

# Chapter 1

“WOULD IT KILL YOU TO TAKE a day off, Daisy?” Paul asked over the phone.

“Yes,” I said, glad he couldn’t see my smile so the game would play out a little longer. “It just might.”

Paul laughed, a laugh that was too high-pitched for a man of forty-four. When we first started dating six years ago, I’d found it annoying and knew I would never be able to marry a man who laughed like a teenage girl. Somewhere between that first date and a marriage proposal—complete with swans, if you can believe it—I came to love that laugh and a hundred other things that made Paul a husband-extraordinaire.

“You know I can’t take time off at the end of the month—too many policy renewals,” I said.

Commercial insurance policies tend to renew annually on the first day of the month, meaning that my clients bombard me with questions a week before they’re supposed to re-up for another year, even though I’ve been reminding them for the last sixty days.

“The thirtieth is a Saturday,” Paul said. “We can leave Friday afternoon after you finish your renewals and you can take Monday off. It won’t set you back too far. Come on,” he prodded. “You know you want to.”

“You are so bad for me,” I said, lowering my voice seductively. Meanwhile I flipped forward through my planner almost a month to check the dates for this romantic escapade. I had a ten o’clock meeting on Monday, November first, but I was pretty sure I could reschedule it. My hopes were rising as I flipped back a page to make sure I’d properly evaluated the weekend.

“Shoot,” I said, scowling at October thirty-first. “Sunday is Halloween.” It was part of the unspoken code of parenting ethics that you had to be around for any and all holidays—even pointless ones I swore were instituted by the American Dental Association and Mars Candy, Inc., as a means of job security. My next thought, however, surprised me: *Did* I have to be there? Stormy was in her final year of high school and with ten years between her and her older sister, December—who was about to make me a grandma at the age of forty-six—I’d been doing the Halloween thing for a very long time. Couldn’t I take one off?

“Maybe Stormy could stay with Jared,” I said, feeling my excitement build at the thought of a weekend away. Stormy didn’t spend many weekends with her dad since she had things going on with her friends most of the time, but Jared *was* there. It was perhaps the only perk of having my ex-husband live just half an hour away.

“Your call, Mama,” Paul said.

I scowled. He knew I hated it when he called me that. It always made me defensive of the many things I was, motherhood being only one of them. Paul, on the other hand, claimed to find my maternal aspects sexy, and I took that at face value. His fifteen-year-old daughter, Mason, lived in San Diego and found it hard to come up on the weekends now that she was in high school. She came for a couple of weeks each summer and on alternating holidays, but I knew Paul missed her.

I bit my lip and stared at the page in my planner. "I'll talk to Stormy about it," I said, hoping it would be an argument I could win. I flipped back to "Today" in my planner and wrote a note to myself.

*Stormy-Halloween w/Jared?*

Then I leaned my elbow on my desk and rested my head in my hand as I continued the sweet talk with my sweetie. "So where are you taking me, Romeo?"

"It's a surprise," Romeo said.

"Not even a hint?" I pushed. It was Paul's year to plan our anniversary celebration, and I felt a thrill run through me at the possibilities. Say what you will about second marriages, but so far mine had been a wonderful ride. Maybe it was because both of us wanted to make sure this one worked, or maybe we were both grown-ups now and knew how to make better choices in a mate, or maybe we had a better idea of our future and could plan it out exactly as we wanted it to be. Whatever the reason, Paul was the sugar in my coffee, the tread on my tire, or, as he liked to say every time he brought me flowers, the Shasta to my Daisy.

"I'll give you a clue: bring your bikini."

"Nice one," I said, narrowing my eyes. Bikinis don't come in a size fourteen, but I had a very flattering one-piece with control panels in all the right places. "I don't know why I put up with you sometimes."

"Because I pay the mortgage," Paul said.

It was an offhand comment, but it pinged in my chest and I responded without thinking about it. "Careful, sailor, or you're on the next boat out of here."

That fell even flatter, and we both went quiet, having sufficiently stepped on one another's toes rather harshly. We could banter and tease

all we wanted, but Paul's wife had left him without warning ten years ago, so jokes about me leaving were never funny. I wondered why I'd said it. But his comments implying that I couldn't take care of myself were equally difficult for me to take in stride. Did I say second marriages were *perfect*?

I cleared my throat. "Well, I'd better go. But the weekend sounds like fun. I'll talk to Stormy about it tonight and then give Jared a call. I'm sure it'll be a go, though; he totally owes me for Labor Day." He'd had to cancel that weekend with Stormy. He said he had a last-minute business trip, but I suspected he'd taken his newest girlfriend to New York for the opening of a Broadway play he'd told Stormy about the week before. Jared had been a theater major in college; it was probably how he'd tricked me into marrying him—he acted the part of faithful suitor. What a joke.

"Right," Paul said, also trying to recover from the awkward moment. "She's got that Shakespeare thing at school tonight, right?"

I groaned. "That's right," I said, looking at my planner again. I hadn't written it in. Instead, I had a list of errands I was hoping to do on the way home: Stop by the hair salon to pick up another bottle of my favorite shampoo—Stormy had left the other bottle at the pool on Saturday—swing by the library for a new novel, and then hit the grocery store for some more Lean Cuisines; I had brought my last one to work today for lunch. "Um, is there any way you could go solo so I can run some errands?"

"But Jared's going, right?"

"I think so," I said.

"Daisy."

The reprimand in his voice caused me to let out my breath in a huff. Paul and Jared did okay together, but Paul was always anxious

about seeming as though he was overstepping his boundaries as step-dad when dad-dad was around.

“Okay, okay. Don’t worry about it.” I tried not to sound as annoyed as I felt. After working all day I just wanted to run my errands and go home, not sit through a high school drama performance where my daughter probably had three lines. “I’ll try to leave a little early and get my stuff done before it starts.”

*My stuff*, I thought after I hung up and looked at my list again, a familiar frustration rising in my chest. I yearned for *my* stuff, *my* time, *my* schedule. After so many years of putting *me* after *their* stuff, *their* time, *their* schedules, my patience was wearing thin. Of course, Paul was different. He was a grown man and he was wonderful about giving me my space. My girls? Not so much. I was their mother; I was supposed to put them first, but that didn’t mean I didn’t long to just do my own thing. I’d been so young when I first became a mother—barely seventeen—and I felt like I’d been trying to catch up with the role ever since. Now the end was in sight. If it made me a bad mom to look forward to being done with this phase of my life, well, so be it. I’d given so much for so long.

I pushed my planner to the side of my desk and opened up my e-mail folder; my break was officially over. I glanced at the clock—it was almost two. If I kept a steady pace, I should be able to leave the office by four thirty. That would give me time to get the shampoo and the microwave meals. I could go to the library tomorrow.

*Eight more months*, I reminded myself. That’s how much longer I had before Stormy graduated from high school. She was already planning to live with Jared for the summer and then go to California State—applications were due in November. Once she was up and out, I could go away on the weekends any time I wanted to. Paul and I

planned to buy a trailer and hit the open road. My office was getting closer and closer to telecommuting options all the time, so I could still work part-time. We wanted to trace the Oregon Trail, then visit the thirteen original colonies. There was so much we wanted to do, and we were so close to having the green light to do it.

For now, however, I was sentenced to high school plays, budget-busting prom dresses that were worn once, and overseeing homework.

“Eight more months,” I said one last time before getting back to work.