, I’m on a deadline today, and I wasted far too much time telling you my sob story. I need to get back to work on my cake order. I got a text from Kiera, and she said I could use their kitchen. They’re going to board the shoe thief with their friend the veterinarian so I can work on the flowers,” I explain.

“I guess that means I get a rain check?” asks Ty with a mysterious grin on his face.

“Yes, it would stand to reason,” I reply uncertain about the strange direction of the conversation.

Suddenly, Ty flashes a huge grin as he announces loud enough for everyone else in the restaurant to hear, “Why yes Ms. LaBianca, I would be more than happy to go on a date with you. I very much enjoyed this date, a follow-up date would be lovely. Thank you for asking.”

Abruptly, all the noisy background clatter and conversation in the quaint little Italian bistro seems to vanish. Everyone is waiting to see what I’m going to say. It isn’t often that someone can throw me off my game, but Tyler seems to have uncanny aim. I guess it was time to put on my game face.

I summon my inner Lauren Bacall and look up at him through my eyelashes. After one long blink, I sassily retort, “Well, someone had to step up to the plate and do the asking because I’ve been waiting for months for an invitation and nothing happened. So, I figured I’d show some initiative.” I turn to the people watching with rapt attention and slip them a small wink when Tyler isn’t looking.

Tyler chokes back a chortle of laughter as he says, “Well played ma’am. I should’ve known better than to go up against the master of verbal play.”

As I stand and give a mock curtsy, It’s one of the things that makes things so interesting with Tyler. He isn’t afraid to challenge me or listen to my ideas. We always have a great spirited conversation, no matter what the topic—even if it’s about scheduling our next date. It’s a refreshing change when I’m used to my opinion not counting for much.



“Dad, it’s not a big deal. I wasn’t even in the food truck when it happened. No, we don’t know who did it. It’s probably just some neighborhood kids playing around. Tyler’s got it all under control. I’m sure he’ll figure it out.”

I have to pull the phone away from my ear to be able to deal with my dad’s response. Although, I don’t know his exact words, the gist is very clear. “Oh for Pete’s sake, Dad! I’m not sleeping with the man. I went out for pizza with him. He’s the friend of a friend and happens to be the officer that responded to the break-in. I think I can control myself long

enough not to ravish him in the middle of a restaurant,” I reply with an eye roll, even though my dad can’t see it through the phone.

I listen as my dad berates me some more, and I try again to defend myself as we have the same conversation we’ve had every year for the past four years. “No, dad you’re right. I have terrible taste in men, and I’ve been known to make stupid mistakes. However, the break-in was not my fault. I parked the truck in a well-lit area, and it was secure when I left it.”

As the tongue-lashing continues, I wonder why I even bother to engage in these conversations. I sigh as I continue to try to defend myself, “Yes, the security system was set. No, I’m not going to come home and marry your partner’s nephew just because it’s the sensible thing to do. I’m sure he’s a nice guy, but I’m not interested in being married to a golf pro. Listen, dad, I need to go, I have a wedding cake to make.”

I hang up the phone feeling exhausted. I cringe whenever I hear the ring tone associated with my dad. I wish I didn’t feel that way, but sadly I do.

I tuck my phone into my jacket pocket and try to put the conversation behind me as I unpack the supplies and put them on Kiera’s kitchen counter.

Mindy comes bounding up to me— because like me— she never approaches anything slowly. “Whoa, Mindy! Remember what I told you about running in the kitchen? It’s never a safe practice for any chef,” I caution.

Mindy’s face scrunches up with confusion, “I thought that was only if I was carrying knives,” she replies.

“Nope, it’s pretty much true always. If I had had a pan of hot sugar, you could’ve been in real danger,” I explain.

“Okay, if I’m careful, can I help you?” asks Mindy hopefully.

“I brought you some cake scraps so you can make cake balls and if you want to, you can play with the gum paste scraps because I am making flowers,” I suggest.

“That’s rad!” exclaims Mindy excitedly, bouncing from one foot to the other.

“First, you have to go wash your hands. It’s always the first rule of safety. Are your mom and dad here?”

“Sure, Dad’s down in the basement with Tyler,” Mindy answers as she runs toward the bathroom.

“Tyler’s here?” I practically shriek.

“Well, Duh! He came over to watch the NASCAR race with Papa,” Mindy clarifies as if she’s talking to a simpleton. “What’s wrong Miss Heather? Mr. Tyler is so nice. He gives me piggyback rides, and he’s going to teach me how to ride his horse.”

“Nothing’s wrong Mindy Mouse,” I say quickly, trying to cover my earlier overreaction. “I just didn’t expect him to be here.”

“Then how come you’re all red like a stop sign?” asks Mindy as she plays with the ribbons on her ponytails. “Hey, did you know Uncle Ty is a real cowboy? He has a ranch-n-everything. The barn is even red just like in the movies.”

“That sounds neat. Weren’t you planning to learn to ride a horse so you can ride at Justice Gardner’s ranch?”

Mindy nods as she exclaims, “Uh-huh, Uncle Tyler said he would teach me when we have school vacation if the fields aren’t too muddy. I’m so excited. The Judge-man said I was a very good horseman. I thought that was funny because I’m a girl.”

“Well, you’re braver than me. I’m too scared to ride a horse,” I admit.

“No, way!” Mindy says with her mouth gaping. “How can you be a grown up and not ride horses? I thought everybody rode ponies when they were little.”

“Nope, I was too big of a chicken. I was afraid they were going to step on me. So I never even tried. I wish I had been braver when I was little. Now I feel stupid that I never even tried,” I concede, sheepishly.

Just then, Tyler emerges from the basement. It’s clear from the expression on his face that he’s overheard our conversation. He is studying my body language as he asks me, “Would you mind coming out to my ranch so that I can show you my babies. They’re so gentle that they wouldn’t hurt a fly. Literally. In fact, I think Fannie Farmer is harboring a family of fugitive flies in her mane.”

I giggle, and Ty gives me an odd look. “I’m sorry, but the name of your horse is funny in light of our conversation this afternoon. I don’t know if you realize this, but your horse is named after a vintage cookbook. I find that ironic, especially since your favorite food is microwavable pizza.”

“If you think that’s funny you’ll get a kick out of the fact that I have two other horses named Julia and Jacques.”

“You’re kidding me! Please tell me it’s not coincidental and that you get the cultural reference behind their names.”

“Gidget, I didn’t say I was never exposed to cooking. My mom is a huge fan of Public Television. I think you’re reading far too much into my dislike of noodles. My transition from dorm food to the Army’s finest cuisine didn’t do much to develop a sophisticated palate either. But, it doesn’t mean I’m a total idiot. In fact, my mom would be pleased as punch to meet you. She always wanted to go to culinary school.”

“What does your mom do now?” I ask, realizing that I’ve never seen her at any of Jeff and Kiera’s family events.

“My mom is a retired third-grade teacher and my dad owns a local hardware store back in my hometown in Oklahoma.”

“You’re from Oklahoma? I knew you had an accent, but I didn’t realize that’s where you’re from.”

“I’ve been from so many places recently, sometimes it’s hard for me to remember. What? You don’t think I have an authentic Ory-gun accent?”

“I’m probably not the person to ask about that since I grew up around Harvard Yard and spent my summers in North Carolina and Texas. My dialect is so confused it doesn’t know if it’s coming or going,” I tease.

“Speaking of places to visit, I would like you to come see my ranch, remember? You never answered my question,” Ty remarks, pinning me with a direct gaze. I look into his eyes that are so sexy, and I almost forget what my objections are.

“I was hoping you would miss that artful little dodge,” I confess “If I come see you, do I have to touch the horses?”

Tyler chuckles as he assures me, “No, Heather, I wouldn’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. I promise. We’ll just have a nice visit. Maybe you can even Skype with my mom and say hi. That way you can hear what a real Oklahoman accent sounds like.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound too dangerous,” I remark.

“Well, Gidget, I suppose the level of danger is entirely up to you.”

Chapter 3



Tyler

I can't believe I cut myself shaving today. I haven't done that since I was a kid. I guess it just goes to show how nervous I am which is weird because this isn't even my first date with Heather. If you count the time I spent helping her with the wedding cake, it's almost like our third or fourth date. The whole food truck fiasco turned out to be a positive experience for me because it's given me an excuse to hang out with Gidget. Although, it feels odd to call her that now because I can see her fashionable clothes are more of a defense mechanism than a reflection of who she is comfortable being.

The lot where her food truck was parked turned out to be the center of a turf dispute in a gang war between drug factions. They had actually been shooting at each other from inside her truck like some sick kids game using her humble little business as their home base. The narcotics task force in Salem made an arrest. Hopefully, that nightmare will soon be

over. Unfortunately, because of the complexity of the case, her food truck has been tied up as evidence far longer than any of us anticipated. There was a fire in the commercial kitchen that she rents which complicated matters even more. She got permission from her client to use my kitchen at the ranch to make the cake since the facility was once used as a bed-and-breakfast.

This process has been entertaining and educational for me. At first, she didn't want me to help her. She was shocked to learn that I have a food handler's card. I'm so grateful for the time I spend with the Explorers program, which requires me to have one. She and I spent a very adventurous evening baking cake under Kiera's watchful eye. Kiera wasn't able to help as much as she typically does since my kitchen isn't set up for her wheelchair, but she was very helpful in giving me step-by-step instructions. Even Heather said I make an excellent sous chef. I also got to show off my woodworking skills when I built the structure for the cake. The cake design was very abstract, with lots of odd angles that needed to be supported so the cake would not collapse on itself. I've seen cakes like that on television, but I had no idea they required internal supports. It was quite fascinating. I think the most entertaining part was making all the flowers. It was tedious in a way, but also a lot like playing with Play-Doh. Heather was sweet and didn't tell me my stuff looked like a first grader made it, so I guess I did okay. Heather told me the bride emailed her and told her she was thrilled, so it all worked out okay in the end.

Heather was out here a couple weeks ago when we did the cake, but she didn't go anywhere near the barn. So, I'm trying to figure out a way I can introduce her to the barn without it totally overwhelming her. At first, I thought she was embellishing her fear of horses for dramatic effect, to

entertain Mindy. But I quickly found out the truth. Even talking about them makes her nervous. It just seems so opposite to her typical personality. In many ways, she's the type of person who takes on any challenge with absolute fearlessness. I can't even begin to fathom being afraid of horses. Being raised in Oklahoma, I was around horses before I could sit up on my own. I had Julia and Jacques shipped from Oklahoma after I returned from Iraq. I adopted Fannie Farmer from the Humane Society, and I can't imagine my little herd without her. She was a senior citizen horse that they considered un-adoptable because someone had allowed her hoof infection to become so advanced, they didn't think it would heal correctly. Fortunately, with a little tender loving care, she healed right up, and she's my most gentle horse now.

So I've decided that we're going to play some traditional yard games in the field outside of the barn. I know Heather has a competitive streak a mile wide; I figure if she's playing a game, she may not notice how close the horses are to us. I thought we might play a rousing game of lawn bowling and croquet. Heather likes retro things, so I thought she might get a kick out of it. I hunted long and hard on eBay for an intact, authentic lawn bowling set.

I examine the food I picked up from the nearby specialty deli and hope it meets her expectations. I know she's a phenomenal cook, but I know very little about her personal tastes in food. She is reluctant to eat in front of other people, so I don't get a chance to check out her preferences much. I checked with Mindy, my secret source of information on all things Heather, but Mindy didn't seem to know much either, except to say chocolate bars are always a good choice.

At noon exactly, the doorbell rings and I'm presented with the gift that is Heather. Today, she's exquisitely wrapped in a traditional red and white gingham shirt and overalls, with

red Converse shoes. She even has little cowboy boot charms on the end of her shoelaces, and it's hard to miss the fact that she's brought one of her famous pies along. It's impossible not to grin because her pies are legendary. In fact, Jeff and Kiera credit a peach pie, which she helped make, with bringing them back together after a disagreement.

When I take the pie from her, I notice she's done some incredibly intricate latticework and placed a cool design around the crust. "This looks like a piece of art!" I exclaim. "Are you sure you want us to eat this?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I?" she asks. "It's only apple pie. I usually make apple cranberry, but I thought you might like a more traditional pie better."

"Heather, our bet is only about pasta. You can feel free to make anything you want to. I like cranberries, but regular apple pie is amazing too. I'm not picky. I'm just happy to eat something that's not in a box or from a takeout menu."

Heather wilts a little. "Darn it, I knew I should've gone with the cranberries."

"Gidget, honey, I'm blown away that you brought me anything at all. I don't care if it's got cranberries, apples, pumpkins or lemons. I'm gonna love it because you made it for me," I insist.

"I get weird about this stuff, I guess. I want everything to be perfect," she admits with a shy grin. "I drive Tara and Kiera crazy, always trying to fix recipes."

"I can understand where you're coming from. In my spare time while I was stationed overseas, I started making small jewelry boxes and clocks out of wood and antlers. I wanted to do it right, so I studied hundreds of woodworking sites online when I had access to computers in the barracks, and I downloaded books on it to my Kindle. It took me a long

time to get up the courage to show anyone anything I had made. Even after people started telling me they loved it, I wondered if they were just telling me that because I was their commanding officer or their friend, or if really they liked it. I've been doing them for several years, and I even have a website now, but there are still days when I wonder if I am any good at it," I confess.

"I know what you mean about the boundary between friends and constructive criticism. Fortunately for me, the Girlfriend Posse knows they can tell me anything without hurting my feelings. My family is a whole other story, of course. Can I see something you've made? I promise just to look and not say anything."

"Since when have we ever kept our opinions to ourselves, Gidget?" I tease. "If we did, it would fundamentally alter the nature of our relationship. I like our relationship the way it is, so feel free to give me an ass-kicking if I need one. Consider this a people-pleasing-free-zone."

Heather gives me a slightly menacing grin, "Just remember you said that. Someday, you may be sorry you ever uttered those words. I often have strong opinions that I don't always share. My grandma taught me to be a nice Southern Belle, even if I had to bite my tongue in half to do so," she explains.

"Southern grandma?" I ask. "I thought your Nonna was Italian."

"I had both," Heather answers with a laugh. "Imagine how confused my childhood was. My dad was an East Coast Italian from New Jersey. He was one of the first in his family to go to college and he's Mensa smart. So he got a scholarship to Harvard. Well, my mom is from North Carolina and was visiting one of her high school friends at Harvard. My dad

apparently was quite a looker in his day, and my mom fell head over heels for him. Well, imagine my mother's surprise, with her very cultured, North Carolinian debutante background, when she found out that the Harvard scholar she was in love with was from the projects in New Jersey. They stayed together, but they did everything in their power to reinvent themselves as a moneyed yuppie couple, with picture-perfect kids, and a manicured lawn. It was a mixed-up world to grow up in. I had grandparents who were very proud of their heritage, and parents who were running away from theirs just as fast as they could. I didn't know where I fit into all of that. Added to all the confusion was the fact that I didn't fit into the conformist family mold. It didn't take much to get me labeled a complete rebel."

After what I've seen in the military, the idea of Heather being in the role of the rebel is ludicrous to me, but I know family politics can be complicated. "How did you end up here in Oregon? It's a long ways from Harvard Yard."

"Yes, it is," Heather agrees. "Kiera and I met when she came to Boston's Children's Hospital for an experimental treatment when she was younger. When I changed my major from business to culinary, I decided to follow her to Oregon. It took me a while to be brave enough to take the plunge as a chef. I tried more 'respectable' careers like nursing and teaching first, before finally deciding I could follow my passion without guilt. My dad held all the purse strings, and that made it difficult. Thank God for Kiera and Denny. They let me move in for free and fed me. Denny treated me like a daughter."

"They're good people. Jeff found himself a keeper when he found Kiera and her family." I agree.

"I think Kiera is pretty lucky to have found Jeff, too."

How did you guys become friends?” Heather inquires.

“We met in college. He ran track, and I played football. Jeff was one of the few people who wasn’t okay with my ‘lifestyle choices’ and tried to steer me in the right direction. I was too damn stubborn to listen, but Jeff was decent enough to stick around while I collected the pieces of my life and started over in the military. He was there for me again when my life blew up a second time. I didn’t even need to ask him. He’s just that kind of guy,” I explain.

“It sounds like you’ve been through a lot. This time, I have all the time in the world to listen. It’s my turn to have broad shoulders,” Heather offers.

“I appreciate the offer, Gidget, but I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy. I’ve had a lot of really crappy stuff happen to me along the way. Some of it I deserved, and some of it I didn’t,” I reply vaguely, feeling regretful about my inability to trust people.

“I understand. You don’t have to tell me your entire life story, I just wish I knew a little of your back story so that I don’t step on any land mines,” she responds.

I raise an eyebrow. “You mean, for instance, land mines like ... talking about land mines?”

Heather turns ghostly white and puts her hand over her mouth as she gasps, “Oh my God! I’m so sorry! Is that what happened to you--I mean, is that why you’re not a soldier anymore?”

I gather her hands up in mine, and I notice they’re cold. “Heather, take a deep breath. I was just flicking you crap. I’m fine, we can talk about it all you want. I want you to be comfortable with me. I’ll be happy to answer questions about whatever you want to know. Feel free to ask.”

Heather slumps down a little as she breathes out a sigh of relief “Oh, thank God! I was afraid my thoughtless remark might have caused you a great deal of pain. I would never want to do that.”

“Sometimes, I let my smart mouth run away from me. I didn’t mean to freak you out; I was only kidding. I do have some post-traumatic stress, according to the fine folks at the Veterans Administration, but I’m not so damaged that I can’t talk about it in general conversation. I’m still a soldier. I just serve in the National Guard now.”

“Were you badly hurt?” Heather asks, concern evident on her face.

“I caught some shrapnel and was burned. I tore up my shoulder pretty bad and had to have a couple of surgeries to repair it, but the worst was the bell ringing I took to my head. The rehabilitation specialists say I may never fully recover from it. It’s a lovely stew of confusing side effects. Sometimes I can’t remember words I’ve known since I was in kindergarten, and other times I’ll find myself crying at stupid television commercials that aren’t even intended to be emotional. That’s probably the most frustrating thing of all because I was never ‘that guy’. Unless I was sloppy drunk, I was pretty much always in control of my emotions. Now, they can sneak up on me out of the blue. The worst thing is coping with the death of the other members of my unit. They were under my command, and I was responsible for them. They died because of decisions I made that day, and I’ll have to live with that for the rest of my life. I think that changed me probably more than anything else.”

“I know that you laid your life on the line as a soldier, but it’s still on the line every day as a law enforcement officer,” Heather continues. “I think if I had gone through

what you went through, I would be curled up in my bed like a pill bug and never want to leave it. The fact that you still go out and serve the people every day is astonishing to me, and I respect you so much for it.”

I swallow hard and shift in my chair. I fight the urge to run from her gentle, well-meaning words as they continue to rain down. They’re meant to be as soothing as a summer rain, but they burn like acid. They make me flinch.

“I’ve been told by other soldiers,” she continues gently. “There’s a cost of war and if you did your best, it’s part of the risk,” she goes on, with a look of sympathy in her eyes. “I’m sure they don’t blame you.”

I hate the pity. Everyone gets the same look. In the space of half a conversation, I’m suddenly half a man. If it’s bad for me, I can only imagine what it’s like for the driver of that convoy, Jason Fletcher. He came out of the ordeal as a double amputee. Trevor Black ended up maimed too.

“I wish it were that easy,” I answer in a harsh whisper. “You didn’t see those guys when they died. I held one kid, barely old enough to shave while he drew his last breath. Another guy in my unit was two frickin’ days from retirement. His daughter was going to have a baby. Their lives were lost because I trusted the wrong people. I can never take that back.”

“Did you make that decision all by yourself?” Heather asks softly. “I didn’t think the military worked that way. Don’t you decide things in duplicate and triplicate?”

“Well, yes; there is that. The Army specializes in redundancy. No, I didn’t make the decision alone. You can’t take a piss without paperwork. But that doesn’t change the fact that I was responsible for those men.”

Heather scoots back her chair, walks over to me, and

gives me a gentle hug, resting her cheek against my shoulder. “I’m sorry you feel that way. It must be a terrible burden to carry. However, I know you to be a decent guy, and I’m sure you didn’t put your men in harm’s way on purpose. I’m sure they knew that too,” she murmurs, her words muffled by the corduroy fabric of my shirt.

“Thanks so much for saying that. It’s just something I need to work through.” I say, wrapping my arms around her and giving her a gentle hug.

“Are you ready for lunch?” I ask, more than ready to change the topic to happier things. “The guy at the Greek Deli said I bought the best stuff on his menu. I’m eager to see if you agree.”

“It looks phenomenal, and I’m eager to try it. How did you know that gyros are my favorite food?” she asks, as she opens each container to examine the contents.

“Honestly, I didn’t,” I admit. “It was just a lucky guess.”

“Well, you should go buy a lottery ticket because you were spot on.”



“We’re going to do what?” Heather asks, alarm making her voice squeak at the end of her sentences. “That’s close enough for the horses to see us.”

“Well, I doubt that they’ll be keeping score,” I grin. “You can still cheat at croquet if you want to. They won’t tell on you.”

“Can you get them off of me if they decide to attack?” she asks. Her panic is setting in.

I smother a laugh and reassure her, “Heather, I’ve been leading horses around since I was about four years old. There isn’t a horse I can’t handle. If one of them got a wild hair up their butt and decides to do something totally out of character, I can handle it. I promise.”

“Really? You’re not just making that up to make me feel better, right?” Heather probes.

This time, I do chuckle. “No, Heather, I wouldn’t lie to you. I’ll keep you safe. Why are you so afraid of horses?” I ask, genuinely curious because Heather is typically fearless.

“Oh honey, you have no idea. I’m scared of most things that don’t walk on two feet. I can handle house cats, but not so much alley cats. In that case, I’m on the fence. I was making friends with Lucky until he ate my shoes. Now, I’m beginning to reassess my decision to trust dogs.”

“Lucky has a shoe fetish, I admit, but there’s no reason to be afraid of him. He’s a super nice dog. Look how well behaved he is around Becca.”

“I know it’s not rational,” Heather explains. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told about my fear of house pets. I guess it started when I was a kid. People would tell me how nice their animal was, and how it would never bite anyone. Then it would turn around and bite me, and only me. Early on, I learned that I can’t trust animals. They call me the anti-Dr. Doolittle in my house. One of my mom’s favorite charities is a Greyhound rescue group, and she is very disappointed that I never help with her charity work. Have you seen those dogs? They look like walking skeletons. It’s Halloween every day around them.”

“I can see I’m going to have to teach you to use some

of your moxie around animals. If you act nervous, it makes them nervous. I'd be more than happy to work with you, on your confidence. I have a sweet border collie who can serve as your personal therapy dog to help overcome your phobia. Annie loves everybody," I explain.

Heather grins nervously. "You do realize that's what everyone says to me, just before their dog takes a big chunk out of my calf. It would stand to reason horses would be an extremely bad bet for me."

"Gidget, I understand your reluctance. But I'm totally sure that I can keep you safe. My grandpa used to have a cattle ranch in Oklahoma; I used to help him train horses and herd cattle and sheep. I know I can keep my lazy riding horses well in hand."

Heather visibly relaxes "Okay, I'll let you handle it. Just to let you know—I totally scream like a girl. Mindy accuses me of trying to break her eardrums. You might want to avoid that if possible. It's not pleasant."

"I'll keep it in mind and do my best to avoid the pain. But I've got you covered. Do you want to start with croquet or lawn bowling?" I ask, trying to get her mind off the presence of my big four-legged babies.

"Lawn bowling? You mean the traditional kind?" she asks her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Yep, I've got a gen-u-ine vintage old person's game here. We can pretend we're an old married couple livin' in Florida or something."

"It's funny you should say that because I learned it with my grandparents. We used to play every Sunday after church. My grandpa was a serious competitor. He even wrote down the score on a little pad with a small red pencil. After he passed away, my grandma found boxes of used pads where he

had kept the scores for years. I don't know if he was planning for an epic rematch or what. I have to warn you, I'm pretty good," Heather brags with a smile.

"Well, I haven't had the advantage of being well schooled in the proper use of lawn bowling equipment, but we spent a lot of time improvising games while serving in the desert. I played several games with rocks which strongly resemble lawn bowling, so I might just give you a run for your money," I challenge.

"Oh, you're so on, Cowboy! If you win, I'll make you a batch of cookies or a pie of your choice," she offers magnanimously.

"That's a generous offer, considering you're going to lose this bet. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?" I tease, waiting to see if she'll rise and take the bait.

"Yes, I'm sure, and when I win, you're going to have to give up something for me. Have you considered what that might be?" Heather asks, with a decided twinkle in her eye. I suspect she gave her big brother a run for his money when they were growing up, so I consider my options carefully.

"Maybe you would prefer it if I offered you an opportunity *not* to do something for a prize instead?" I tease.

"Well, if you ever want me anywhere near these horses then you better play this game hard." She continues, "You just gave me a powerful incentive to play the most accurate game of lawn bowling ever played. I could make the Olympic team of lawn bowling just to avoid getting near your horses."

It's too bad Heather's so afraid of horses. Otherwise, I could see her as the quintessential rodeo queen, with big curly hair, audacious makeup, gaudy rhinestone shirts, skin tight Levi's, and shiny boots. She has the personality and the vivaciousness to pull it off in a heartbeat. I've watched her

with Mindy and Becca. I've seen that she is tender and caring. I know she would have a wonderful affinity with animals if only she can overcome her fears.

"Heather, are you going to give this a chance? I think that I can help you with the horses if you let me. But I don't want to force you into something you don't want to do."

"I honestly don't know how I'm going to react. It's the closest I've ever been to any horses, ever. I would like to say I totally trust you to keep me safe. But, to be honest, after all I've been through with men in my life, I have issues with that. So I don't know what to tell you, other than, 'I'll try'."

Heather says with a helpless shrug. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to disappoint you."

"Hey now, stop that," I cajole. "Remember what I said about this being a people pleasing free zone? It applies to me. You can't disappoint me just by having an opinion or a hang-up. Everybody's got hang-ups. I have a whole truckload of them. We would need a day and half to catalog all of mine."

Heather blinks back tears. "Thanks for being so understanding; not everyone would be."

Her response baffles me. I wonder what type of relationships she's been through before to make her feel like she doesn't have the right to an opinion. Even when I was in a dark place with Stacia, we each had our points of view and voiced them quite loudly and often. As far as I know, Stacia was never apologetic for anything she ever did, even if she was wrong. I can't imagine my former girlfriend apologizing for making me slightly uncomfortable. She would've probably just laughed at me.

"Gidget, it's no big deal. Trust takes a long time to build, and I need to earn your trust."

"Really? Because I would totally get it if it's a problem."

Don't worry, I've had lots of people tell me I'm not worth their time. You wouldn't be the first."

"If you think I'm stupid enough to let a woman like you slip through my fingers, think again." I declare as I take Heather's hand and lead her to the lawn bowling course I set up.

I don't think I've looked forward to something quite so much for a long while. Now, I just need to decide if I want to win or lose. Given our wager, it might be hard to tell the difference.

