

Firefly Island

A Novel

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*For Alice Steele
and her sisters Paula and Cindy*

*May books and love
always bind you together*

*When we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.*

—Wendell Berry

(Written on the Wall of Wisdom,
Waterbird Bait and Grocery, Moses Lake, Texas)

Chapter 1



There are times when life is a cursor on a blank page, blinking in a rhythm a bit like an electronic heartbeat, tapping out a question in three little words.

What.

Comes.

Next?

Time and space and life wait for an answer. A blank page is an ocean of possibilities.

The producer from CNN wants to know how I ended up here. Did I realize, when I started this thing, where it would lead?

The cursor would like an answer to that question. Or maybe it is challenging me. A wink instead of a heartbeat. A wink and a little chuckle that says, *Go ahead and try*. It's like one of those bad jokes told by lonely traveling salesmen in hotel lounges: *What do a milk cow, an Irish love legend, and a political scandal have in common . . . ?*

But I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried, much less explain it. It's easier just to look out the window, scan the DC

skyline that seems out of place now, and let it fool me as it whispers, *It's summertime, Mallory. It's balmy out here—can you feel it? Don't you hear the crickets chirring and the hens plucking June bugs off the porch?*

I let myself sink into the fantasy, let it wrap around me like a comfortable old shirt—the oversized sort with the neck torn out and the fabric washed so many times that the tag is bleached bare and the logo is only a smattering of color clinging to individual threads.

I imagine that I am home, not here in DC. I hear the waters of Moses Lake lapping at the shore, feel the rhythm of it beneath my feet. My eyes fall closed, and I drink in the water-scented Texas air, the oleander blooming, the sound of small bare feet tramping up the hallway, a favorite blanket dragging behind. The honey-sweet tastes of a summer morning.

I'm ready to cuddle a knobby-kneed little body in my lap, snuggle a case of bedhead under my chin, feel the soft, downy hairs tickle my neck, hear the first snuffly breaths of morning before there's any need to talk or ask questions or face the rest of the world. I'm aching for all the things I never thought I'd want, for the place that has wound its way over me like the silk of a web, soft yet strong. I am a prisoner of it, content in ways I could never have imagined. It's strange how quickly a life can become *your* life, and how hard you'll fight for it when someone tries to take it away.

CNN's Washington Bureau wants the story in my own words, so the anchor can prep for the interview. They're looking for details, the juicy sort that will pull in viewers. They wonder if I had any idea I'd end up here. They're not the first ones to ask; inquiring minds all over the world want to know.

For CNN, you'll do things you wouldn't do for anyone else. You'll attempt to flatten your life like a map, smooth your hands over it, letting nothing hide in the wrinkles. So I put

my hands on the keyboard and try to go back to the beginning, to lean all the way over that accordion-folded sheet of memory and identify the start of a yearlong wild ride, at the far corner of the map.

The first time I saw Daniel Everson, I was scrambling on the floor of the Capitol building among papers and sticky notes, trying to gracefully manage a squat in an above-the-knee straight skirt and pumps that were practical enough to say, *I'm serious about my work*, yet high enough to whisper, *I am woman, hear me roar*. The suit was my favorite—the perfect thing to wear while posing for an early-morning congressional staff photo on the Capitol steps.

The papers skittering along the marble floor were in direct conflict with the upwardly mobile fashion choices. They said, *This girl's an idiot*.

“Looks like a bomb went off in here.” The smooth, deep voice with just a hint of baritone was hardly welcome just then. Neither was the observation. Bomb jokes on The Hill are generally considered bad decorum, even early in the morning when the tourists haven't invaded the place in droves yet.

“I've got it,” I answered in the flat, perhaps slightly hostile tone of a girl still sensitive about the idea that her father might have had something to do with her landing a new job as a legislative assistant in a senior congressman's office. I squat-stepped sideways, slid a little on the slick floor, then slapped my hand over five sheets of the massive Clean Energy Bill, now peppered with yellow flags and scribbled notes in the margin, and headed for revisions, an exhaustive proofing, and duplication. Now I'd have to collate the thing by hand before I could even work on it.

A gust of air whooshed past—the result of the nearby renovations to the Capitol building—and I heard papers tumbling into the cavernous space of the rotunda. A single

cherry blossom cartwheeled past in a strange sort of slow motion. Two men in dark suits, engaged in a rapt conversation, circumvented me as if I were invisible. A sheet of paper went airborne and stuck itself to my rear end. I reached for it, playing an odd game of solo Twister, one hand holding the papers on the floor, the other reaching for the piece that was wedged against my backside. My fingers caught it just as another sheet slid past. I pinned that one beneath my remaining foot.

“Hold on a minute.” The man’s voice held a friendly little laugh in the undertone. I tried to place the accent. Michigan, maybe—a Yooper from the Upper Peninsula, or maybe upstate New York. Could be Canadian. His voice had a nice sound. Warm and thick, almost musical. He leaned over and grabbed the smattering of papers I’d pinned to the floor. I imagined what he was seeing—a blonde in a pencil skirt, stretched over the tile like a giant spider.

It crossed my mind that the bill was fresh from a mark-up session and definitely not for public consumption. Technically, it was my job to protect it, and when your newly retired father has spent his life in the lobbying business, you know that there are always people skulking around, hoping for leaks. “No. Really. I’ve got it under control,” I insisted.

“I can see that.” He slid the papers from beneath my foot, shuffled them into a stack, and squatted down to tap them on the floor. Handing them back, he looked at me and smiled, and just as in those classic black-and-white movies on late-night cable, the world stood still. I heard the rising crescendo of music that would accompany such a scene, heavy on the trumpets and violins.

Daniel Webster Everson—yes, that was his real name, though I didn’t know it yet—had the most beautiful green eyes I had ever seen. Framed by thick, black lashes, they seemed

to glow with an inner light that was almost otherworldly. His hair was wavy and dark, long enough to curve around his collar, too nontraditional for Congress. He was wearing a suit—rather well, I might add. Black with a pale blue button-down chambray shirt and a fairly sedate navy-and-gray striped tie. I wondered what his business was here. Lobbyist? Tourist who'd somehow sneaked in early? Consultant?

I wondered how in the world a person could have eyes that shade.

I wondered if he wore color-enhanced contacts.

I wondered if his father was a gypsy.

Or an actor.

He looked like a gypsy-slash-actor. The guy who would play the prince of Persia, or the pirate king, or the Jedi Knight.

I wondered if he was married.

I wondered if he wanted to *get* married. Ever. Anytime in the next decade would be fine. Really. I'd wait.

Did he live here, or was he just visiting? Did he like furry little kittens and children? Did he visit his mother on Sundays? Was the curl in the back of his hair natural? Surely it wasn't one of those horribly outdated man-perms my friend Kaylyn referred to as *merms*?

Did he like Italian food? Was he Italian?

He could be Italian. . . .

Or a baseball player. A professional baseball player. He looked athletic. Congressmen loved to invite pro athletes in for behind-the-scenes tours. . . .

I mentally cycled through all those questions in the space of an instant, before he handed me the sheets of paper, jogged into the rotunda to gather up the rest, and returned them with a smile as I was regaining my feet and trying to reel up my bottom lip. I reached for some intelligent thought, some clever comment that might indicate that this brush with

klutziness was just a random incident—I wasn't some ditzy office assistant, hired because of my dazzling beauty and the way I looked in a straight skirt and a good pair of Spanx.

But all I could think was, *hubba-hubba*. And all I could manage to say was, “Thanks.” I felt myself blushing, which, for a thirty-four-year-old, city-wise girl who'd sworn off relationships in favor of political aspirations, was saying something. The (at that point) nameless Good Samaritan wasn't the most incredibly good-looking guy I'd ever seen, not in the fashion model sort of way, but there was just . . . something. Fireworks, I believe my great-grandmother would have called it. *Mallory*, she liked to say, pointing that knobby grandma finger at me, *a smart woman doesn't settle for a man, just to have a man. That's like buying shoes just because they're cheap. If they don't fit, what good are they?*

You wait for fireworks.

Great-grandma Louisa was from the holy city of Charleston, South Carolina, the only southerner in the family, an enigma of sorts. She believed in misty-eyed platitudes. Offered up in that long, slow Southern drawl of hers, they sounded delightful and sweet, like a taste of mayhaw jam or honey butter. She supported the idea of skyrocketing and things meant to be.

I'd always thought the notion charming but sadly outdated, until the day I met Daniel Webster Everson. My heart fluttered against my ribs like a butterfly trapped in a net. I had the fleeting thought that surely he could see it. In that instant, over the jumbled carcass of the Clean Energy Bill, we seemed to be drawn together by some invisible force we both sensed but couldn't see. He felt it. I just knew he did.

And then, all of a sudden, he shattered my fantasy completely. His wristwatch—one of those geeky plastic digital kind with a million buttons and gadgets—beeped, he checked

it, then smiled, wished me an upturn in my day, and hurried out of my life. Leaving me standing there, still slightly splay-footed and speechless.

I toddled off, juggling the Clean Energy Bill like an unruly baby and feeling either rejected or teased by fate, or both. On the heels of that thought, there was a still, small voice drumming out mantras from the stack of self-help books I'd read since moving to DC and shaking off the dust of my last imploded relationship. It was the longest I'd ever dated anyone, and the only reason I'd stayed two years in a career black hole at the U.S. Consulate in Milan. I'd spent the last nine months of that time trying to find a graceful way to exit without disappointing everyone's hopes—his, my family's, his family's.

When you're over thirty, single, and you date someone for more than six months, everybody decides this must be *the one*, the (somewhat delayed) start of the marriage-and-family phase of life. But some people really aren't picket-fence-and-two-point-five-kids material. I'd always known that I was better suited to a career. Political life intrigued me. I relished the power, the sense of doing something world-changing and important, the mystery of deal making behind the scenes. Like the underground rail system that connected the Capitol to the Congressional and Senate office buildings, the place was laced with hidden connections, and I delighted in figuring them out. This was the life I was meant for.

My mother hated the idea with a passion. She thought I should be looking for a suitable man, particularly at my age. In Mother's family, women *married* influence; they didn't seek it for themselves. She'd had her way with my four older sisters, but I would be the one who was different, who broke the mold, who became a deal maker myself.

Yet, as I sorted my current stack of papers and put it back

together like Humpty Dumpty, I was thinking of the guy from the rotunda. The one with the green eyes and the thick, boyish lashes.

We would make beautiful babies together. We really would.

I found myself wondering if I'd taken a wrong turn at a crossroads of fate by letting him walk away without a word. Silly, of course. He wasn't interested, or he wouldn't have left me for a beeping wristwatch.

When I dropped by my apartment to change clothes before heading to the gym that night, I called my sister Trudy—the one closest to my age, but still five years older. Trudy was teetering on the backside of thirty-nine and undergoing in vitro treatments. Today, she wasn't really interested in hearing about the guy in the rotunda. She was headed back to the doctor tomorrow to find out if the latest round had worked. Tense times.

“You could be like those people who had six all at once,” I said, and Trudy groaned.

“We'd just be happy to get one, maybe two. I just want to be someone's mommy, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” I didn't, really. Maybe it was being the baby of the family, but I'd never been too confident that I'd be any good at handling the care and feeding of another person. If you failed as a mom, you'd end up on an afternoon talk show someday, defending yourself in front of millions. Trudy's life seemed pretty good to me, actually. She had a successful husband and an imports business, but none of it mattered. She wanted a baby, and the lack of one was all she could talk about.

I finally gave up on the conversation and headed off to the gym. My little cast of friends was there—rejects like me, who couldn't find anything better to do after work. We'd cleverly dubbed ourselves the *Gymies*. Most days we ended

up working out and then hitting the restaurant across the street for French fried onions and Philly melts. Seems counter-productive, but when you're sampling round-robin pie and discussing career hits and misses as if you really matter to the functioning of the free world, you don't feel so much like your Love Boat is stuck in dry dock.

I ended up telling Kaylyn about the guy in the rotunda right after she confessed, somewhat sadly, that the new man she'd been eyeing at her favorite coffee shop had turned out to be a dud. Married, three kids. Gorgeous wife.

She pulled a breath when I mentioned the rotunda experience, and the guy. "Ohhh, I'll bet he's Irish," she breathed. "It's St. Patrick's Day, you know."

I paused with a bite of pie halfway to my mouth, uncertain what one thing had to do with the other. Did Irish people move about more readily on St. Patrick's Day? Take it in their minds to suddenly visit the hallowed halls of Congress? "He didn't look Irish. More . . . Italian, maybe. Or . . . gypsy. I think he was a gypsy. Or a Scottish laird."

Kaylyn rolled her eyes. "Don't be making fun of my books." Kaylyn was hopelessly hooked on romance novels. We'd known each other since prep school, and even back then, she'd had her nose in a book. She knew the names—the real-life names—of the guys dressed as cowboys, knights, and highland warriors on the covers.

"I wasn't." I shoulder-nudged her. Who was I to criticize, really? At least the guys in Kaylyn's romance novels had integrity. They fell in love and stayed that way, unlike so many of the people I worked with. Life around the movers and shakers could make you cynical after a while. "I think it's great to be a romantic."

Kaylyn nodded her approval, her pert little nose scrunching. "Mmm-hmm. Did you read *Taming the Texan* yet?"

I wasn't sure whether to confess that the books she'd loaned me were gathering dust in my apartment. Across the table, Josh, all two hundred and eighty pounds of him, was once again watching Kaylyn through lovesick eyes. Even though they shared an office at a software company, she wasn't the least bit romantically inclined toward poor Josh. He didn't look anything like her favorite cover models.

"I . . . uh . . . started it. There was some good . . . history," I hedged. That seemed a benign enough response.

Kaylyn was pleased. "I told you so." She lifted her straw from her cup and sipped drips from the end while Josh watched wistfully. "Wait until I give you *His Irish Bride*. It's so good. You know that if two people meet on St. Patrick's Day, they're destined, right? That's why I asked if the guy was Irish."

"So, it only works for Irish people?" I raised an eyebrow to indicate that I was in no way being sucked into any premise that came from a used paperback.

"I'm sure it works for anybody." Snorting, she flashed an eyetooth and dipped her straw back into the glass. "Except cynics. Amy Ashley does her research, by the way."

"Who's Amy Ashley?"

Kaylyn wheeled a hand as in, *Pay attention here*. "She wrote *His Irish Bride*. She's won Readers' Pick of the Year, like, five times. She does her research."

I ate a few peanuts, pretending to defer to the wisdom of Amy Ashley. "All right, all right. But the odds of my running into the rotunda guy again are a million to one. I've never seen him around before. He was probably a tourist from Hackensack. Anyway, I'm not a cynic. I'm just . . . realistic." *Is that so wrong?* "But I'm not Irish, either, so I don't suppose it matters. I think you'd have to be Irish for the St. Patrick's Day thing to work." I threw a peanut across the table. "What do you think, Josh?"

Josh helped himself to the peanut and pretended to think about it. “We could test it.” Throwing his head back and his arms out, he smiled and said, “Kiss me. I’m Irish.”

Kaylyn rolled her eyes and pointed the straw at me again. “All right, how about we just put our money where our mouths are. I bet—” she interlaced her hands and steeped two fingers—“a year’s supply of romance novels that you see that guy again, and that he asks you out before the month is over.”

“You’re on, sister.” Laughing, I stuck out my hand to seal the deal. I wasn’t a gambling type, but it seemed like an extremely safe wager.

Across the table, Josh was shaking his head with an expression of foreboding.

He knew how many romance novels Kaylyn could read in a year.

My beloved is mine, and I am his.

—Song of Solomon 2:16

(Left on the Wall of Wisdom by Blaine and Heather, proud new owners, Harmony Shores Bed and Breakfast, Moses Lake)

Chapter 2



Love is a many splendored thing. There's a more classic history to that phrase, I'm sure, but I learned it from a Sinatra album—the old-fashioned vinyl kind my father played on an ugly console stereo that looked like something out of *The Jetsons*.

The night after my sixth birthday party, that song tugged me from my bed. I moved to the sliding glass doors, pulled back the curtain, and saw my father out for a late-night swim, trying to coax my mother into the pool. She was curled in a chaise lounge, wearing a long, filmy negligee. The feather-edged sleeve floated diaphanous and light on the breeze as she playfully slapped his hand away. Laughing, she let her head fall against the cushion, her gaze rising into the starry night.

She never saw him coming. Without warning, he scooped her off the chair and carried her across the patio as she protested, squealed, and told him what she'd do to him if he ruined her new loungewear. He ignored her completely and swept her straight down the steps and into the water, deep blue under the smoky patio lights. The hem of her nightgown

floated to the surface, her body and his disappearing into the darkness below as he kissed her.

I'd never seen my parents behave in such a fashion, never even considered whether they kissed or hugged or got romantic like the Bradys did on afternoon cable reruns. But after watching them in the pool, I knew that love really could be the way it was in the movies. From that night on, I believed in the possibility. Even if I'd never been lucky enough to find the right guy, I clung to a yearning that made me want that kind of intensity. All of my life a still, small voice had been whispering in my ear, *If it can happen to Mom, it can happen to anyone.*

My mother was about as stiff, proper, and practical as a woman could get. If she could be swept off her feet, anybody could.

I was off my feet almost from the moment I met Daniel Webster Everson. Both in the literal sense and the figurative sense. I twisted an ankle running for a subway train the day after the spilled-bill incident, and I was wearing a walking cast later that week when I hobbled into the office of James V. Faber, honorable congressman from Arkansas. Two steps in the door, and I found myself once again face to face with the startling green eyes I remembered from the rotunda.

Congressman Faber's home district was big in poultry production and processing. Daniel was a biochemist working for the USDA, visiting The Hill at Faber's request to discuss some particulars in a pork-barrel (or in this case poultry-barrel) rider to a bill working its way through committee. I'd dropped by Faber's office to personally pick up a LOI—Letter of Intent—that would make Faber a cosponsor for my boss's Clean Energy Bill.

Suffice to say that a freakish alignment of legislation brought me together with Daniel Everson for a second time.

Or perhaps it was the Irish legend.

Choose to believe as suits you, but God does create soul mates, and Daniel Webster Everson was mine. I knew it from the first time I saw him, and by the second time, I *knew* I knew it.

I limped into his life once again carrying an armload of papers. Daniel glanced up from the leather sofa in Faber's receiving area and noticed my uneven walk and the cast, attractively embellished with Sharpie drawings by office co-workers and the Gymies.

"Looks like things haven't quite taken that upturn yet," he observed. Very astute of him. Then he laughed softly and smiled, and I forgave him for making light of my unfashionable situation.

I noticed those boyishly thick lashes again. And his smile. If I had to feed Kaylyn's romance novel habit for a year, or ten, I had to know who he was.

"It's been that kind of week," I admitted. "Month, actually."

There was a flash of something in his eyes, as quickly as a car passing at the other end of an alley, but I saw it. A look that said, *Yeah, me too. That kind of week . . . month . . . year.*

I shifted the stack of papers onto my hip and tried to look as though one arm wasn't slowly growing longer than the other. My foot was hurting. I needed to get off it. The doctor had prescribed limited walking for a couple weeks while the ankle healed. You can't limit your walking on The Hill, not and be in the know. It's a big place. My position as a legislative assistant put me about halfway up the congressional staff ladder. There were plenty of young kids hungry for advancement, and each of them had two good feet. My only advantage was charm and the fact that, even though I'd tried for anonymity, word had gotten around. People knew who my father was.

Daniel stood up like he'd been pushed out of his seat by a loose spring. He reached for the documents. "Here. You look like you could use some help with those."

The rest was history, or a whirlwind, depending on your point of view. I asked about Daniel; he asked about me. Faber's personal assistant gave us irritated looks for muddying up a congressional office with an obvious flirtation. We exchanged business cards before Daniel headed for a consultation in Faber's office. After he'd passed the snotty personal assistant, he turned around, pointed at her and made a face, then mouthed, *I'll call you*, as if we'd known each other forever.

The grouchy lady swiveled a stern look over her shoulder. Daniel made a show of turning around and heading for the congressman's door.

I giggled.

I fell in love.

My ankle didn't hurt anymore, because I wasn't standing on it. I was floating a few inches off the ground.

Within four hours, my artsy cast and I were having dinner with Daniel at a hole-in-the-wall Italian place with decor that was vintage Dollar Store. I didn't mind. The food was good, and it hadn't taken me very long to figure out that my newly discovered prince, my gypsy king, my romance novel cover guy was, unfortunately, fairly broke. He had a master's degree in biochemistry, two years of university research experience, two years of interesting stories from having traveled the world doing crop science for an underfunded non-governmental organization, and a couple years of teaching experience at a city college. His recently acquired position at the USDA was his first real eight-to-five job. He also had a healthy supply of student loans, medical bills from a car accident a few years back, and a three-and-a-half-year-old son who, that particular week, was in Ohio with grandparents.

It was a lot to take in on a first date. I had a feeling that Daniel didn't usually share so much information so quickly. I wondered how much of his life he normally offered up to women he'd just met. Then I found my brown eyes going a little green over the idea that he met other women. Ever. I felt strangely possessive.

That didn't matter, as it turned out. For the next two weeks, we were together every evening. Both of us knew we didn't want to see anyone else.

Kaylyn started hounding me to pay her romance novel bills and to admit that Amy Ashley's Irish love legend had validity. Irish magic aside, the night before Daniel's son was to come home, I was worried. Other than roughhousing with my nieces and getting them in trouble with their mothers, I had no idea what to do with children of any size, particularly not a three-and-a-half-year-old. Aside from that, I'd grown up in a family full of girls. Boys were a complete mystery.

I was trying not to classify little Nick as a stumbling block, but a sense of loss and foreboding had begun needling me, even though I didn't want it to. It wasn't mature to think of a preschooler as the competition, but I liked things the way they were. Life with Daniel was . . . perfect. *We* were perfect. Just the two of us.

I hated myself for having that thought. I really did. I knew all about Nick. He was adorable—a towheaded version of his dad. I'd looked at his pictures in Daniel's apartment. I'd laughed at many a "Nick" story over dinners and lunches with Daniel. I'd stood in the doorway of Nick's room when Daniel wasn't looking, studied Nick's toys and his little race car bed, trying to imagine him there. I'd sympathized with Daniel when he'd snuggled me under his chin and brooded because Nick had started to notice that other kids in day care got picked up by their mothers. Nick wanted *his* mother

to pick him up. Nick didn't have a mother. Not that anyone could see, anyway.

"Nick's mother doesn't ever get in touch?" I asked, trying to picture her. There were no photos of her in Daniel's apartment. I suspected that was intentional. Daniel's face revealed an obvious pain whenever Nick's mom came up in conversation. "She doesn't ask to see him?"

A sigh deflated his chest beneath my cheek. "She didn't want kids. She's into her work." The bitterness in his voice worried me, if I wasn't worried enough already. I already knew that Nick's mother worked for an oil company and traveled around the world. "Nick wasn't planned," he added.

"I wasn't planned, either, but my mom didn't just walk out on me," I said, and then admonished myself for overstepping.

"It is what it is." Daniel's arm tightened around me in a way that made me feel good. I was reassured that I hadn't said the wrong thing. I tried again to imagine Nick's mom. I conjured an image of an executive. In my mind she was tall, svelte, with the face and body of a fashion model. Blond, probably, judging by Nick's hair. He didn't get that from his father.

"It's just harder now that he's asking, you know?" Daniel's hand slid up and down my arm, raising a pleasant tingle on my skin. I felt an expectation in that caress, in Daniel's words, in the absence of Nick's mother. There was an empty space to be filled here, for both Daniel and Nick. But I'd met Daniel only two weeks ago. How could either of us possibly know whether I was the person to fill it?

I wasn't a very likely candidate. If I met Nick now, we might only be setting him up for disappointment. On the other hand, if I didn't meet Nick, how would I continue to spend time with Daniel? With no relatives living nearby, Daniel was a full-time single dad. The last two weeks had been an anomaly.

Real life was headed this way, safely strapped in a car seat in the back of the grandparents' minivan.

"I don't usually let him . . . meet people," Daniel offered, and I felt sick. He was having second thoughts, trying to gently tell me that we needed to cool it for a while. Maybe now that Nick was coming back, Daniel was rethinking things altogether. Now that there was a child involved, perhaps Daniel was sensing the thing that men seemed to pick up on innately: I was hopelessly nondomestic. I couldn't even make macaroni and cheese, the boxed kind.

I understand. I knew that was the correct response, but I couldn't force the words out. I felt another unwanted stab of competitiveness toward little Nick. Looking across the room, I took in a picture of him dressed in a Giants jersey, a massive football helmet hiding his face in shadow, so that only a huge smile showed. I envisioned myself getting into a squat like an NFL lineman and knocking him off the playing field. I was bigger than he was. . . .

The thought was reprehensible, of course. It was only proof of what I already knew: I was the spoiled, self-centered, over-indulged, late-in-life baby of the family and would never grow up. Completely hopeless.

"So . . . then . . . what . . ." *What are you saying? What does this mean? What do you want me to say?* I reached up and rubbed my eyebrows, then pinched hard, a little pulse thrumming beneath my fingertips. The I'm-not-going-to-cry feeling stung my throat. Daniel's parents would be here tomorrow, road weary after driving from Ohio, and on their way to visit their other grandkids. Daniel and I had already established that this wasn't the best time for me to meet them. *They're a little touchy because of Nick*, he'd explained. Now Daniel was having cold feet, too.

“He’s getting old enough that he notices things,” Daniel remarked vaguely.

“Things?” My voice trembled a little, just getting that much out. I felt like I was groping in a dark room, waiting for Freddy Krueger to jump from the shadows and slash my heart in two. Another relationship meets its gruesome demise.

A soft little laugh-snort ruffled my hair and my thoughts. Now I was completely confused. Daniel found this funny? I was dying here. “Yeah, like the other day on the phone, he asked me why some people at Nanbee’s and Grandpa’s have one name, and some people have two. The second cousins, even the teenagers, who seem like grown-ups to him, are Angie, Chris, Corrie, and Zack, but the great-aunts and uncles are Aunt Tammy, Uncle Carl, and so on. The nursery ladies at their church are Miss Lori and Miss Teresa. He’s all confused.”

“Oh.” So was I—all confused.

Daniel shifted on the sofa, forcing me to sacrifice the warm spot under his chin, so I could see him. Those eyes, those beautiful green eyes, took me in. They were so pensive, so concerned, as if an invasion of the Daddy-body-snatchers had stolen away my gypsy king.

I felt every heartbeat in my chest, felt the teary lump rising and growing more imminent by the minute. *Please don’t say it. Please don’t say it.*

“So, anyway, I was thinking . . .” he began.

Here it comes, here it comes. I braced myself. Or tried. For some reason, a snippet of Josh and Kaylyn’s video-game programmer talk raced through my mind. *Shields, shields, raise the deflector shields . . .*

“ . . . what do you think he should call you?” Daniel finished.

“I . . . huh?” My disembodied self melted back into the

carcass of the highlighted-blond, brown-eyed girl on the sofa. *Seriously?* I wanted to say. *You scared me to death for that?*

I pretended to have a tickle in my throat and something in my eye. In reality, tears of joy had begun to seep onto the bridge of my nose. “Sorry. I must have gotten a whiff of something.” I fanned myself, my body hot, then cold, then hot again. My gosh. I was crazy about this man. How was that possible after only a couple weeks? “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it.” *Because I know absolutely nothing about kids.* To my nieces, I was just a big kid—someone fun to play with, but completely useless at mealtime or bath time.

Daniel scratched the nape of his neck, seeming to agonize over the question. “It’s just that . . . well . . . however we get him started, that’s what it’ll be forever. Kids are creatures of habit, you know?”

I nodded. Nope, didn’t know. This whole issue had never even crossed my tiny little mind, nor could I really focus on it now. I was still stuck on one word of that sentence: *forever*. *Forever, forever, forever.*

“Why don’t you pick?” I suggested. “I’m okay with whatever you decide.”

Whoops. I instantly sensed that I’d given the wrong answer. He looked disappointed—as if I’d blown off something he considered important, indicating that I didn’t understand the weight of it. “Okay, let me think a minute.” I said. *Think. Think, think, think . . .*

I’m not his aunt. I’m not his mother. Well, not yet, but a girl can dream. These were changing times, but I had always been taught that children didn’t call adults by their first names. My mother found the familiar way my older nieces spoke to me to be completely distasteful. Since they wouldn’t use *Aunt Mallory*, she had attempted to convert them to *Tante M*, the French word for *aunt*, which, in her view, had greater

hipness to it. It was a flop, unless the nieces were trying to tease me. Then, when Mother asked who'd spilled Kool-Aid on the kitchen floor and failed to wipe it up, they'd call out, *Tante M did it*, with an emphasis on the French.

It crossed my mind that whenever I did finally work up the guts to confess to my mother that I was seriously dating a divorced guy with a three-and-a-half-year-old son—at which time she would frown gravely and remind me that I was recently out of a two-year relationship—she would not be impressed if Daniel's preschool-aged child was calling me by my first name.

“How about Tante M? It's French for *aunt*. It's sort of a weird handle my mother made up. She hates it when the nieces call me by my first name.”

“Tante M.” Daniel licked his lips, tasting the word.

I watched his lips, felt myself swoon. Everything about him lit me up like a Christmas tree. He hadn't even tried to put the moves on me, which, considering that this was DC, was shocking. Daniel was a perfect gentleman, old-fashioned in his view of things. I found that as charming as everything else about him. I'd almost lost faith that there were guys like that around anymore, but deep inside me, there was that image of my parents romancing in the pool. I'd always known that casual relationships were no substitute for true love and lifetime commitment. Aside from that, Great-grandma Louisa had avidly assured us girls that a man does not buy the cow if he can get the milk for free. You don't forget a mental image like that one. Ever.

“But we can pick something else if you don't think that seems good.” Maybe he thought the whole foreign language thing was dorky.

He shifted, bracing a hand on the sofa arm and leaning toward me. “I don't know. I'm not sure I want some other

man talking to you in French.” His voice was throaty and rich. “You might like him better than you like me.”

“Not possible,” I whispered, and he kissed me, and the storm of worry in my mind whirled off into a corner, growing smaller and smaller, until it was just a little swirl, like water spinning down the drain after a hot bath.

Not possible that I could like someone better than you. In some hidden part of my soul, I knew that *like* wasn’t the word I meant. I didn’t just *like* Daniel. I was in love in every way a girl could be. If two weeks was too soon to be using that word, I couldn’t help it. This was it. The Amy Ashley romance novel kind of love. I wanted to be his Irish bride.

No other man I would ever meet could possibly make me feel like this, I was certain.

But as it turned out, little Nick took a pretty good stab at it the very next day. I liked him the minute we met, over a picnic of fried chicken and soggy potato wedges. I’d been burning the midnight oil at work, and the best I could do was a quick brown-bag dinner in Bartholdi Park. I was, at least, newly out of the walking cast, so the stroll over was no problem.

Nick was not only adorable, he was funny, articulate, and—perhaps because he felt the absence of a mom in his life—surprisingly attuned to women. Moments after we met, he told me he liked my hair. I’d let it dry wavy that day, and he said it was *princess hair*. I fell in love. While Nick explored the softly trickling water feature nearby, I told his father he had competition for my affections.

“Figures.” Daniel let his head droop forward, his shoulders rounding in a display of surrender. “Nick always gets the girls. You should see him at day care.”

“I think you’re doing all right yourself.” I stretched onto my tiptoes for a kiss while Nick wasn’t looking. The next thing I knew, something was pushing on my knee, trying to

force me away from Daniel. An instant later, I realized that it was Nick, and that we'd been caught. Guilt sledgehammered me. I'd watched the talk shows. I knew that this first meeting should have been about getting acquainted in a nonthreatening way that was easy for Nick to adjust to. Less than a half hour together, and I'd blown it already. He hated me. *Step away from my daddy*, the pressure of that little hand said. *Who do you think you are, strange-princess-hair-woman?*

Daniel and I yielded to the push in unison. There was a hand pressing on his leg, too. When we looked down, Nick was poised between us like a tiny Atlas, trying to hold two worlds apart. Daniel cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable. He gave me a worried look. I was sorry that we hadn't waited for a less rushed time to begin introductions with Nick—maybe allowed him a few days to reacclimate to DC.

"Sorry, buddy," Daniel said, and Nick just rolled a look at him—the kind of honest scorn that comes from a little psyche not yet attuned to hiding feelings in order to make everyone feel warm and fuzzy.

We'd really screwed up.

Daniel extended a hand to take Nick's. "C'mon, bud. Let's go see the water."

I took a step back. Now would probably be a good time to exit, since this hadn't gone so well. "I should . . . ummm . . ." I thumbed over my shoulder, wincing apologetically. "Go back to . . ."

I never finished the sentence. The most amazing thing happened, and in that moment, I felt certain that angels must have been swirling overhead. They smiled down on us as Nick turned to me, his face rising into the light, his blue eyes framed with his father's thick lashes. He reached upward, fingers extended, all ten of them, as far as they would go, and in the space of a heartbeat, I understood that he wanted me to pick him up.

Daniel and I glanced at each other, and he just shrugged. “Well, I can see I’m second-rate.”

I picked Nick up, swinging him onto my hip somewhat awkwardly, but he didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he flashed an over-the-shoulder smirk at his dad, a pleased look with perhaps a hint of gloat in it. Daniel grinned wider and shook his head, a dark curl toying near his eyebrow. “I think someone’s after my best g-i-r-l.” He spelled the last word, and Nick squinted at him, trying to discern the meaning.

I felt like a queen, like a rock star, like a supermodel with adoring fans crowding in at the edges of the catwalk, fighting over me. Nick wasn’t pushing me away from his dad. He was pushing his dad away from me.

Nick wrapped his little arms around my shoulders, and from that moment on, we were friends. He quickly discovered that although I didn’t know how to properly cut up a hot dog into toddler bites and I could not even begin to name the characters on *Thomas the Tank Engine*, I could keep a balloon in the air for a long time without reusing any part of my body, I was pretty good with a soccer ball, and I had a poor short-term memory that made me easy to beat at the memory match card game. Time after time, it was a mystery to me which card had the purple dinosaur under it and which had the rubber ducky, and so on. Nick loved that about me. He also knew more farm animal sounds than I did, and he loved that, too. I had no idea what a goat might say, and I didn’t know whether a bull would *moo* like a cow or snort like a fire-breathing dragon. Nick knew because his grandparents lived in a rural neighborhood with farms just down the road. I didn’t mind losing parlor games to a kid who had yet to graduate from day care to official preschool. I was just happy that the three of us were bonding so well.

We made dinners together. We played games. We did things

on the weekends. We watched the last of the spring blossoms fall and new leaves come in. The Gymies, fearing that I'd been kidnapped by some underground government agency, began reconnoitering, sniffing out the situation, asking concerned questions.

"Don't you think things are moving a little . . . fast, though?" Kaylyn wanted to know when I called to ask Josh if I could borrow a few of his Disney DVDs for a couple days. Daniel had to go out of town to some sort of symposium about fertilizers and genetically modified super crops, and due to a snafu with the baby-sitting he'd arranged, I'd agreed to stay with Nick through the weekend.

"I mean, it sounds like you're practically moving in over there." Kaylyn's romantic notions of St. Patrick's Day magic and Irish destiny seemed to have faded away. "It's only been, like, a month, y'know."

A month? Had it really been only a month? "I'm *just* watching Nick for the weekend while Daniel's gone. I'm not *moving in*." But in the pit of my stomach there was a giddy little domestic feeling that I hadn't told anyone about. I was looking forward to spending the weekend with Nick—boiling hot dogs, working on my ability to make boxed convenience foods, watching Disney movies, and reading favorite story-books before tucking him into his little race car bed.

"What's your mom think about all this?" Kaylyn had been dragged along on enough of my mother's DC shopping visits to fully understand the undertows between Mom and me.

"I haven't . . . exactly . . . said anything to them," I admitted.

"You haven't told your parents?" Kaylyn's shock caused me to hold the cell phone away from my ear.

"I will. I will," I ground out, the pressure pinching like a hermit crab nested under the mop of hair at the back of my neck. "I'm just waiting until I go home for Easter next week.

That way, I can tell them in person—sort of ease Mom into it, so she doesn't go berserk. The whole thing about Daniel being divorced-with-kid might throw her a little. She thinks divorced guys are damaged goods. She's prehistoric that way."

"You haven't told your parents *anything*?" Kaylyn reiterated, then she covered the phone and shared the news with Josh, who was probably hard at work on the other side of their cubicle, creating fantasy characters and pixel-based swords for some new video game. "Mallory hasn't told her family anything about Mr. Wonderful or Little Mr. Wonderful."

I heard Josh's response. "Whoa. That's radical."

The conversation went on from there, Kaylyn's admonishments heaping guilt and trepidation on me until I almost gave up my quest to wrestle away some of Josh's prized Disney DVDs.

But I wanted those movies, so I persevered, and an hour later, I was picking them up on my way to grab Nick from day care. Kaylyn was concerned about my ability to handle over forty-eight hours of parental responsibility. She dredged up the issue of the little window-hanging finch feeder she'd given me for Christmas. The one that sat empty while disenfranchised birds cast wistful looks from nearby electrical lines.

"I'm not going to forget to feed the kid," I insisted as Josh caressed the stack of Disney movies, appearing to have second thoughts. "I'm *not*. Seriously, I've got it all planned out. He's just one little boy, and he's adorable, and we have a blast together. What could possibly go wrong?"

I should have known that such questions only tempt fate.

Nick picked that weekend to get the stomach flu.

I learned about thermometers and wet wipes, sensitive skin and Desitin, sponge baths, dehydration, throw up, washing sheets, washing sheets again, scrubbing stains out of carpet, and calling the emergency hotline in the middle of the night.

I also learned what fully qualified caretakers already know. The stomach flu is contagious.

By the time Daniel came home, Nick and I were a couple of washed-out rag dolls, strung across the recliner, nibbling soda crackers and blearily watching *Bambi* for the umpteenth time. Daniel went down to the Chinese restaurant on the corner and bought soup for us. When he came back, he fixed trays and then got to work cleaning up the offal of towels, clothes, DVDs, toys, and empty Pedialite bottles that had overtaken the apartment during our quest to survive. The phone rang while he was carrying an armload of stuff to Nick's toy box. He took the call in the bedroom. When he came out, he was as pale as Nick and me.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He looked like someone had died. I immediately thought of his family in Ohio. I only knew what Daniel had told me. He had a mom, dad, grandparents, and various cousins, aunts, and uncles all living within a thirty-mile radius, and a brother who lived in Boston with his wife and kids. Like my parents, Daniel's parents still owned the house he'd grown up in. I hoped the call hadn't brought bad news—a car accident or something.

"I think I just got offered a job," he said, his jaw hanging slack after the words, a hint of five o'clock shadow testifying to the fact that, in his rush to return home to Nick and me, he hadn't even shaved this morning.

"A job?" That didn't sound like bad news. Why the horrified expression?

He nodded slowly, his eyes shifting toward the bedroom doorway, as if the spirit of something large and life-altering were hovering there, and he expected it to come storming up the hallway any moment.

His next two words explained everything. "In Texas."