

(In the Prologue, readers see Mac being sworn in as a federal judge.)

One

Two years later

In the bedroom she shared with her husband, Ali Timberlake tucked her makeup case neatly into her suitcase, then zipped it shut just as her husband emerged from his closet, a duffel bag in one hand. “Are you sure about this, honey?” Mac asked, his brow knitted with concern. “We can still change the plan.”

“Right,” Ali replied, her tone dry. “And for the rest of my life I’ll get to listen to Stephen and Chase talk about the one that got away.”

“Hey, we can go fishing in Alaska another—”

Ali interrupted. “No, it’s okay. I’m glad you’re getting to go. It’s a minor miracle that your schedule and those of the boys meshed this time. If Caitlin wanted you with her, that would be different, but she’s flexing her wings and feeling independent and ready to take on Vanderbilt University.”

Her lips twisted as she added, “Frankly, I’m not sure she really wants me to go with her to Nashville. We haven’t exactly been getting along very well lately.”

Her husband tossed his duffel onto their bed, then gave Ali a rueful look. “She did tell me you packed her toothbrush three days ago. She thinks you can’t wait for her to go.”

“After the way she’s been acting lately, can you blame me?”

“Now, sweetheart.”

“Oh, I know.” Ali shrugged and waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “She’s emotional. I’m emotional. It’s not every day that your youngest child and only daughter goes off to college for the first time.”

“Exactly.” Mac grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s why I think I should be there. The boys could go to Alaska without me. No reason why they couldn’t.”

He truly appeared torn, so Ali swallowed her own misgivings and pasted on a smile. “Actually, there is. This is a father-son trip. You can’t very well have a ?father-son trip if the father is a no-show. You went with me and Cait to orientation, and that was the ?important trip. This will be fun for me and Caitlin. An August road trip. A mother-daughter adventure. We’ll do just fine.”

He gave her a long, searching look, then nodded. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” She smiled with a brightness she didn’t feel. “Now I’d better get downstairs and see to breakfast.”

“Leave your suitcase. I’ll carry it down when I come.”

“Thanks.”

Ali tried to shake off her melancholy as she made her way downstairs to prepare a meal for her family. She wanted today’s breakfast to be extra special since this was Caitlin’s big day, the day she flew out of the nest and off to college. It was also the first time in months that the entire family would sit down to a meal together and likely the last meal they’d all share until Thanksgiving.

Throughout the children’s lives, Ali had made the family supper a big deal. It was the Timberlake family together time, and everyone was expected to make a real effort to be there. Since Mac had worked at her father’s firm while the kids were growing up, she had invoked the boss’s daughter privilege in that respect alone. Mac had rarely missed dinner with the family. That had changed since he took the seat on the bench, but by then the crucial years were behind them, the precedent had been set. Their family was stronger because of it.

After today, family meals would be few and far between.

Ali briefly closed her eyes. Don’t go there.

She’d have the kids set the table in the dining room and make it a celebration. Maybe even use her mother’s china. The kids would complain about having to hand-wash the dishes, but if you didn’t go to the trouble to make an occasion an occasion, it became just one more meal in a lifetime of meals.

Mentally she reviewed the contents of her fridge and pantry. Yes, she could do a Hollandaise sauce. She had fresh spinach. If she did eggs Florentine, at least the boys would have one serving of a vegetable today. Fresh berries. She could make pigs in a blanket for Caitlin. They were her favorite.

As she approached her kitchen, the aroma drifting in the air gave her warning. Bacon? Someone was already cooking? Her eyes rounded with surprise. What alternate reality was this?

Ali stepped into the kitchen and halted abruptly. The kitchen table was set with a “Bon Voyage” paper tablecloth. A SpongeBob SquarePants paper centerpiece adorned the center of the table. Paper plates proclaimed “Happy St. Patrick’s Day,” and helium-filled Mylar balloons that read “Over the Hill” had been tied to the back of each of the chairs.

Each of her three grown children turned to look at her, and Ali desperately wished she had a camera. Stephen, looking like a lawyer already with his neatly trimmed hair, freshly shaved face,

and button-down shirt. Chase, the outdoorsman, with his three-day beard and longish hair drawn back and tied at the nape of his neck with a leather lace. And Caitlin, blond and beautiful and brimming with life, a typical college coed. Ten minutes ago these young adults had been grade-schoolers riding their bikes on the sidewalk. Where had the years gone?

Familiar impish grins spread across their faces, telling Ali that they were tickled pink that they'd surprised her. Some things never change, thank goodness. They'd recognized that this was an important family moment. Something she'd tried too hard to teach them had stuck. Happiness bloomed inside Ali like a springtime flower, and she didn't try to keep the smile off her face as she said, "Caitlin, did your brothers actually cook for you to mark your special day?"

"Sort of," Caitlin replied, glancing at the boys. "But not exactly."

"We are cooking breakfast," Stephen clarified as he removed the last piece of bacon from the frying pan and placed it on a paper towel to drain. He was a younger version of Mac, with his father's dark hair and brown eyes that now sparkled mischievously. "I know it's shocking, and I'm glad we didn't give you a heart attack. At your advanced age, I worried about that."

"Just because you are in law school, young man, doesn't mean I can't still send you to your room," Ali fired back. Her gaze fixed on the table, she asked, "Happy St. Patrick's Day?"

"We shopped the bargain bin at the party store," Chase explained. "G'morning, Mom."

"Good morning, son." She eyed the activity at the stovetop, counter, and kitchen table. Apparently the menu included bacon, scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice, Ali's usual yogurt and fruit, and of course Chase's favorite, Froot Loops. "So, who is going to clue me in? What does Cait mean when she says 'sorta'?"

Chase opened his mouth, but Caitlin stopped him with an elbow to his side, then pushed the lever on the toaster and gave Stephen, their eldest, a look that said, Go on.

"We thought it was important to mark the occasion because today is a special day," Stephen said as Mac joined the family in the kitchen. Mac placed his hand on Ali's shoulder while their eldest continued, "The last of your chicks is officially flying from the nest today. It is a special day for Caitlin, and that's why we bought her a princess crown to wear during breakfast. But it's also a special day for you and Dad. We thought it was an appropriate time for the three of us to tell you both how much we love you and how much appreciate all you've done for us."

Oh. Ali brought a hand to her chest. Wow.

Stephen nodded toward Chase, then cracked another egg into a bowl. Ali's middle child flashed his father's grin, then said, "I'll keep my part short because I know you, Mom. You'll start bawling, and we don't want you dribbling snot into your yogurt."

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