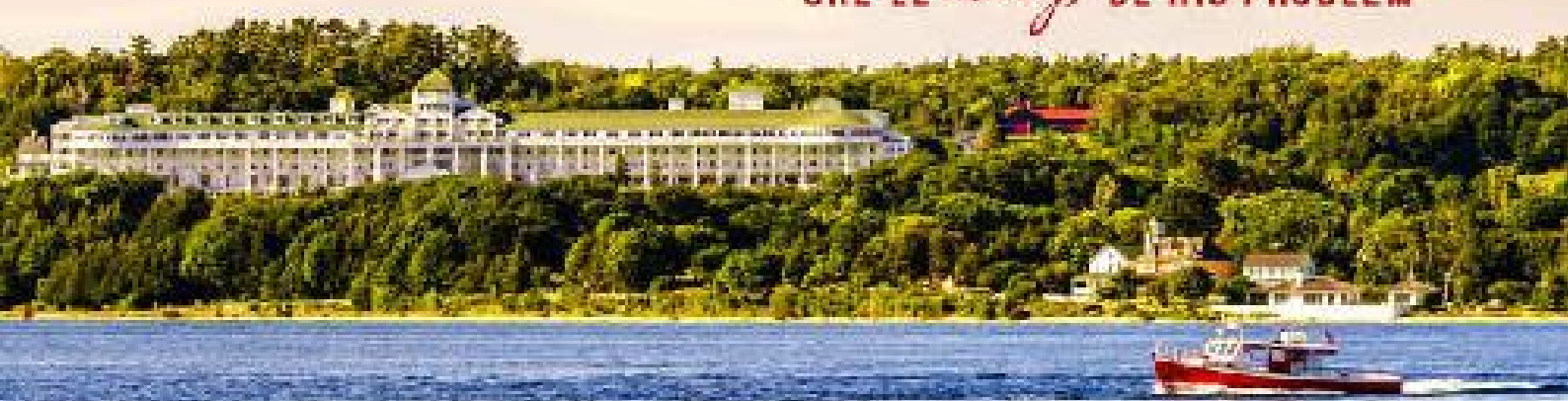


*Forever*  
**NEVER**

SHE'LL *always* BE HIS PROBLEM



LUCY  
SCORE

# **FOREVER NEVER**

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# LUCY SCORE

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Brick Callan had no idea that he was one grocery aisle away from his worst nightmare.

Had he bothered straightening to his full six feet four inches and looked up from the canned goods, he would have caught that telltale flash of red. The color of forest fires and the temptations of hell.

Instead, he weighed the options between diced tomatoes with or without green peppers while shopkeeper Bill House complained to him.

“I’m telling you, Brick. That Rathbun kid spent half the afternoon gunning his snowmobile down Market Street like a maniac,” Bill hissed, crossing his skinny arms over his chest.

Brick tucked the tomatoes with peppers into the cart next to a bag of yellow onions, two cartons of beef broth, and the pack of batteries.

“Kid scared the hell out of the horses on delivery yesterday,” Bill continued. “*And* he came this close to side-swiping Mulvaney’s new Arctic Cat last week. You know we’d never hear the end of that.”

Brick bit back a sigh. Just once it would be nice to do his shopping without small talk. “I’ll talk to him,” he promised. He happened to know a thing or two about the dumb shit boys did to impress teenage girls.

Bill blew out a sigh and adjusted the Doud’s Market ski cap he used to keep his bald head warm from November through April. “Appreciate it, Brick.”

There was a delicate balance to their little island community, and Brick’s job was to help maintain that balance even in the dead of the Michigan winter when only the most hardy of residents remained on Mackinac. It was the same reason he’d promised Mrs. Sopp he’d change the batteries in the smoke detectors of her rental when she’d called from the back nine of a golf course in Florida.

The door to Doud's opened with a jangle of the bell.

Mira Rathbun—mother of said “Rathbun kid”—blew into the little store with a bone-chilling lake wind. Bill clammed up, looking as if he'd swallowed his tongue. The man didn't mind tattling to the off-duty cops on his neighbors, but he was more comfortable doing so behind their backs.

“Shut the damn door!” The order came from the cashier and two customers closest to the entrance.

When the last full ferry of tourists left Mackinac Island back in October, it also took the polite courtesy required for a summer resort with it. The town's 500-ish year-round residents hunkered down for another bone-chilling offseason in the middle of Lake Huron with a charming surliness.

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry,” Mira said, impatiently brushing a layer of powder off her bright orange snow suit. The woman was a mile-a-minute whirlwind, which stressed Brick out. It was unfortunate for the community that she'd been the one to teach Travis to drive his third-hand snowmobile.

This was Brick's fourteenth winter on the island. He perversely looked forward to the frigid temperatures and the seasonal closures of most of the businesses. Winter was quiet. Low-key. Predictable.

Bill peered into Brick's cart, eyebrows disappearing under the edge of his hat. “Beef stew again? Don't you know any other recipes? I bet there's a single gal or two on the island who wouldn't mind cooking up a nice pastry for ya.”

“I like beef stew.” He also liked not being forced to be social while eating it.

Brick made a batch of beef stew every week and ate it for four or five days straight because it was easy and familiar. As for the social aspect, he'd earned his solitary winters and wasn't inclined to set a second place at the table.

“Didja hear the news?” Mira demanded, bustling over and crowbarring herself into the conversation.

Brick was skeptical. News didn't happen on Mackinac in the winter. Which meant this was gossip. Something he preferred to avoid despite the fact that both his jobs constantly put him on the receiving end of it.

“This have to do with the plane that came in late last night?” Bill asked, temporarily forgetting his problem with Mira's kid's accelerator hand.

Her eyes sparkled with the rare nugget of novelty in the middle of a season when every day looked a hell of a lot like the day before. Brick had a sudden desire to walk right out into the cold and avoid whatever bomb



Mira was about to drop. Instinct told him something bad was about to happen, and he'd left his gun at home.

"Now, keep this under your hats because rumor has it her family doesn't know yet," she said, leaning in and dropping her voice to a whisper.

Brick had a very bad feeling about this.

"Whose family?" Bill asked, looking bewildered. "I'm not following."

"I'm drawing it out for effect. Jeez. This is the longest conversation I've had with someone I didn't marry or give birth to in three months. Let me have this," she insisted.

Brick nudged his cart forward, hoping to escape the news. But Mira grabbed on tight, stalling his progress. "Remi Ford!" she announced.

His knuckles went white on the handle.

*Remington Honeysuckle Ford.*

Remi Honey to family. Trouble to him. *Hell.*

"Well, I'll be damned," Bill crowed. "What's she doing back here in the dead of winter without telling her folks?"

Their hushed voices melded beneath the steady hum in his ears. Brick did his best to keep his face expressionless while his insides detonated. The exit was only twenty feet away, but his feet rooted to the floor, knees locked. Over the deafening thump of his heart, he stared at Mira's mouth while she spilled the dirt.

She couldn't be here. Not without a heads-up.

It took him weeks to prepare mentally, to gird himself before being forced to exchange casual greetings across the dinner table.

"Psst!" The cashier, Bill's nephew, waved his arms from behind the register and silently pointed to the next aisle. Brick's stomach dropped into his boots.

*No. This was definitely not happening.*

Mira and Bill made a mad dash for the cereal aisle. Brick charged in the opposite direction toward the cashier, deciding now was as good a time as any to escape before—

His cart T-boned another just as it peeked around the corner. The momentum took both carts into a tower of oatmeal boxes, sending them toppling.

*Fuck.* He knew it before he looked up from the vanilla almond and maple bacon massacre on the floor.

And there she was. All five feet two inches of mischievous pixie. She wore her red hair in a long, loose braid over one shoulder of her magenta parka. Ear buds peeked out from the yellow wool cap crammed on her

head. Her eyes were the color of the green antique glass his grandmother had once collected. Her mouth was full and wide, and when she turned that smile on a man, he couldn't help but feel just a little dazzled...at least until he got to know her. The smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks stood out against the ivory of her skin.

She looked different. Pale, tired, almost fragile. The energy that usually crackled off her, raining down like sparks on her unsuspecting victims, was only a dull buzz. As someone who'd spent half a lifetime cataloging everything there was to know about Remi, Brick knew something was wrong.

Their gazes held for one long beat. He couldn't decide if he should say hello or if he could get away with running for his life. Before he could choose, she abandoned her cart and walked straight into him.

Instinct had him wrapping his arms around her even though it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. She slid her hands under his coat and melted into him. Her scent was still agitating. It always reminded him of a meadow...right after a lightning strike. Without thinking, he rested his chin on the top of her head, his beard scraping over the soft knit of her hat. Something dug into his side, but before he could figure it out, she distracted him by letting out a long, slow breath, and some tension left her. This was not the Remi he knew. That girl would have teased him with a loud, smacking kiss on the mouth just to piss him off before whirling away again to wreak havoc.

He pushed her back, holding on to her upper arms. "What's wrong?" he demanded, keeping his voice low.

"Well, if it isn't little Remi Ford!" Bill declared as he skidded to a stop, Mira on his heels.

"What are you doing home in February?" Mira asked.

Remi slipped out of his grasp and plucked the ear buds from her ears. The smile she sent them wasn't up to her usual wattage, but he was the only one who noticed. "What can I say? I missed the winters here," she said brightly.

That raspy voice was so familiar even after all this time it almost hurt.

Bill hooted. "Now, that's a dirty lie!"

Mira rushed in to give the prodigal a hug. "Are you surprising your parents?" she asked. "I know they missed you at Christmas this year."

Remi avoided looking directly at Brick when she answered. "I felt bad about missing the holidays with them and thought I'd make up for it now with a nice, long visit."

*She was lying.* He was sure of it. Whatever had put those shadows

under her eyes wasn't guilt over a missed holiday.

"You're such a good daughter. How's big city living?" Mira pressed. The woman would drain Remi of every detail if she let her. Then it would be served up to other islanders over school pick-ups and to-go orders.

"It's...good," Remi said.

Brick's eyes narrowed on the hesitation.

"Quick! What's my aura color?" Bill asked.

Remi's cheeks pinked up. "You're looking a nice bright green today just like always," she told him.

There were a lot of things that made Remi different from the average girl. Synesthesia was one of them.

The story went that little Remi Ford caused a fuss in kindergarten when she demanded a pink crayon to write her Es because everyone knew Es were pink. It took a few years, but her parents finally got an answer from a specialist. Their daughter's brain created extra connections, tying colors to things like letters, words, people.

But the thing he found most fascinating was the fact that she could see music. Back in the day, before things got complicated, he used to quiz her about the colors she saw for songs.

"Are you still at the museum?" Mira asked.

"Actually, I'm painting full time now," she said.

*That was news.* He was surprised her parents hadn't mentioned it.

Brick glanced into her cart and spotted three boxes of Marshmallow Munchies cereal, coffee, sugary creamer, and a package of honey buns. Not a protein or a vegetable in sight. The woman was stress eating.

"Houses or paintings?" Bill teased.

"Mostly just paintings," Remi said with a wink. "But I'd paint a house for you, Bill."

The man turned a shade of scarlet Brick had never seen. Such was the power of Remi's charm.

She tucked a stray hair behind her ear, an old nervous habit, and that's when he caught a glimpse of pale orange plaster between her thumb and index finger. Her right arm was in a cast.

Brick's gut clenched as questions revolved through his mind.

It wasn't any of his business. And he knew what would happen if he let himself get curious. Remi Ford was no longer his concern.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Mira asked. "Did you bring a boyfriend for Valentine's Day?"

Brick clenched his jaw. "Excuse me," he said, gripping the handle of his cart. "I've got to get going. Welcome home, Remi."

“Thanks. It was nice to see you, Brick,” she said with a sad little smile.

He gave her a tight nod. With heroic effort, he walked instead of ran to the checkout, leaving her, the rest of the items on his grocery list, and his unanswered questions behind.

Well, that hadn't gone horribly, Remi decided, as she looped her bags over her good arm and stepped back out into the biting morning cold.

After a long, sleepless night, she'd survived an unexpected encounter with Brick. And accidentally hugged him in a way that screamed *woman in distress*. But she'd at least managed to swear Bill, Mira, and the rest of the store's occupants to secrecy until she surprised her parents.

Which gave her about an hour before her mom got a call from someone spilling the news.

An hour to figure out her official story and wipe the fatigue from her face.

An hour to try calling the hospital again.

She walked far enough so that she was past the grocery store's windows before dumping the bags on the sidewalk. Using her teeth to yank off her glove, she redialed.

"Northwestern Memorial Hospital, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, I'm calling to get an update on a patient's condition," Remi said.

"Patient's name?" The voice on the other end sounded like there were a lot of other things she'd like to be doing besides answering phones, but at least it was a different operator than yesterday.

"Camille Vorhees."

"Your name?"

Remi hesitated. "I'm...her sister."

"Name?"

*Fuckity fuck fuck.* "Alessandra?"

"You're not on the list."

"It's because I'm the black sheep of the family," she tried.

“You’re not on the list. According to HIPAA—”

“Yeah. Thanks. I got it.” Remi disconnected the call and kicked at the support column holding up the porch roof of the next building. “Damn it,” she muttered.

“Remi.”

She jumped clear out of her skin. That voice. That fucking rough, low, gravelly voice that still haunted her dreams.

“Jesus, Brick!” He was crossing the street, coming toward her like the tide. Inevitable. Unapologetic.

It was annoying that her heart still sang whenever she saw him. But she couldn’t really fault its taste considering Brick Callan was one giant hunk of man. Her appreciation for him had started probably somewhere around the broad shoulders and wide expanse of chest. But it hadn’t taken long for her to realize those serious blue eyes, now with faint crinkles at the corners, had hypnotic, panty-melting superpowers.

The cowboy hat he stubbornly wore despite the much warmer alternatives in headwear added to the rugged appeal. Especially when mixed with his heavy winter coat and the jeans that showed off muscled thighs.

The beard was new and glorious. The intensity was the same and annoying. The deep blue aura pulsed around him. *Steady. Dependable. Strong.*

Twelve years ago, he’d torn her heart in two. Seven years after that, he’d shattered it into pieces. She’d yet to forgive either of them for it. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t still appreciate him being the poster child for testosterone.

She bent to pick up her bags, but he beat her to it, adding her groceries to the ones he already carried. He smelled like leather and sawdust and horses.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m perfectly capable of carrying my own groceries.”

“What happened to your arm?” He asked the question briskly like it annoyed him to want an answer.

*Of course he’d noticed.* Brick Callan didn’t miss a goddamn thing, except for the most obvious one in the world.

“It’s nothing,” she said, reaching for the bags. He lifted them over her head in what she determined to be an unnecessary—and hot—display of strength. “A small break.”

“How did it happen?” The familiar, gravel edge of his tone settled in her belly and pooled there like warm honey.

He cared. Maybe not in the way a lovesick teenager had once hoped he would. But to the wounded thirty-year-old, it soothed.

“Car accident,” she said. “Seriously. Give me my groceries.”

“Where? Were you driving? Was anyone else hurt?”

She faced him on the sidewalk as the lake wind did its best to slip icy fingers beneath her layers. “No offense, but Chicago is out of your jurisdiction, Sergeant. And my life is none of your business. Remember?”

He laid one of those long, broody looks on her, the meaning of which she’d never decoded.

A vibration from her pocket startled her. Forgetting the man mountain in front of her, she dug frantically for her phone.

*Pain in My Ass.*

*Shit.* The hope that had bloomed in her chest disintegrated. She hit ignore like she had on his last four calls and stuffed the phone back into her pocket. Brick was frowning at her now. At least some things never changed.

“Where are you staying?” he asked, finally. “I’ll walk you.”

It wasn’t an offer. He was too much of a gentleman to let her play lame pack mule for a few blocks in hypothermia weather, and no matter how big of a fuss she made, he’d insist.

“Red Gate,” she said.

Brick looked down at his boots, then off into the distance where the sky kissed the water. He blew out a puff of breath.

“Oh, don’t go all tortured cowboy over it,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like we’re gonna be running into each other all over the place.”

Red Gate Cottage was perched on the southern tip of the island, pinned right up against the water. It also just happened to be directly across the street from Brick’s house. She still wasn’t sure if that had been a factor in her decision.

“You’re the reason Mrs. Sopp has me changing the batteries in the smoke detectors?”

“No reason to be an ass about it. Gimmie the batteries, and I’ll do it myself.”

“Yeah? So you can fall off a chair and break your other arm?” He started down the sidewalk, shaking his head and muttering uncomplimentary phrases.

She jogged to catch up as he strode past inns and souvenir shops shuttered for the season. “Does this crabby cowboy routine actually charm any girl out of her thermal underwear?” she asked.

“Shut up, Remi.”

Feeling marginally more cheerful now that she'd annoyed him, she fell into step and stuffed her hands into her pockets. It was a sunny, ten-degree morning. The light coating of snow on the road was groomed by snowmobiles, the island's primary mode of transportation for the season. Snowmobiles, horses, and feet were a resident's options for traversing the four miles of hilly, forested island.

To some folks, Mackinac Island was a novelty. An entire island without cars? A community with a shelf-life of about four months before the interminable, brutal winter set in?

But to Remi, it was home. And home meant healing.

They made the rest of the walk in silence. She hurried ahead of him to unlock the gate, painted a brash, lipstick red. Tall hedgerows protected the white brick cottage from prying eyes on the sidewalk, but the rambling two-story Victorian across the street could look right over it.

"You painted," she said as Brick brushed past her with the groceries. The house had once belonged to his grandparents, who had opened their home to two troubled grandsons. Back then, it had been white on white on white. Now, the cedar shakes and board and batten sported a deep navy. The wide front porch centered on a red front door, a color combination Remi approved. He'd kept the low picket fence along the sidewalk a pearly white.

With the snowy front yard and low-growing evergreens, it was picture perfect.

He grunted—because Brick had a daily word allowance of about fifty—and headed around the side of the cottage to the front door. Rather than a porch, Red Gate had a low cedar platform. In the summer, there was a table and chairs with an umbrella for sitting and appreciating the unbeatable view. In the winter, the deck held neat stacks of wood for the small fireplace in the bedroom.

Remi unlocked the door and barely suppressed an eye-roll when the mountain of a man insisted she go in first. Grumpy chivalry held a limited charm.

The cottage, on the other hand, was overflowing with it.

Agnes Sopp—Mackinac's real estate mogul—had redone it with wide plank pine floors and creamy stucco walls. In the living room, an off-white sofa with deep cushions faced the gas fireplace. The kitchen was tiny, with white cabinets and glossy butcher block. But a small, stainless steel island on wheels added storage and counter space. The windows on the front wall had all been replaced to make the most of the view.

And what a view it was.



The inky, gray waters of Lake Huron stretched out to infinity in front of the cottage, constant and dependable. Just like the man prowling her space. He stalked into the kitchen, taking up all of the space with his cowboy shoulders and grumpy competence.

And *that*, she realized as she shed her boots and coat, was why she'd come back. To be just close enough to feel safe again. Despite his protestations, Brick Callan cared about her. There was something in his spirit that demanded that all the people he cared about be safe. She envisioned him running around like a cattle dog, nipping at the heels of the people of Mackinac, keeping them all from harm's way.

She let out a sigh. Nothing good ever came from mooning over the ungettable man. Besides, she had bigger, more dangerous problems on her hands.

He produced a blister pack of batteries from one of the bags. She watched as he efficiently popped the cover on the first smoke detector without needing a chair or stepladder and wished she could curl up on the couch and sleep while he was here. While she was safe.

She climbed into one of the blue velvet swivel armchairs in front of the window. Turning her back to the lake, she pulled her knees up to her chin and watched him grudgingly take care of her.

Covers clipped back into place, he pitched the packaging and old batteries into the trash bin under the sink.

"Do you do a lot of maintenance for Agnes?" Remi asked.

He turned to look at her, and when those long legs of his ate up the space between them, she scooted back in the chair. She didn't know what she'd expected him to do, but it certainly wasn't to take her right hand gently in his and push up the sleeve of her oversized sweater.

She had hugged, kissed, poked, prodded, and leaned into him about a thousand times over the years. There was a spark of something special every time they touched. It fascinated her. Comforted her. Confounded her. But the very thing that attracted her to Brick seemed to repel him from her. She could count on one hand the number of times the man had voluntarily touched her first.

"How the hell did you do this?" he demanded. His voice was stern, but the way he held her hand as he examined the plaster was almost tender.

"It wasn't *my* fault," she insisted, not sure if that was indeed the truth.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, it feels great. Of *course* it hurts. It's a broken arm," she snapped.

"How did it happen?" he demanded grimly.

She tensed, unable to control the visceral reaction to the memories.

*Blindingly bright lights. Metal collapsing in on itself. Falling into the dark.*

“I told you. It was a car accident,” she said, trying to pull her arm away. But he held her arm carefully, firmly in his grip as his fingers explored the tangerine plaster of her cast.

Those blue eyes focused on her as if they were peeling back the layers.

“What happened?” he asked again. His voice was rough and low, but his touch warm. That blue, pulsing light that surrounded him seemed to envelop her, too.

She was horrified when her eyes filled with tears.

This time, she was able to yank her arm free and turned away to face the windows and the water beyond. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You always want to talk about everything.”

“Not anymore,” she murmured.

“How much does it hurt?” he rasped, sounding as if he were in some pain himself.

She rested her cheek on her knee and willed the tears away. “Not so much anymore.”

“You do remember that I can tell when you’re lying,” he said, spinning her chair around and forcing her to look at him. She saw storms in his eyes. More gray than blue now. She wondered what he might see in hers.

Would he look past the bravado and see what lurked beneath the surface? The thing that hadn’t existed before. The thing that had changed everything.

“That was a long time ago,” she reminded him quietly. “We’re both different people now.”

He rose, straightening those mile-long legs of his and returned to the kitchen. “You’re gonna need to stock up on some essentials,” he observed as he loaded up his bags. He was leaving. She was relieved and sad. As much as he annoyed her, his presence chased away the shadows. And that pissed her off.

“I’ll get around to it,” she told him, quickly wiping a tear away when he wasn’t looking.

Groceries collected, he paused and gave her another once-over. “You look tired. You should rest.”

“Good-bye, Brick,” she said pointedly. He headed toward the door, and she waited until he’d opened it. “I like your beard,” she called after him.

With a clench of his jaw and one last smoldering look, he was gone.

“*R*emi Honey?” Not much surprised Chief Darlene Ford. Born and raised on Mackinac, she’d served the island as a cop for nearly thirty years. But finding her youngest daughter—who was supposed to be working and living in Chicago—standing on the front porch seemed to be enough to put a hitch in her step.

“Surprise!” Remi wrapped her mom in a too-tight hug and held on for dear life. The name badge clipped to the front of Darlene’s offseason uniform sweatshirt bit into Remi’s shoulder. She may have inherited the woman’s green eyes, but she hadn’t gotten any of the extra height.

“Well, holy hell!” Darlene breathed, squeezing her hard. “Why didn’t you call and tell me you were coming? I could have gotten your room ready. How are you? Are you taking your prescriptions? Is something wrong? How’s your painting going? Have you sold any?”

The motherly interrogation made Remi laugh as she released her. “I wanted to surprise you and Dad. I don’t need my room because I talked Agnes Sopp into renting me a place. And everything else is just fine.”

“Well, I’m just tickled!” Still gripping her shoulders, Darlene looked over her shoulder and bellowed. “Gil! Get your ass down here.”

“What’s wrong? It’s too cold for spiders,” Gilbert Ford called back from the second floor.

“It’s not a spider,” Darlene shouted.

Darlene Ford had been born fearless...except when it came to spiders. It was the one area in which she allowed her mild-mannered, English-teaching husband to ride to her rescue without complaint.

“Well, come on inside before we heat the whole neighborhood.” She ushered Remi across the threshold into the house she’d spent her teenage years escaping.

Small details were different. The rug under her feet was new. There was a sturdy desk in the cluttered study on the left. The old one, a rickety-ass card table, had finally collapsed last year under the weight of high school essays and half-empty coffee mugs. Across the hall, the living room boasted a bigger, newer TV.

But it still smelled like home. Coffee and furniture polish.

Her landscape of Mackinac's shoreline, one of her first paintings, still hung in the hallway that led to a sunny kitchen and dining room. And her parents still yelled from room to room.

"Remi Honey!" Gilbert Ford was one inch taller than his wife and a little less athletic. His dark red hair was always slightly mussed, clothes just a little mismatched, but he had a way of really listening to people that made them forget all about his disheveled appearance.

In his excitement, he missed the last step and nearly bowled both women over at the foot of the stairs. He flashed a sheepish grin before wrapping Remi up in a tight hug.

She closed her eyes and let herself be loved. "Hi, Dad."

"What a wonderful surprise," he said, swaying them side to side. Gilbert was an expert-level hugger and just the right medicine for what ailed his daughter at the moment.

How was it possible, Remi wondered, to be homesick while standing in her childhood home wrapped in the arms of the first man to ever love her?

"You didn't know either?" Darlene asked her husband, shooting him a calculating look.

He shook his head, releasing Remi. "I had no idea," he insisted, giving her hands a squeeze. "Didn't you?"

Her parents were notoriously busy and often forgot to relay messages of varying importance to each other.

"I didn't tell anyone I was coming home. I wanted to surprise you both," she assured them.

Gilbert's smile faded a bit, and his eyes narrowed behind the tortoiseshell glasses he'd been wearing for twenty years. "What's this?" He gave Remi's wrist a gentle squeeze.

"Oh, that. That's a cast," Remi said.

"A cast? As in you broke your arm?" Darlene barked.

"I was in a little fender bender. It's just a baby break. No big deal."

Her dad's brow furrowed. "Can you paint with the cast, sweetie?"

"I haven't really tried yet."

So many little white lies, and she hadn't even made it past the foyer. It