

## Chapter 1

“. . . And they lived happily ever after. Period. The end.” Caylor put down her favorite pen—the one with the sparkly purple ink—and twisted in her chair until her back popped in several places. She could understand her editor’s wanting to get revisions on this manuscript finished before Christmas, but to give her a due date for the Friday after Thanksgiving—which meant the Friday before finals week—was ridiculous. She’d begged to have the deadline extended a week. Then she could have worked on the revisions while her students took their tests.

No use fretting over something that wasn’t to be. The work was done, and it would only take her another hour or so to type up a list of all the changes to e-mail back to her editor. And if she got the e-mail sent before midnight, she’d have beaten her deadline by one day.

But if she was going to keep working, she needed sustenance. Quietly as she could, she slipped down the stairs from her loft, skipping the third step from the bottom that squealed like a puppy with its head stuck in a fence.

She turned on the light over the sink instead of flooding the room with the 1960s fluorescent panels in the ceiling. Opening the first of the three tall cabinets that served as the pantry, she pulled out the basket overflowing with packets of gourmet flavored hot chocolate. She dug through the assorted Mylar bags until she found what she wanted: sugar-free dark chocolate toffee. She put a mug of water in the microwave and set it for two minutes. She'd have to stop it before it beeped, lest she wake Sassy up.

Next, she opened the middle cabinet. Back behind the multiple canisters of all different kinds of flour, she felt around for The Box. She and Sassy had agreed to keep it hidden behind the flour because if Caylor didn't see it, she wouldn't want what was in it. At least not every day.

The Box was not there. Caylor pulled the flour bins out. Nope. No Box.

“Looking for this?”

Caylor jumped at her grandmother's soft voice, which coincided with the beeping of the microwave. Sassy held an opaque plastic storage bin, slightly larger than a shoebox, in both hands.

“I knew you had a deadline tomorrow, so when Trina, Lindy, and I stopped at Kroger on the way home from coffee this afternoon, I hit the Christmas candy aisle.”

Caylor grinned. “Sass’, I knew there was a reason I love you.” Before Caylor pulled her mug out of the microwave she grabbed the brushed–stainless steel kettle off the stove, filled it with fresh water, and put it back on over high heat. Then she fixed her own hot chocolate.

Sassy sat down at the end of the 1950s chrome-and-Formica table and popped the lid off The Box. Still stirring her drink, Caylor took the chair to her right and examined the booty. All kinds of miniature candy bars wrapped up in green, red, silver, and gold foil wrappers, mixed in with Hanukkah gelt, a sentimental favorite Sassy got every year and honor of her Jewish

grandmother. But Caylor dug through the stash, knocking at least a quarter of the candy out, until she came to what she knew her grandmother would have put on the very bottom—the Christmas tree-shaped peanut butter cups.

“I only got a dozen of them,” Sassy warned.

“For the twelve days of Christmas?” The kettle shrilled, and Caylor put the still-wrapped candy down beside her cup and got up to fix a cup of instant decaf for her grandmother. “What flavor?” Caylor opened the cabinet above the coffee pot only she used in the mornings.

Sassy squinted and moved her glasses around. “Belgian chocolate toffee.”

Shaking her head at their similarities in taste, Caylor pulled down the canister of flavored powdered creamer and stirred two heaping spoonfuls into the double-strong instant coffee. Ever since she’d turned Sassy on to espresso-based lattes and cappuccinos, she’d insisted on having her coffee at home extra strong, extra creamy, extra sweet, and extra flavored.

Sassy took the purple mug with both hands, blew across the surface twice, and took a sip. “Ahh. . .hits the spot. I tried that soy latte today. I’ll stick with milk from now on.”

“Did y’all try somewhere new today?”

Sassy gave her an incredulous look. “Do you and your friends ever try somewhere new when you get together for coffee?”

“So, you went to the Frisky Berry down in Franklin.”

“They have the best toffee–chocolate chip cookies.”

“Sassy, you know you aren’t supposed to be overdoing it on the sugar.”

She raised one thin eyebrow. “Look who’s talking.”

Caylor stopped with her teeth half sunk into the chocolate-covered peanut butter tree. She finished the bite, let it saturate her mouth a moment, and swallowed. “Hey, now, I do this only

on rare occasions.”

“I know. You’ve been so disciplined about keeping away from it. I’m proud of you. How much weight have you lost?”

“About twenty pounds. I’m fitting back into all of my size fourteens now.” Though that had less to do with discipline and more to do with the fact that—between teaching, participation in the university’s drama productions, and trying to get her latest book finished—the only time she wasn’t running ninety-to-nothing to get her work finished was during the very few hours of sleep she got each night. Who had time to eat with a schedule like that? Of course, the healthier selections they’d started offering in the cafeteria at school helped considerably, too.

“Good for you. Now, what do you want me to make for you to take to Zarah’s Christmas party tomorrow night?”

“You don’t have to do that. I can pick something up at the grocery store on my way.”

As expected, Sassy looked thoroughly scandalized. Caylor hid her grin.

“No granddaughter of mine will go from this house taking food the likes of that.” She stood and opened all three pantry doors, then moved back to lean against the table beside Caylor so she could see the contents of all three cabinets at the same time.

Caylor turned in her chair. “I told her I’d bring dessert.”

“Excellent. Dessert’s my middle name. Write this down.”

Caylor finished off her confectionary tree and crossed the kitchen to pull the small magnetic white board off the side of the fridge. She pushed The Box back and set the white board on the table before resuming her seat.

Sassy mumbled to herself, pointing at things in the pantry. “Okay. Ready?”

“Ready.” Caylor hovered the dry-erase pen over the clean white surface.

“Corn syrup. Confectioners’ sugar. Dark brown sugar. Oleo. Peppermint extract. Chunky peanut butter. Bittersweet and semisweet chocolate. Butterscotch. Walnuts and pecans—”

“Sassy, there will only be twelve people there. We’re not feeding an army.”

“Quiet. I’ve got friends and parties to go to also, you know. Keep writing.”

Caylor chuckled and decreased the size of her handwriting to be able to fit the continual stream of ingredients onto the board. When Sassy lost her driver’s license shortly after Papa passed away, Caylor had agreed to move in and become her grandmother’s caretaker and primary source of transportation. It had been a difficult decision—Caylor so enjoyed sharing a house with her two best friends, Zarah Mitchell and Flannery McNeill. But in the five years since then, Caylor had come to depend on Sassy as much as Sassy depended on her.

Which was why Caylor had resigned herself to the idea she would never marry—at least, not for a very long time. If she did, who would take care of Sassy?

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Dylan Bradley picked at the dried blue paint on the large knuckle of his left hand. He hoped this wouldn’t take long—if the canvas dried too much before he could get back to it, the painting would be ruined.

“We’re happy you decided to move back to Nashville, to let us and your parents help you get back on your feet. But while you’re living in the guest house, there are some ground rules we wanted to cover.”

Though he currently sat at his grandparents’ kitchen table, the tense atmosphere created by being in the same room with a retired university president and a retired judge reminded him

forcibly of the meeting he'd had just over a week ago with the president of the art college where he taught. Used to teach. It was easy enough for him to think of this as a Christmas break just like every other Christmas break—except he was here in Nashville instead of enjoying the gala art scene in Philadelphia.

Rules, rules, rules. That was all anybody ever wanted to talk to him about. What good were rules when all they did was keep people from pursuing what made them happy?

Dylan feigned attention as his grandmother reviewed the “agreement” they expected him to sign and abide by in exchange for living rent-free in the converted carriage house behind their large Victorian home. Paying utilities. Blah, blah. Respect the historical integrity of the building. Blah, blah, blah. Find some kind of paying work. Blah, blah, blah, blah. No women spending the night.

Dylan's face burned. He'd never felt comfortable with the level to which his relationship with Rhonda had progressed—though it had been an eye-opening lesson on living outside of the rules; but he'd hoped his grandparents hadn't figured it out. In vain, obviously.

“And you are to attend church every Sunday. You can go to church with us, or you can find another church that you prefer.” Perty gazed expectantly over the rim of her fashionable, aqua-framed reading glasses at him.

He should've known—his parents had freaked out two years ago when he admitted to them he no longer attended church regularly. Why wouldn't he expect the same from his grandparents? “And if I choose to go somewhere else, how will you know?”

“Dylan, dear, we're not doing this to make you feel like a child.” Perty reached over and wrapped her small hand around his larger one. “We're hoping that by asking you to start attending church again, you'll regain some of the self-respect you've lost over the last couple of

years.”

The last couple of years? Ha. If his grandparents or parents ever learned what he'd really done to put himself through college and supplement his teaching income the first year or two, they would know he had no self-respect to rebuild.

“We would like for you, as an adult, to determine the best way to show us you're willing to abide by this agreement.” Gramps should have been wearing his black judge's robe, as Dylan could not imagine his voice had sounded much different fifteen or twenty years ago when he passed sentences in civil court cases.

“We also think getting involved in church will help you meet people your age who can help you settle in to your new life here more quickly,” Perty added.

And, no doubt, acts as good influences on him. “Okay.”

“Okay? As in okay to the entire agreement, or okay you understand this part of it?”

“Okay as in let's sign the agreement.” What was the point in arguing or trying to negotiate? He didn't have a job, he didn't want to cash in his 401(k), and just paying utilities, groceries, and gas would start dwindling his savings account pretty quickly.

As instructed by Gramps, Dylan initialed and dated the bottom corner of each page of both copies of the agreement before signing and dating the last page of both beside their signatures. Perty collated the pages, stapled each copy, and handed one to Dylan.

What, no notary public? No case number and surety just in case he broke the agreement?

All right. This over-the-top cynicism was starting to get to him. He put down the pen and flexed his left hand against a sensation of his skin's being too tight and not stretching correctly. He looked down. Blue. He needed to get back to his painting.

“Is that everything?” Dylan drummed his thumb against his thigh.

Gramps raised his eyebrows, but before he could speak, Perty reached over and squeezed his arm.

“I suppose,” Perty said, her blue eyes twinkling, “it would be too much to ask you to cut your hair?”

Dylan reached up and touched the bush of curls held back from his face with an elastic band around the crown of his head. He’d started growing it out when Rhonda mentioned how much better she thought certain male celebrities looked with long hair.

“Don’t worry. We don’t want to put too many unreasonable demands on you.” Perty handed him his copy of the agreement. “Oh, but that reminds me, if you have your curriculum vitae ready, I can pass it along to Sassy Evans’s granddaughter who teaches at James Robertson University. Caylor says they’re always looking for adjuncts, especially in the Art division.”

Perty’s suggestion surprised him. As an alumna, former professor, and the first female ever to become president of JRU, Perty could have simply made a phone call to one of her many contacts at the college and ensured Dylan the choice of any course he wished to teach.

“Maybe I should take it out myself tomorrow.” Last thing he wanted was to have everyone at the college believing he’d gotten the job simply because of his grandmother’s connection to the school. He was tired of taking handouts.

Perty reached around to the kitchen breakfast bar behind her and grabbed a notepad from one of the open shelves below. She scrawled something and handed the top sheet to Dylan. “This is Caylor’s office number. Give her a call, and I’m sure she’d be happy to give you a tour of the campus and introduce you around.”

*I’m not a child, Perty. I can figure out how to get around a college campus on my own, thanks.* He didn’t even want to know why his grandmother had this woman’s office phone

number memorized. He tucked the note into his shirt pocket—where he'd probably forget about it until his next load of laundry came out with little bits of paper all over it.

He looked at them with raised brows. He shouldn't have to ask his question again. *I've eaten all my Brussels sprouts. May I please be dismissed?* Actually, he liked Brussels sprouts, especially the way they made them at the little German restaurant and biergarten near the art school. Oh, how he would miss hanging out there with his graduate students after studio on Thursday and Friday evenings.

“If you don't have any questions for us,” Perty looked at Gramps then back at Dylan, “you can go do whatever it is that we took you from earlier. And you know you're welcome to join us for lunch at noon.”

He graced them with a single nod of his head and left the table—only to turn back after two steps and snatch his copy of the living arrangement agreement to take with him. If he was going to have to depend on his grandparents' charity for his temporary living arrangements until he could figure out where he wanted to go from here, at least he had the carriage house—set back at least fifty feet from the museum-like Victorian he'd always hated visiting as a child, from being told not to touch anything. Back then, the upstairs of the carriage house—now a two-car garage plus workroom—had been nothing more than a big, open space where he and his younger brothers could run around to their hearts' content in bad weather. Now it housed an apartment any of those hoity-toity patrons of the art school would have been jealous of. Almost nine hundred square feet, granite and stainless kitchen, wood floors throughout, and big, airy rooms. An apartment like this in Philly would have been far out of his price range. Thus his primary reason for ignoring his conscience and moving in with Rhonda.

He entered the outbuilding through the side door. He supposed he didn't mind having his

grandparents' Mercedes and Lexus as his downstairs neighbors. He crossed the garage and stepped up into the workroom.

The canvas on the easel taunted him, as if it knew what he'd just been though.

Blue. Gray. Green. No. All wrong.

He grabbed the tubes of lemon yellow and cadmium red, streaked them together on his palette, and slashed yellow-orange-red across the boring fades of blues and grays. He stepped back, dipped into the puddle of swirled brightness, and went a little Jackson Pollock on the canvas, enjoying the stark droplets of brightness against the somber background as he flicked and flung his brush to splatter and drip the paint onto the image.

Of course, the image happening on the canvas bore absolutely no resemblance to the image he'd carried around in his head all day. But he'd promised himself he'd never paint anything like that ever again. For now, he'd stick with the abstract, ambivalent dreck that had garnered him so much praise at the three gallery showings he'd had in Philadelphia over the past five years. *Three* gallery showings in *Philadelphia*. Friends from college had yet to land *one* showing anywhere.

He mashed the brush into the black paint and daubed it in lopsided polka dots across the surface, leaving plenty of texture. Rhonda had always liked the texture he created in his paintings. *Dimensionality*, she'd called it.

Child's finger-painting, he'd thought it looked like. Not something he would be adding to his portfolio.

Speaking of his portfolio. . .

He grabbed the rag hanging from the top of the easel and wiped his hands while crossing to the super giant economy size worktable that filled the end of the room. Finished canvases of

all shapes and sizes sat seven or eight deep leaning up against the wall. He hadn't updated his portfolio since before the faculty art show back in October. He hadn't painted anything he liked since then, but he hadn't painted anything he'd liked in the last two years, so what did that matter? Rhonda said—

He supposed it didn't really matter anymore what his former department head and secret partner—she'd hated the term *girlfriend*—had said about his work. She'd been the one to make him completely change his style after hiring him as a full-time associate professor of art.

After flipping through most of the couple dozen canvases, he felt like throwing them all away instead of taking digital pictures of them to print and add to his portfolio.

He crouched down and pulled out one of the big cardboard boxes from under the table, the one with the address of his apartment in Brooklyn written in black magic marker across the face of it. Ah, the Brooklyn years. The years when painting and drawing actually made him happy—and money. The years when art—doing, learning, and teaching it—had been about his own expression of ideas, thoughts, innovation, and creativity, not about trying to bamboozle some wealthy fat-cat in Philadelphia into buying one of his paintings because it was a *quote* conversation piece. *Unquote*. Or to give some bored socialite high on prescription drugs the feeling that she had one-upped her rich snotty friends by buying a one-of-a-kind, original, unique, one and only, exclusive, one-off work by somebody who actually looked like an artist should look: curly black hair stylishly unkempt, three days' worth of stubble, an earring, a large silver signet ring on the middle finger of his left hand, and a couple of tattoos. At least Rhonda had not put up too much of a fight over his own designs for the tattoos she insisted he get.

He pulled his watch out of his pocket. Not quite eleven o'clock in the morning. If he got cleaned up now, he could make it out to the college campus before noon. He was pretty sure this

was the week before finals, so most of the professors and deans should still be on campus, even on a Friday.

And just in case his grandmother asked, he would go ahead and pop his head into the friend's granddaughter's office, just so he wouldn't have to lie about meeting her.

It wasn't like he'd ever have to see her again.