

Prologue

Steve Grant's heart pounded as if it might hammer its way right out of his chest. He took a measured breath, stretched an arm across the back of Annie's chair and settled into his stadium seat. *What's the problem, man? You've faced down Billy Ray Butler and Crush Davis, stared them down across home plate, in front of a sold-out crowd without breaking a sweat; you can do this. It's the right thing to do.*

The band's drums, trumpets and trombones belted out the Michigan fight song. "Let's! Go! Blue!" The Ann Arbor crowd cheered as one.

"Why'd you give up your fifty-yard-line seats for these nosebleeds?" Annie raised her eyebrows.

"Lemme go," the three-year-old behind her shrieked as he strained and bucked in his mother's arms.

Annie winced, covered her ear and gave Steve a knowing look. When they went out without her children, he knew she wanted a break from *all* kids. These seats cost a small fortune; who in the hell brings their kid along? Steve scanned the packed seats around them—not a damn kid in sight. What were the chances they'd be sitting right in front of the only holy terror?

"One of our paralegals, Pete McGaffy, has his dad in town this weekend to celebrate his first year cancer free. Pete helped me a couple of times so when I found out his dad's a huge Michigan fan, I gave them my tickets and got these instead." He glared at the kid beating an annoying tattoo on the back of Annie's chair, tempted to grab the little ankle to still him. "We have a great view of the whole field from here. Besides, I thought you'd enjoy sitting with Notre Dame fans instead of the enemy for a change."

Annie had gone to Notre Dame and was a die-hard Irish fan, where as a Michigan alum, Steve's season tickets bordered the Michigan sideline. She held out her hand for the binoculars and jerked forward as the kid pounded her chair with both of his feet. Stiff backed, Annie scooted forward in her chair.

"Switch seats with me." Steve stood and pulled Annie out of her seat. She should

be safe in front of the dad.

Annie stood and threw the little brat that warning look mothers seem to perfect, before slowly lowering herself into the other seat. Not exactly the mood he wanted to set. He hoped it wasn't an omen. *Chill, man. She's gonna love it.*

He looked at the giant scoreboard—five minutes to halftime. Steve settled back in the seat, rubbed tight neck muscles, and rolled his shoulders.

He'd chosen these seats carefully. The first row in club level seating had lots of leg room, a bird's eye view of the whole field, and the cameramen should have no trouble zooming in on them. It was perfe—the boy put a sticky hand on Steve's head and lunged over his shoulder, nearly falling into his lap. Steve caught him and shoved him back at his parents.

"Henry. I'm sooo sorry. Really. Sorry. I . . ." His mortified mother tried to lift him onto her lap, but the little boy arched his back and bellowed.

"That's enough!" the father said. He handed his wife his beer and reached for the boy at the same time the kid jumped up, knocking her arm.

The halftime buzzer sounded loudly as Steve lunged forward, but he couldn't right the cup before a wave of beer cascaded over the lip, splashing all over Annie's shoulder, arm, and chest.

Annie gasped, jumped up and whirled on the threesome. Fury burned in her eyes as she shook her arm, spraying beer. "Are you freaking kidding me? What's *wrong* with you people? Haven't you ever heard of a babysitter?"

Steve stepped back and stared in horror. The pink of Annie's shirt grew increasingly dark as it soaked up the beer.

"I'm *so* sorry." The woman rummaged in her bag, yanked out some baby wipes and held them out to Annie. "I . . . please. We'll pay for dry-cleaning."

Annie snatched the wipes, made a few futile dabs at her arm before throwing them on her seat and pushing past Steve.

"Laaadies and geeen-tlemen," The announcer drew out.

Steve grabbed her arm. "Where're you going?"

"Preee-sent-ing the two-hundred thirty-five member Michigan marching Band. Baaa-nd . . . take the field."

Annie frowned as if he was crazy. "To the bathroom."

"Now? You can't go now."

Eyes widening, she plucked the wet shirt from her chest. "I'm *covered* in beer."

Shit. Shit. Shit. "Uh . . . there'll be a long line. Just wait a little bit." He turned her toward the field. "Watch the show." He glanced at the forty-seven by eighty-five-foot screen to see the camera zooming in on them. He pointed toward the field. "Look, they're spelling out something."

"I don't care." She tried to pull free.

Steve tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Listen. It's that Bruno Mars song you love."

"What is wrong with you?" She glared. "I'm soaked and smell like a frat party."

Steve pivoted her toward the field and locked his arms around her. "*Look.*"

The band had spelled out "M-A-R-R-Y M-E" and dissolved to reform one last word. "A-N-N-I-E."

The announcer boomed, "Weeeell, Annie?"

Annie looked toward the huge board where the camera had zoomed in on them and they stood larger than life. Her glare melted as awareness set in. She brushed her hair back and a tentative smile flickered across her face.

Steve released her. He wiped damp palms on his thighs, then dropped to one knee and took her hand. "Will you marry me, Annie?"

Hand covering her mouth, Annie dragged her gaze from the huge screen long enough to nod at him. Her glance darted back and forth from the screen to him. She thrust out her left hand. He took the ring box from his pocket, then slid the ring onto her finger.

Annie yanked her hand back and after a quick inspection of the 3-carat marquise, held it up for everybody to see as if she were a winner lofting her trophy. Steve pulled her into his arms for a hug while the crowd cheered and clapped.

Smile, Steve. Even if he couldn't give her his heart, he'd embarrassed himself in front of millions of people and given her her dream proposal. The love would come.

Chapter 1

Even the best-made plans were subject to the whims of fate, and Jenny Harrison believed in embracing Lady Destiny's cues. She grabbed her list and the gallon-size baggie of cookies, whistled for Ritz and rushed through the hedge separating the driveway from their neighbor's. With the golden retriever prancing at her heels, she breezed through Steve's back door, calling out, "Hey, Grant?"

"Kitchen." Steve, with his maroon silk tie tucked into his white dress shirt, leaned over his sink and bit a pickle. He saluted her with the dill. "Lunch?"

"No, thanks, we'll catch something on the road. Save room; I made your favorite, pecan chocolate chip." She held up the cookies.

Steve took the bag. "Mmmm. They're still warm. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. We really appreciate your taking care of Ritz and the house. With the trial ramping up, I know you're crazy busy."

"No problem." He polished off the pickle and pulled the cookie bag open.

The sweet scent of fresh-baked cookie and warm chocolate commingled with the acetous pickle smell. Jenny winced. Gross. Shaking her head, she laid down the list. "Here's the number of the Saugatuck Inn—in case of an emergency—though we'll both have our cells." She frowned and craned her neck to read the upside down list. "And . . . you have a key to the house. We won't set the alarm. There should be plenty of dog food in the garage, and I stopped the newspapers." She looked up. "Questions?"

"Jen, you'll only be gone three and a half days." Then at her steady look, he sighed. "Got it."

Jenny reached for her back pocket and fingered the bulky line there, thinking. She couldn't wait to share her good news. Ordinarily she'd want it to be Gabe, but under the circumstances, maybe a test run on Steve might be good.

"What?" He raised his eyebrows and polished off the cookie. "Out with it. You look like the cat who swallowed the canary and got her cream too."

Jenny smiled, whipped the plastic stick from her back pocket and waved it

around. "I'm pregnant."

"You're . . .?" His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "That's great. Right? Is it great?"

She nodded and smiled. "It's amazing."

"Pregnant? Wow. What'd Gabe say?"

"He doesn't know. I just found out myself. I'm going to tell him this weekend."

She grinned a wide silly grin, then bit her lower lip. "I'm going to have a baby."

"Congratulations, kid. You're gonna be a great mom."

"Thanks." Jenny smiled, still a little shocked. She fingered the stick, staring at the blue line, then slipped it back in her pocket. That wasn't so bad. In just a few minutes Steve had lost that stunned look. It'd be fine. Everything would be fine.

Jenny crouched down and rubbed the big dog's head between her hands. "Be a good girl, Ritz." Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed her husband's red Volkswagen zipping up their driveway. She stood and headed for the door. "Gotta run. Thanks."

"Have fun."

"See ya." Jenny rushed out the door and trotted across the drives to her Jeep. She faced Gabe with a cheerful smile. "Hi."

Gabe walked over and planted a quick kiss on her lips. "Ready to go?"

"Car's all packed, but—" She reached out and took his hand. Threading her fingers between his, Jenny held on to keep his attention. "I have a tiny favor to ask."

He raised his eyebrows. "Tiny, eh?"

She nodded. "Hardly anything at all."

"Shoot."

"Would you mind very much stopping by the clinic on the way out?"

"Be-cause . . ."

"Because . . . I sort of promised Tommy you'd take a look at his little brother. You know, the eleven-year-old boy I interviewed for the foster care article. His half brother and sister live with their grandma, and his little brother's been sick for the past week. Grandma works as a cleaning lady and doesn't have insurance, so she won't take the boy to the doctor."

"So you told Tommy I'd examine him." Gabe looked down at her, his expression hard to read.

"I did." She winced. "Do you mind very much? It shouldn't take long and it's on the way. I was hoping that if I got a chance to talk to the grandma, I could help her see that the clinic isn't such a bad place."

"What time are we supposed to meet them?"

She pulled her hand free to look at her watch. "Eleven forty-five—shoot, we're gonna be late."

"We'd better get a move on."

Relief lightening her heart, Jenny ran around the Jeep and jumped into the passenger's side. They drove down Lakeshore Drive. The huge century-old elms shading Grosse Pointe neighborhoods gave way to the stark, concrete city streets of Detroit.

Settling back in her seat, Jenny took in the tired neighborhoods, pausing on the occasional abandoned home where the peeling paint of white-framed windows highlighted dark, gaping holes. A few windows had unbroken, grimy glass, but most held jagged broken panes looking like sharp wicked teeth in a monstrous dirty brick face.

Green bushes and weeds grew three feet tall around the decaying buildings, as if trying to hide the dangerous eyesores.

Jenny turned to Gabe wondering if the worn dereliction saddened him as it did her, or, since he drove this route once a week, had he become immune to the neglect. His attention seemed focused on avoiding the potholes rather than inspecting the neighborhood.

Ten minutes later, they pulled up outside the one-story red brick clinic. Tommy stood beside an elderly lady with white hair and a ramrod-straight back. She wore a dark woolen coat and no-nonsense shoes. A little girl about four years old clutched the woman's hand while a boy about seven slumped against her as if exhausted.

"Hi, guys." Jenny smiled broadly and held out her hand to the woman. "You must be Tommy's grandmother. I'm Jenny and this is my husband, Gabe."

The woman stared at her several long seconds, then looked at her hand before slowly raising her own and shaking Jenny's. "Abigail Johnson. Tommy said you might could help Sammy here."

"Why, sure we can." She smiled reassuringly at the little boy. Poor little guy's eyelids drooped over eyes dulled with pain. "Hi, Sammy, I'm Jenny."

"Miss Jenny," his grandma corrected and gave the boy a raised eyebrow and a telling stare for emphasis.

Sammy's head rolled up and the edges of his lips rose in a weak smile. "Miss Jenny."

Jenny turned and bent until she was face-to-face with the little girl. "I like your pigtails. What's your name?"

"Clarisse," she whispered, in a darling little lisp.

"Isn't that a pretty name?"

Gabe rested a hand on Jenny's back. "Why don't we move inside? Jenny will get the paperwork from Sharon while I find us an empty exam room."

Gabe urged the group toward the Plexiglas, bulletproof door. The thin, bespectacled guard sitting behind a scarred desk gave them a broad smile and buzzed them in.

"Hey, Doc."

"How's it goin', Max?"

"Fine. Jus' fine. You workin' today?"

"Nope, just got a friend here I need to take care of and then we'll be out of your hair."

Jenny ushered them toward the receptionist, stopping when she felt a tug on her arm. Abigail Johnson looked her in the eye. "I don't have money for this. Wish I did, but with the two little ones and . . . well—I just don't."

"Grammy J, I told you, Miss Jenny said it's free," Tommy broke in.

She scowled at him. "Hush now. I'm talkin' to Miss Jenny."

Jenny leaned close. "Please, it's just Jenny. Don't worry, Mrs. Johnson, he's right; it is free. We just need you to fill out some forms, but there's no charge."

The woman nodded and put a bony hand on Jenny's arm. "You can call me Grammy J."

Jenny smiled. She'd never had a grandma she remembered, and this stern old lady

warmed her heart. Jenny seated her charges and got the new patient forms from the receptionist. Grammy J sat with the little girl on her lap, clutching her like a shield. Her nostrils flared wide and her knee bounced so hard Jenny worried little Clarisse's eyeballs rattling around in the poor mite's head would give her permanent eye damage—that is, if she wasn't catapulted off her grandma's knees.

Sitting next to them, Jenny handed the clipboard of papers to Grammy J.

She stopped her nervous galloping and accepted the board. After several seconds of peering at the paper over Clarisse's shoulder, Grammy J passed the clipboard to Tommy. "I can't concentrate."

Tommy obediently took the forms and slowly, with meticulous printing, began to fill them out. Occasionally he whispered a question to Grammy J, who murmured an answer. Then he handed her the pen and pointed to the spot on the consent form needing her signature.

Gabe came back to get Sammy. "Mrs. Johnson, would you like to come too?"

"No, I'll keep an eye on this one. Tommy'll go along." She nudged Tommy, then grabbed Sammy's thin arm. "You do what the doctor says, hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered. Sammy slipped his hand into his brother's and followed Gabe down the hall.

"I can watch Clarisse if you want to go with Sammy," Jenny offered.

"Tommy'll do."

"You've done a wonderful job with the children. They're very polite and sweet."

Staring at the hall her grandsons disappeared down, Grammy J sighed. "I try. It about tore me up to have to send Tommy away, but he better off outta that neighborhood." She looked at Jenny. "You know, you try to do the right thing. You take 'em to church and try to raise 'em right, but with the gangs and the drugs, they just won't let 'em be. Them kids were after Tommy for weeks to join up, but I sent him away. He better off."

"I'm sorry. It sounds like you're doing the right thing. I know Tommy misses his brother and sister, but the Jeromes are nice people and make sure he visits, right?"

"Not enough. I shouldn't have to get permission from nobody when I needs to take my own flesh and blood outta school to he'p his brother," Grandma J whispered. She looked sideways at Jenny. "You got kids?"

"Me? Uh—" Jenny resisted the urge to put a hand to her stomach; instead she shook her head. "Stepchildren. But they're in college."

"None of your own?"

Not really. Not yet. "No. Children are a lot of responsibility."

Grammy J's head bobbed. "Amen to that."

"Well, I think you're doing an awesome job." She smiled and ducked her head to look at the four-year old. "Isn't she?"

Clarisse nodded shyly.

"Would you like a juice box Miss Clarisse?" At the enthusiastic nod, Jenny looked at Grammy J. "Can I get you both a juice, or perhaps you'd like coffee?"

"No. Thank you."

Jenny went off to the kitchen to get drinks. On her way back, she ran into Gabe and the boys.

"Will he live?" Jenny teased.

“Should.” Gabe looked at Grammy J. “He’s got a pretty good ear infection going, but after a few days of antibiotics, he’ll be fine. I’ll get the medicine, then we can be on our way.”

Jenny handed out the juices. Grammy J sat stiffly in the plastic chair. Her knee began fanatically springing again as she constantly scanned the near-empty waiting room as if expecting an attack. Poor thing couldn’t have looked more uncomfortable.

Jenny turned Tommy aside so they faced the wall. “You know there are free programs to help her learn to read.”

“What?”

“She can learn to read; she’s not too old.” Jenny looked into his eyes. “You can’t always be there to help her.”

Tommy stood up tall and lifted his chin. “Who says she can’t read?”

“I says.”

“She’s too proud,” he whispered.

“Maybe I can talk to her after I get back from vacation.”

“Maybe.” He gave her a considering look before breaking into a broad smile.

“She likes you.”

“I like her too.”

Gabe returned, gave Grammy J the medicine and explained the dosage. He looked at Jenny. “How about we give these nice people a ride home?”

Grammy J frowned. “We don’t want to trouble you.”

He held the door open for them. “No trouble. I insist.”

“Thank you.” She looked up with solemn eyes and nodded. “For everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jenny’s heart swelled with pride. She caught Gabe’s eye, and mouthed, “I love you.”

He winked and opened the car door for her.

They piled into Jenny’s Jeep, dropped the Johnsons home and Tommy at school.

After Tommy disappeared behind the dark wooden doors, Jenny turned in her seat.

“You’re a good man, Gabriel Harrison.”

Gabe stretched out in the passenger’s seat. “I try.”

She smiled at his glib answer. “I know how precious your free time is. Thanks for doing that for me.”

He gave her a warm look. “My pleasure.”

Some husbands would be seriously derailed at starting their vacation several hours late because their wives committed them to a good deed, but not Gabe. Her husband was a sweetie, a real angel. She just hoped what she had to tell him wouldn’t wreck things.

“What would I do without you?”

He threaded his fingers through hers. “Don’t worry, you’re never gonna get the chance to find out.”

#

Driving down I-94 in her new sapphire blue Jeep, they sped past Detroit Metro airport before Jenny remembered the present. “Oh. With all the commotion, I forgot about your anniversary present. Look in the glove compartment.”

Gabe pulled out the flat, square gift. Though the distinctive shape pretty much

precluded the reason for wrapping the CD, Jenny had chosen brightly colored paper and tied a stylish gold wire-rimmed bow around it. “Guess who.”

“Isn’t the appropriate gift for a second anniversary paper or tin foil or pottery?”

“Close. Guess who.”

“Kelly Clarkson?”

“Would I get you *my* favorite singer as a present?”

“You got me headphones for Christmas so *you* could sleep while I watched TV in bed.”

“That’s different,” she dismissed airily. “That was a gift to both of us. You get to watch the whole TV show in bed, and I don’t have to harass you to turn it off when I want to go to sleep.”

“And that’s different . . . How?”

“It’s cheaper than marriage counseling,” she said in mock warning.

Gabe laughed and tore open the wrapping, revealing a classic Chuck Mangione recording. “Jazz. Great. Thanks, honey.” He reached out a hand to massage her shoulder. Jenny leaned into his touch, enjoying the way his fingers lingered at the nape of her neck and toyed with her hair.

“You’re welcome. Why don’t you pop it in?”

They drove west across Michigan to the relaxing sounds of the horn while the tension lines eased from around Gabe’s eyes. The hectic pace of his general surgery practice combined with his volunteering at the inner city clinic took its toll.

The breeze from the open window whipped Gabe’s short hair. He propped one sneaker-clad foot on the dash and slumped deeper in his seat. “Are you in mourning yet? Now that Steve and Annie are engaged.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Funny. She’s not who *I* would’ve picked for him, but I’ll be nice to her.”

Gabe chuckled. “You hate her.”

She shot him a quick, accusing look before returning her attention to the road. “You don’t like her either.”

“He could do better.”

“So why Annie? And proposing at a football game?” She rolled her eyes. “How private and romantic.”

“It had national coverage. She loved it.”

“She would,” Jenny muttered. “Think she’s pregnant?”

One eyebrow arched over mirrored aviator glasses. “*Not* nice.”

Yeah . . . this “nice” thing would take some practice.

Gabe rummaged through the cooler for a Coke Zero and opened it with a loud pfft. Holding it out to Jenny for a sip, his hand jerked, sending soda splashing across the center console.

“Shoot.” He grabbed a Kleenex to swipe at the drops sliding down the side of his seat.

Jenny swallowed a quick gulp and handed the can back. “Thanks.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gabe’s hand tremble violently as he raised the can to his lips. This wasn’t the first time she’d noticed his hand shaking, but it seemed to come and go.

He glanced sideways and flashed her a rueful grin. “Better lay off the caffeine.”

She gasped. “Leadless?” They’d always disdained decaf coffee.

He stared at the black can in his hand and sighed. “Soda, too.”

Jenny laughed at his sorrowful look. Gabe loved his morning coffee and was a bear until he’d downed at least half a cup. The hand jitters made him more nervous than she would have thought. Did he know something he wasn’t telling her? She peeked at him out of the corner of her eye again. It was probably nothing a little less caffeine wouldn’t cure. They’d give it up together. Caffeine wasn’t good for the baby anyway.

Before Benton Harbor, they turned north onto a less-populated road. They drove up the coast past near-empty beaches now lying dormant in the off-season. The musty smell of lake water gave way to the distant scent of burning leaves. Harbors sat quiet, where a few remaining boats waited patiently to be dry-docked and stored for the winter.

“Hey, Gabe?”

“Hmm.”

Jenny kept her eyes on the road. Her fingers flexed around the steering wheel. “What would you think of our having a baby?”