

LOVE & GELATO



# LOVE & GELATO

∞ JENNA EVANS WELCH ∞

**SIMON PULSE**

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*To David,  
for being my love story*





# Prologue



YOU'VE HAD BAD DAYS BEFORE, RIGHT? YOU KNOW, THE ones where your alarm doesn't go off, your toast practically catches on fire, and you remember way too late that every article of clothing you own is soaking wet in the bottom of the washer? So then you go hurtling into school fifteen minutes late, *praying* no one will notice that your hair looks like the Bride of Frankenstein's, but just as you slide into your desk your teacher booms, "Running late today, Ms. Emerson?" and everyone looks at you and notices?

I'm sure you've had those days. We all have. But what about really bad days? The kind that are so pumped up and awful that they chew up the things you care about just for the fun of spitting them back in your face?

The day my mom told me about Howard fell firmly in the *really bad* category. But at the time, he was the least of my worries.

It was two weeks into my sophomore year of high school

and my mom and I were driving home from her appointment. The car was silent except for a radio commercial narrated by two Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonators, and even though it was a hot day, I had goose bumps up and down my legs. Just that morning I'd placed second at my first-ever cross country meet and I couldn't believe how much that didn't matter anymore.

My mom switched off the radio. "Lina, what are you feeling?" Her voice was calm, and when I looked at her I teared up all over again. She was so pale and tiny. How had I not noticed how *tiny* she'd gotten?

"I don't know," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "I feel like I'm in shock."

She nodded, coming to a stop at a traffic light. The sun was doing its best to blind us, and I stared into it, my eyes scalding. *This is the day that changes everything*, I thought. *From here on out there will only be before and after today.*

My mom cleared her throat, and when I glanced at her, she straightened up like she had something important to tell me. "Lina, did I ever tell you about the time I was dared to swim in a fountain?"

I whipped around. "What?"

"Remember how I told you I spent a year studying in Florence? I was out photographing with my classmates, and it was such a hot day I thought I was going to melt. I had this



friend—Howard—and he dared me to jump into a fountain.”

Now, keep in mind, we’d just gotten the worst news of our lives. The *worst*.

“...I scared a group of German tourists. They were posing for a photo, and when I popped out of the water, one of them lost her balance and almost fell back into the fountain with me. They were furious, so Howard yelled that I was drowning and jumped in after me.”

I stared at her, and she turned and gave me a little smile.

“Uh . . . Mom? That’s funny and everything, but why are you telling me this now?”

“I just wanted to tell you about Howard. He was really a lot of fun.” The light changed and she hit the gas.

*What?* I thought. *What what what?*

At first I thought the fountain story was a coping mechanism, like maybe she thought a story about an old friend could distract us from the two blocks of granite hanging over our heads. *Inoperable. Incurable.* But then she told me another story. And another. It got to the point where she’d start talking and three words in I’d know she was going to bring up Howard. And then when she finally told me the reason for all the Howard stories, well . . . let’s just say that ignorance is bliss.

“Lina, I want you to go to Italy.”

It was mid-November and I was sitting next to her hospital bed with a stack of ancient *Cosmo* magazines I'd swiped from the waiting room. I'd spent the last ten minutes taking a quiz called "On a Scale of One to Sizzle: How Hot Are You?" (7/10).

"Italy?" I was kind of distracted. The person who'd taken the quiz before me had scored a 10/10 and I was trying to figure out how.

"I mean I want you to go live in Italy. After."

That got my attention. For one thing, I didn't believe in *after*. Yes, her cancer was progressing just the way her doctors said it would, but doctors didn't know everything. Just that morning I'd bookmarked a story on the Internet about a woman who'd beaten cancer and gone on to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. And for another, *Italy*?

"Why would I do that?" I asked lightly. It was important to humor her. Avoiding stress is a big part of recovery.

"I want you to stay with Howard. The year I spent in Italy meant so much to me, and I want you to have that same experience."

I shot my eyes at the nurse's call button. *Stay with Howard in Italy*? Did they give her too much morphine?

"Lina, look at me," she said, in her bossiest I Am the Mother voice.

"Howard? You mean that guy you keep talking about?"

"Yes. He's the best man I've ever known. He'll keep you safe."

"Safe from *what*?" I looked into her eyes, and suddenly my breath started coming in short and fast. She was serious. Did hospital rooms stock paper bags?

She shook her head, her eyes shiny. "Things will be . . . hard. We don't have to talk about it now, but I wanted to make sure you heard my decision from me. You'll need someone. After. And I think he's the best person."

"Mom, that doesn't even make sense. Why would I go live with a stranger?" I jumped up and started rifling through the drawers in her end table. There had to be a paper bag *somewhere*.

"Lina, sit."

"But, Mom—"

"Sit. You're going to be fine. You're going to make it. Your life will go on, and it's going to be great."

"No," I said. "*You're* going to make it. Sometimes people recover."

"Lina, Howard's a wonderful friend. You'll really love him."

"I doubt it. And if he's that good of a friend, then why haven't I ever met him before?" I gave up on finding a bag, collapsing back into my chair and putting my head between my knees.

She struggled to sit up, then reached out, resting her hand

on my back. “Things were a little bit complicated between us, but he wants to get to know you. And he said he’d love to have you stay with him. Promise me you’ll give it a try. A few months at least.”

There was a knock on the door, and we both looked up to see a nurse dressed in baby blue scrubs. “Just checking in,” she sang, either ignoring or not noticing the expression on my face. On a Scale of One to Tense, the room was at about 100/10.

“Morning. I was just telling my daughter she needs to go to Italy.”

“Italy,” the nurse said, clasping both hands to her chest. “I went there on my honeymoon. Gelato, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, gondolas in Venice . . . You’ll love it.”

My mom smiled at me triumphantly.

“Mom, *no*. There’s no way I’m going to Italy.”

“Oh, but, honey, you have to go,” the nurse said. “It will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

The nurse ended up being right about one thing: I did have to go. But no one gave me even the tiniest hint about what I’d find once I got there.

# Chapter 1

THE HOUSE LOOMED BRIGHTLY IN THE DISTANCE, LIKE A lighthouse in a sea of headstones. But it couldn't be *his* house, right? We were probably just following some kind of Italian custom. *Always drive newcomers through a cemetery. That way they get a feel for the local culture.* Yeah, that must be it.

I knit my fingers in my lap, my stomach dropping as the house got closer and closer. It was like watching Jaws emerge from the depths of the ocean. *Duuun dun.* Only it wasn't a movie. It was real. And there was only one turn left. *Don't panic. This can't be it. Mom wouldn't have sent you to live in a cemetery. She would have warned you. She would have—*

He flipped on the turn signal, and all the air came rushing out of my lungs. *She just didn't tell me.*

"Are you okay?"

Howard—my dad, I guess I should call him—was looking at me with a concerned expression. Probably because I'd just made a wheezing noise.

"Is that your . . . ?" Words failed me, so I had to point.

"Well, yes." He hesitated for a moment and then gestured out the window. "Lina, didn't you know? About all this?"

"All this" didn't even come close to describing the massive moonlit cemetery. "My grandma told me I'd be staying on American-owned land. She said you're the caretaker of a World War II memorial. I didn't think . . ." Panic was pouring over me like hot syrup. Also, I couldn't seem to finish a single sentence. *Breathe, Lina. You've already survived the worst. You can survive this, too.*

He pointed to the far end of the property. "The memorial is that building right up there. But the rest of the grounds are for the graves of American soldiers who were killed in Italy during the war."

"But this isn't your *house* house, right? It's just where you work?"

He didn't answer. Instead we pulled into the driveway, and I felt the last of my hope fade along with the car's headlights. This wasn't just a house. It was a *home*. Red geraniums lined the walkway, and there was a porch swing creaking back and forth, like someone had just gotten up. Subtract the crosses lining the surrounding lawns and it was any normal house in any normal neighborhood. But it wasn't a normal neighborhood. And those crosses didn't look like they were going anywhere. Ever.

“They like to have a caretaker on-site at all times, so they built this house back in the sixties.” Howard took the keys out of the ignition, then drummed his fingers nervously on the steering wheel. “I’m really sorry, Lina. I thought you knew. I can’t imagine what you’re thinking right now.”

“It’s a cemetery.” My voice was like weak tea.

He turned and looked at me, not quite making eye contact. “I know. And the last thing you need is a reminder of everything you’ve been through this year. But I think you’ll find that this place grows on you. It’s really peaceful and it has a lot of interesting history. Your mother loved it. And after being here almost seventeen years, I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

His voice was hopeful, but I slumped back in my seat, a swarm of questions taking flight in my mind. *If she loved it so much, then why didn’t she ever tell me about it? Why didn’t she ever talk about you until she got sick? And for the love of all that’s holy, what made her leave out the teeny-tiny detail that you’re my father?*

Howard absorbed my silence for a moment, then opened his car door. “Let’s head inside. I’ll get your suitcase.”

All six foot five of him walked around to the back of the car, and I leaned over to watch him in the side mirror. My grandma had been the one to fill in the blanks. *He’s your father; that’s why she wanted you to live with him.* I probably should

have seen it coming. It's just that good old buddy Howard's true identity seemed like the sort of thing my mother would have at least *mentioned*.

Howard closed the trunk, and I straightened up and started rifling through my backpack, buying myself another few seconds. *Lina, think. You're alone in a foreign country, a certifiable giant has just stepped forward as your father, and your new home could be the setting for a zombie apocalypse movie. Do something.*

But what? Short of wrestling the car keys from Howard, I couldn't think of a single way to get out of going into that house. Finally I unbuckled my seat belt and followed him to the front door.

Inside, the house was aggressively normal—like maybe it thought it could make up for its location if it just tried hard enough. Howard set my suitcase down in the front entryway, and then we walked into a living room with two overstuffed chairs and a leather sofa. There were a bunch of vintage travel posters on the walls, and the whole place smelled like it had been soaking in garlic and onions. But in a good way. Obviously.

"Welcome home," Howard said, switching on the main light. Fresh panic smacked me in the face, and he winced when he saw my expression. "I mean, welcome to Italy. I'm so glad you're here."

"Howard?"



“Hi, Sonia.”

A tall, gazelle-like woman stepped into the room. She was maybe a few years older than Howard, with coffee-colored skin and rows of gold bracelets on each arm. Gorgeous. And also a surprise.

“Lina,” she said, enunciating my name carefully. “You made it. How were your flights?”

I shifted from one foot to the other. Was someone going to introduce us? “They were okay. The last one was really long.”

“We’re so glad you’re here.” She beamed at me, and there was a thick moment of silence.

Finally I stepped forward. “So . . . you’re Howard’s wife?”

Howard and Sonia looked at each other and then practically started howling with laughter.

Lina Emerson. Comic genius.

Finally Howard got himself under control. “Lina, this is Sonia. She’s the assistant superintendent of the cemetery. She’s been working here even longer than I have.”

“Just by a few months,” Sonia said, wiping her eyes. “Howard always makes me sound like a dinosaur. My house is on the property too, a little closer to the memorial.”

“How many people live here?”

“Just us two. Now three,” Howard said.

“And about four thousand soldiers,” Sonia added, grinning. She squinted at Howard, and I glanced back just in time

to see him frantically running one finger across his throat. Nonverbal communication. Great.

Sonia's smile vanished. "Lina, are you hungry? I made a lasagna."

*That's* what that smell was. "I'm pretty hungry," I admitted. Understatement.

"Good. I made my specialty. Lasagna with extra-garlicky garlic bread."

"Yes!" Howard said, pumping his arm like a housewife on *The Price Is Right*. "You decided to spoil us."

"It's a special night, so I thought I'd go all out. Lina, you probably want to wash your hands. I'll dish up and you can meet us in the dining room."

Howard pointed across the living room. "Bathroom's over there."

I nodded, then set my backpack on the nearest chair before practically fleeing the room. The bathroom was miniature, barely big enough for a toilet and a sink, and I ran the water as hot as I could stand it, scrubbing the airport off my hands with a chip of soap from the edge of the sink.

While I scrubbed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and groaned. I looked like I'd been dragged through three different time zones. Which, to be fair, I had. My normally tan skin was pale and yellowish-looking, and I had dark circles under my eyes. And my *hair*. It had finally figured out a

way to defy the laws of physics. I wet both my hands and tried to smash down my curls, but it seemed to only encourage them. Finally I gave up. So what if I looked like a hedgehog who'd discovered Red Bull? Fathers are supposed to accept you as you are, right?

Music started up outside the bathroom and my nervousness kindled from a flame to a bonfire. Did I really need to eat dinner? Maybe I could go hide out in a room somewhere while I processed this whole cemetery thing. Or didn't process it. But then my stomach roared in protest and *ugh*. I did have to eat.

"There she is," Howard said, getting to his feet as I walked into the dining room. The table was set with a red-checkered cloth, and an old rock song I sort of recognized was playing from an iPod next to the entryway. I slid into the chair opposite them, and Howard sat down too.

"I hope you're hungry. Sonia's such a great cook, I think she missed her calling in life." Now that it wasn't just the two of us, he sounded way more relaxed.

Sonia beamed. "No way. I was destined for life at the memorial."

"It does look good." And by "good," I meant *amazing*. A steaming pan of lasagna sat next to a basket of thickly sliced garlic bread, and there was a salad bowl piled high with tomatoes and crisp-looking lettuce. It took every ounce

of willpower I had not to dive right onto the table.

Sonia cut into the lasagna, placing a big gooey square right in the center of my plate. "Help yourself to bread and salad. *Buon appetito*."

"*Buon appetito*," Howard echoed.

"*Buon appe* . . . something," I mumbled.

The second everyone was served, I picked up my fork and attacked my lasagna. I knew I probably looked like a wild mastodon, but after a full day of nothing but airline food, I couldn't help myself. Those portions were *miniature*. When I finally came up for air, Sonia and Howard were both staring at me, Howard looking mildly horrified.

"So, Lina, what kinds of things do you like to do?" Sonia asked.

I grabbed my napkin. "Besides scare people with my table manners?"

Howard chuckled. "Your grandmother told me you love running. She said you average about forty miles a week, and you're hoping to run in college."

"Well, that explains the appetite." Sonia scooped up another piece, and I gratefully held out my plate. "Do you run at school?"

"I used to. I was on the varsity cross-country team, but I forfeited my spot after we found out."

They both just looked at me.

". . . When we found out about the cancer? Practice took

up a lot of time, and I didn't want to leave town for all the meets and stuff."

Howard nodded. "I think the cemetery is a great place for a runner. Lots of space, and nice smooth roads. I used to run here all the time. Before I got fat and lazy."

Sonia rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You couldn't get fat if you tried." She nudged the basket of garlic bread toward me. "Did you know that your mother and I were friends? She was lovely. So talented and lively."

*Nope, didn't tell me that, either.* Was it possible I was falling prey to some elaborate kidnapping scheme? Would kidnapers feed you two pieces of the best lasagna you'd ever had? And if pressed, would they give you the recipe?

Howard cleared his throat, snapping me back to the conversation. "Sorry. Um, no. She never mentioned you."

Sonia nodded, her face expressionless, and Howard glanced at her, then back at me. "You're probably feeling pretty tired. Is there anyone you want to get in touch with? I messaged your grandmother when your plane arrived, but you're welcome to give her a call. I have an international plan on my cell phone."

"Can I call Addie?"

"Is that the friend you were living with?"

"Yeah. But I have my laptop. I could just use FaceTime instead."

“That might not work tonight. Italy isn’t exactly on the cutting edge of technology, and our Internet connection has been pretty slow all day. Someone’s coming by to take a look at it tomorrow, but in the meantime you can just use my phone.”

“Thanks.”

He pushed back from the table. “Would anyone like some wine?”

“Yes, please,” Sonia said.

“Lina?”

“Uh . . . I’m kind of underage.”

He smiled. “Italy doesn’t have a drinking age, so I guess it’s a little different around here. But no pressure either way.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Be right back.” He headed for the kitchen.

The room was quiet for about ten seconds, and then Sonia set her fork down. “I’m so happy you’re here, Lina. And I want you to know that if you need anything, I’m just a stone’s throw away. Literally.”

“Thanks.” I trained my eyes on a spot just over her left shoulder. Adults were always trying too hard around me. They thought that if they were nice enough they could make up for the fact that I’d lost my mom. It was kind of sweet and horrible at the same time.

Sonia glanced toward the kitchen and then lowered her voice. “I wanted to ask you, would you mind stopping by my

place sometime tomorrow? I have something I want to give you.”

“What?”

“We can talk about it then. Tonight you just focus on settling in.”

I just shook my head. I was going to do as little settling in as possible. I wasn’t even going to unpack my bag.

After dinner Howard insisted on carrying my suitcase upstairs. “I hope you like your room. I repainted and redecorated it a couple of weeks ago, and I think it turned out really nice. I keep most of the windows open in summer—it’s a lot cooler that way—but feel free to close yours if you’d prefer.” He spoke quickly, like he’d spent all afternoon rehearsing his welcome speech. He set my bag down in front of the first door.

“Bathroom is right across the hall, and I put some new soap and shampoo in there. Let me know what else you need and I’ll pick it up tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And like I said, the Internet’s been pretty spotty, but if you decide you want to try it out, our network is called ‘American Cemetery.’”

Of course it was. “What’s the Wi-Fi password?”

“Wall of the Missing. One word.”

“Wall of the Missing,” I repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a part of the memorial. There are a bunch of stone tablets listing the names of soldiers whose bodies were never recovered. I can show you tomorrow if you’d like.”

*Nooo, thank you.* “Well, I’m pretty tired, so . . .” I edged toward the door.

He took the hint, handing me a cell phone along with a slip of paper. “I wrote down instructions for dialing the States. You have to put in a country code as well as an area code. Let me know if you have any trouble.”

“Thanks.” I put the paper in my pocket.

“Good night, Lina.”

“Good night.”

He turned and walked down the hall, and I opened the door and dragged my suitcase into the room, feeling my shoulders sag with the relief of finally being alone. *Well, you’re really here*, I thought, *just you and your four thousand new friends*. There was a lock on the door and I turned it with a satisfying *click*. Then I slowly turned around, steeling myself for whatever Howard had meant by “really nice.” But then my heart practically stopped, because *wow*.

The room was perfect. Soft light glowed from this adorable gold lamp on the nightstand, and the bed was antique-looking, with about a thousand decorative pillows. A painted desk and dresser sat on opposite sides of the room, and a large oval mirror hung on the wall next to the door. There were even



a bunch of picture frames standing empty on the nightstand and dresser, like they were waiting for me to fill them up.

I stood there staring for a minute. It was just so *me*. How was it possible that someone who hadn't even met me had managed to put together my perfect bedroom? Maybe things *weren't* going to be so bad—

And then a gust of wind blew into the room, drawing my attention to the large open window. I'd ignored my own rule: *If it seems too good to be true, it probably is*. I walked over and stuck my head out. The headstones gleamed in the moonlight like rows of teeth, and everything was dark and eerily silent. No amount of pretty could make up for a view like that.

I pulled my head back in, then took the slip of paper out of my pocket. Time to start plotting my escape.



## Chapter 2



SADIE DANES MAY BE ONE OF THE WORST PEOPLE ON THE planet, but she'll always have a special place in my heart. After all, I owe her my best friend.

It was the beginning of seventh grade. Addie had just moved to Seattle from Los Angeles, and one day after gym class she'd overheard Sadie make a comment about how some of our classmates didn't actually need bras. Which, be real—we were in seventh grade; only about one percent of us actually needed bras. It's just that I was *particularly* less in need of one, and everyone knew she'd meant me. While I'd just ignored her (i.e., stuck my twelve-year-old head in my locker and blinked back tears), Addie had taken it upon herself to clothesline Sadie on her way out of the locker room. She'd stuck up for me that day and then never stopped.

“Go away. It might be Lina.” Addie's voice sounded distant, like she was holding the phone away from her face. “Hello?” she said into the speaker.

“Addie, it’s me.”

“Lina! IAN, GET AWAY FROM ME.” There was some muffled yelling and then what sounded like a Mexican knife fight going on between her and her brother. Addie had three older brothers, and rather than baby her, it seemed they’d unanimously agreed to treat her as one of the guys. It explained a lot about her personality.

“Sorry,” she said when she was finally back on the phone. “Ian’s an idiot. Someone ran over his phone, and now my parents say I have to share mine. I don’t care what happened. I am not giving his caveman friends my phone number.”

“Oh, come on, they’re not *that* bad.”

“Stop it. You know they are. This morning I walked in on one of them eating our cereal. He’d poured an entire box into a mixing bowl and was eating it with a *soup* ladle. I don’t think Ian was even home.”

I smiled and shut my eyes for a moment. If Addie were a superhero, her power would be Ability to Make Your Best Friend Feel Normal. Those first dark weeks after the funeral, she’d been the one to get me out of the house on runs and insist I do things like eat and shower. She was the kind of friend you knew you couldn’t possibly deserve.

“Hold up. Why are we wasting time talking about Ian’s friends? I’m assuming you’ve met Howard.”

I opened my eyes. “You mean my father?”

"I refuse to call him that. We didn't even know he was your father until like two months ago."

"Less," I said.

"Lina, you're killing me. What's he *like*?"

I glanced at my bedroom door. Music was still playing downstairs, but I lowered my voice anyway. "Let's just say I need to get out of here. Right away."

"What do you mean? Is he a creep?"

"No. He's actually kind of okay. And he's like NBA tall, which is surprising. But that's not the bad part." I took in a deep breath. She needed the full dramatic effect. "He's the caretaker of a cemetery. Which means I have to live in a cemetery."

"WHAT?"

I was ready for her outburst, holding the phone a good three inches from my ear.

"You have to live in a *cemetery*? Is he like a *gravedigger* or *something*?" She whispered the last part.

"I don't think they do burials here anymore. All the graves are from World War II."

"Like that's any better! Lina, we have to get you out of there. It isn't fair. First you lose your mom, and then you have to move halfway across the world to live with some guy who suddenly claims to be your father? And he lives in a *cemetery*? Come on, that's too much."

I sat down at the desk, scooting the chair around until my back was to the window. “Believe me, if I’d had any idea of what I was getting into, I would have pushed back even harder. This place is *weird*. There are headstones all over the place, and it feels like we’re really far from civilization. I saw some houses on the road coming in, but besides that it looks like there’s just forest surrounding the cemetery.”

“Shut up. I’m coming to get you. How much does a plane ticket cost? More than three hundred dollars? Because that’s all I have after our little run-in with the fire hydrant.”

“You didn’t even hit it that hard!”

“Tell that to the mechanic. Apparently the whole bumper had to be replaced. And I blame it on you entirely. If you hadn’t been jamming out, I probably wouldn’t have had to join in.”

I grinned, pulling up my feet to sit cross-legged. “It is *so* not my fault that you can’t control yourself when old-school Britney Spears comes on the radio. But do you need help paying for it? My grandparents are in charge of my finances, but I get a monthly allowance.”

“No, of course not. You’re going to need your money to get home from Italy. And I really do think my parents will be on board with you living here again. My mom thinks you’re a good influence. It took her like a month to get over the fact that you put your dishes in the dishwasher.”

“Well, I *am* pretty remarkable.”

“Tell me about it. Okay, I’ll talk to them soon. I just have to wait until my mom chills out. She’s in charge of this big football fund-raiser for Ian, and you’d think she was throwing a debutante ball. Seriously, she is stressing out *way* too much. She totally lost it last night when none of us ate her noodle casserole.”

“I like her noodle casserole. The one with tuna, right?”

“Ew, you do not like it. You were probably just starving because you’d gone on a nine-hundred-mile run. Also, you eat everything.”

“True,” I admitted. “But, Addie, remember, it’s my grandma we need to worry about convincing. She’s super on board with me living here.”

“Which makes absolutely no sense. Why would she send you halfway across the world to be with a stranger? She doesn’t even know him.”

“I don’t think she knew what else to do. On the drive to the airport she told me she’s thinking about moving with my grandpa into an assisted care center. Taking care of him is getting to be too much.”

“Which is why you should live with *us*.” She exhaled. “Don’t worry. You just leave Grandma Rachelle to me. I’ll take her out to buy some of those butterscotch candies all old people love, and we’ll talk about why the Bennett house is your best option.”

"Thanks, Addie." We both stopped talking, and the sound of insects and Howard's music filled the brief silence between us. I wanted to crawl right through the phone back to Seattle. How was I going to survive without Addie?

"Why are you being so quiet? Is Gravedigger there?"

"I'm in my bedroom, but I get the feeling that sound travels in this house. I don't know if he can hear me or not."

"Great. So you can't even speak freely. We'd better come up with a code word so I know if you're okay. Say 'bluebird' if you're being held hostage."

"Bluebird'? Isn't it supposed to be a word that doesn't sound out of the ordinary?"

"Crap. Now I'm confused. You said the word, but I don't know if you meant it. Are you or are you not being held hostage?"

"No, Addie. I'm not being held hostage." I sighed. "Except maybe to the promise I made to my mom."

"Yeah, but do promises really count if you make them under false pretenses? No offense, but your mom wasn't exactly forthcoming about why she wanted you to go to Italy."

"I know." I breathed out. "I'm hoping there was some reason for that."

"Maybe."

I looked over my shoulder at the window. The moon was skimming the dark tree line, and if I hadn't known any better

I would have thought the view was crazy pretty. "I'd better go. I'm using his cell phone, and this is probably costing a fortune."

"Okay. Call me again as soon as you can. And seriously, don't worry. We'll have you out of there in no time."

"Thanks, Addie. Hopefully I can FaceTime you tomorrow."

"I'll be waiting by my computer. How do they say good-bye in Italy? 'Choo'? 'Chow'?"

"I have no idea."

"Liar. You're the one who's always talked about traveling the world."

"Hello and good-bye is '*ciao*.'"

"I knew it. *Ciao*, Lina."

"*Ciao*."

Our call disconnected and I set the phone on the desk, my throat tight. I missed her already.

"Lina?"

*Howard!* I practically tipped over in my chair. Had he been eavesdropping?

I scrambled to my feet, then opened the door a couple of inches. Howard was standing in the hallway holding a bunch of folded white towels that had been stacked up like a wedding cake.

"I hope I didn't interrupt you," he said quickly. "I just remembered I meant to give you these."



I studied his face, but it was as bland as whipped cream. Apparently being related meant nothing. I had no idea if he'd overheard my conversation with Addie.

I hesitated for a second, then opened the door wider and took the towels from him. "Thank you. And here's your phone." I grabbed it from the desk, then handed it to him.

"So . . . what do you think?"

I flushed. "About . . . ?"

"About your room."

"Oh. It's great. Really pretty."

A big, relieved grin spread across his face. It was definitely the first genuine one of the night, and he looked about a hundred pounds lighter. Also, his smile was kind of lopsided.

"Good." He leaned against the door frame. "I know I don't have the best taste, but I wanted it to be nice. A friend helped me paint the desk and dresser, and Sonia and I found the mirror at a flea market."

Ugh. Now I had the image of him traipsing around Italy looking for stuff he thought I'd like. Why the sudden interest? As far as I knew, he'd never even sent me a birthday card.

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble," I said.

"It wasn't any trouble. Really."

He smiled again, and there was a long uncomfortable pause. The whole night had felt like being on a blind date with someone I had nothing in common with. No, it was

worse. Because we *did* have something in common. We just weren't talking about it. *When are we going to talk about it?*

Hopefully never.

Howard bobbed his head. "Well, good night, Lina."

"Good night."

His footsteps faded down the hall and I shut and locked the door again. My nineteen hours of travel had worked its way to the center of my forehead, and I had an insane headache. Time for this day to be over.

I put the towels on my dresser, then kicked off my shoes and took a flying leap onto the bed, sending sprays of decorative pillows in every direction. *Finally*. The bed was as soft as it looked and the sheets smelled awesome, like when my mom had sometimes hung ours on the line to dry. I wriggled under the covers and switched off the lamp.

Loud laughter erupted from downstairs. The music was still at full blast, and either they were doing the dishes or playing a loud round of indoor croquet, but who cared? After the day I'd had, I could fall asleep anywhere.

I had just drifted into that murky half-sleep phase when Howard's voice brought me back to consciousness.

"She's really quiet."

My eyes snapped open.

"I don't think that's surprising, considering the scenario," Sonia answered.

I didn't move a muscle. Apparently Howard didn't think sound traveled through open windows.

He lowered his voice. "Of course. It was just kind of a surprise. Hadley was so . . ."

"Lively? She really was. But Lina might surprise you. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she turned out to have some of her mother's oomph."

He laughed quietly. "Oomph.' That's one way to put it."

"Give her a little time."

"Of course. Thanks again for dinner—it was delicious."

"My pleasure. I'm planning on posting up at the visitors' center tomorrow morning. Will you be in the office?"

"In and out. I'd like to be off early so I can take Lina into town."

"Sounds good. Night, boss." Sonia's footsteps crunched down the gravel driveway and a moment later the front door opened and then closed again.

I forced my eyes shut, but it was like I had soda pop running through my veins. What had Howard expected? That I'd be overjoyed about moving in with someone I'd never met? That I'd be super excited about living in a cemetery? It's not like it was a big secret that I hadn't wanted to come here. I'd agreed only when my grandma had pulled out the big guns: *You promised your mom.*

And why did he have to call me "quiet"? I *hated* being

called quiet. People always said it like it was some kind of deficiency—like just because I didn't put everything out there right away, I was unfriendly or arrogant. My mom had understood. *You may be slow to warm up, but once you do, you light up the whole room.*

Tears flooded my eyes and I rolled over, pressing my face into my pillow. Now that it had been more than six months, I could sometimes go whole hours pretending to be okay without her. But it never lasted long. Turns out reality is as hard and unforgiving as that fire hydrant Addie and I had run into.

And I had to live the whole rest of my life without her. I really did.

## Chapter 3

**"LOOK, THAT WINDOW'S OPEN. SOMEONE MUST BE HERE."**

The voice was practically in my ear and I sat bolt upright. Where was I? Oh. Right. In a cemetery. Only now it was saturated with sunlight, and my bedroom was 890 degrees. Give or take a hundred.

"Wouldn't you think they'd have signs telling you where to go?" It was a woman's voice, her accent as tangy as barbeque sauce.

A man answered. "Gloria, this looks like a private residence. I don't think we should be poking around—"

"Yoo-hoo! Hello? Anyone home?"

I pushed off my covers and got out of bed, tripping over a smattering of decorative pillows. I was still fully dressed. I'd been so tired that pajamas hadn't even crossed my mind.

"Hell-ooo," the woman trilled again. "Anyone there?"

I gathered my hair into a bun so I wouldn't scare anyone, then went over to the window to see two people who

matched their voices *exactly*. The woman had fire-engine-red hair and wore high-waisted shorts, and the man wore a fishing hat and had a massive camera around his neck. They were even wearing fanny packs. I stifled a giggle. Addie and I had once won a costume contest dressed as Tacky Tourists. These two could have been our inspiration.

“Hell-o,” Real-Life Tacky Tourist said slowly. She pointed at me. “Do you speak-a the English?”

“I’m American too.”

“Thank the heavens! We were just looking for Howard Mercer, the superintendent? Where can we find him?”

“I don’t know. I’m . . . new here.” The view caught my eye and I looked up. The trees outside my window were a rich, velvety green and the sky was maybe bluer than I’d ever seen. But I was still in a cemetery. I repeat: Still. In. A. Cemetery.

Tacky Tourist looked at the man, then back up at me, settling her weight into one hip like *You can’t get rid of me that easily*.

“I’ll check to see if he’s in the house.”

“Now you’re talking,” she said. “We’ll be around front.”

I unzipped my suitcase and changed into a tank top and running shorts, then found my shoes and headed downstairs. The main floor was pretty small and, besides Howard’s bedroom, the only room I hadn’t seen yet was the study. I knocked just in case, then pushed my way inside. The walls were lined

with framed Beatles albums and photographs, and I stopped to look at a picture of Howard and a few other people throwing buckets of water on a huge, gorgeous elephant. Howard was wearing cargo pants and a safari hat and looked like the star of some kind of adventure nature show. *Howard Bathes Wild Animals*. He obviously hadn't spent the past sixteen years sitting around missing my mom and me.

"Sorry, Tacky Tourists. No sign of Howard." I headed for the front, all ready to tell The Tackys I couldn't help them, but when I walked into the living room I jumped like I'd stepped on a live wire. The woman was not only waiting for me out front, but she'd pressed her face up against the window and was peering in at me like an enormous bug.

*Over here. Over here!* she mouthed, pointing to the front door.

"You've got to be joking me." I put my hand to my chest. My heart was going like a million beats per minute. You'd think life in a cemetery would be a lot more . . . dead. *Ba dum tss!* My first official cemetery joke. And first official eye rolling at own cemetery joke.

I pushed the door open and the woman trundled back a couple of inches.

"Sorry, darling. Did I startle you? You looked like your eyes were going to bug out of your head." She was wearing one of those stick-on name tags. HELLO, MY NAME IS GLORIA.

"I didn't expect you to be . . . looking in." I shook my

head. "I'm sorry, but Howard's not here. He said something about having an office; maybe you could go look for him there?"

Gloria nodded. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, here's the problem, doll. We only have three hours before the tour bus comes back for us, and we want to be sure we see everything. I just don't think we have the time to be traipsing all over looking for Mr. Mercer."

"Did you see the visitors' center? There's a woman who works there who might know where he is."

"I told you we should try that," the man said. "This is a *home*."

"Which one's the visitors' center?" Gloria asked. "Was it that building near the entrance?"

"I'm sorry, I really don't know." Probably because the night before I'd been way too panicked to notice anything but the army of headstones staring me down.

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, I hate to inconvenience you, *darlin'*, but I'm sure you know this place better than a couple of tourists from Alabama."

"Actually, I don't."

"What?"

I sighed, casting one more hopeful glance back into the house, but it was as quiet as a tomb. (*Ack!* Second cemetery joke.) Guess I was going to have to jump headfirst into this



whole living-in-a-memorial thing. I stepped out onto the porch and pulled the door shut behind me. “I don’t really know my way around, but I’ll try to help.”

Gloria smiled beatifically. “Grah-zee-aye.”

I walked down the stairs, the two of them following after me.

“They sure do keep this place up nice,” Gloria observed. “Real nice.”

She was right. The lawns were so green they looked spray-painted, and practically every corner had a grouping of Italian and American flags surrounded by patches of *Wizard of Oz*-worthy flowers. The headstones were white and sparkly and didn’t look nearly as creepy in the daylight. But don’t get me wrong. They were still creepy.

“Let’s go this way.” I marched toward the road Howard and I had driven in on.

Gloria nudged me with her elbow. “My husband and I met on a cruise.”

*Oh, no.* Was she going to tell me their life story? I slid a quick glance at Gloria and she smiled engagingly. Of course she was.

“He’d just lost his wife, Anna Maria. She was a nice lady, but real particular about how she kept house—one of those who puts plastic on all the furniture? Anyway, my husband, Clint, had passed a few years earlier, so that’s why we were both there on the singles cruise. They had great food—just