

EMBER

The Free Novella

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From Me to You

I want to begin by thanking each and every one of you for embracing the story of Dane and Bridget the way that you have. The characters took on a life of their own and as I told their story, I was excited by all the positive notes and messages I received. Dane is a special kind of hero. He'll always hold a place in my heart.

This free gift novella continues the story of the characters after the end of EMBER – Part Three. It offers a glimpse into the challenges that Dane and Bridget have to face once they arrive back in New York City.

Although this will be the final chapter in their love story, you will see more of these characters in books I'll be releasing next year. Look for both Dane and his love, Bridget, to pop up where you least expect them.

With all my love and gratitude,

Deborah xo

****Please note: This free novella is best read after the RISE series. If you haven't yet read the RISE series, and you plan on it, please do that first. There are RISE series spoilers in this novella.**

Chapter 1

"No, Dane, you can't mean that." I wrap my right hand around the left without thinking, cupping my fingers into my palm. "What happened? Why don't you want to marry me now?"

He rubs his hands over his face, a small sigh escaping his lips into the barren stillness of the room. "That's not what I said, Bridget. I only asked you to give me back the ring."

My eyes fall to my hands and the simple ring he placed on my finger only a few days ago when we were still in Paris. It had been his late father's wedding ring. A talented jeweler in a small shop near where we lived in France had crafted the band into a delicate engagement ring complete with a small diamond.

I've never been the type to dream of a dramatic ring that captured the light whenever I moved my hand. This ring, the ring I'm now hiding from Dane's view, is the only ring I've ever wanted. It's meaning reaches far beyond the promise of a happily-ever-after. This ring represents the bond that Dane's parents shared. It's that love that brought him into this world. I can't imagine a more perfect symbol of my love for him. Now, he wants to take it back with no explanation.

"I'm going to buy you a new ring." His large hand rests over mine. "I want us to go this week to pick one out."

A wave of relief washes over me and I tap my fingers across his knuckles. "Did your brother say something to you about the ring? You told Landon you gave me your father's ring and he got mad, didn't he?"

His fingers wrap around mine, the grip too tense to signal anything but stress. I've known something was amiss since Landon, Dane's older brother, called him in Paris the day before yesterday asking him to fly back to New York immediately.

We'd had our return tickets from Paris booked for almost two months and Zoe, my best friend, had been excited to pick us up from the airport. I haven't seen her or Vanessa since Dane and I found out I was pregnant. When Landon called and told Dane he was using his connections as a pilot with the airline to change our flights, he had argued briefly but then his entire demeanor had changed.

Landon had embraced me tenderly at the airport after our flight landed, telling me he was overjoyed to meet me. When he'd wrapped his arms around Dane, he'd wept. Dane had held onto him tightly, patting his back, trying to comfort him.

The only words spoken on the drive back to our apartment were between Landon and Dane. It was shallow drivel about the weather in New York and Paris and when Dane planned on going back to work.

I'd kissed Dane goodbye after he and Landon carried our bags up to our apartment. He needed time alone with his brother he told me. The grim expression on his face that had settled there two days ago had shifted to something else. It might have been frustration laced with fear but I knew as I touched my fingers to his cheek that when he came back to the apartment, that things would be different. I couldn't have known that my engagement ring would factor into it.

"There's no easy way to say this, Bridget." He leans forward to brush his lips across my forehead. "Something has happened. It's my father."

I study his face. The entire time I've known Dane, he's rarely spoken about his dad. The pain of the day his father drowned is still there within him. It may not be obvious to anyone else, but I see it when he's sitting alone and staring at nothing, his mind lost

in thought. I hear it when he rests his head against my stomach and whispers to our baby that he's going to be the best father that ever lived.

My fiancé has expertly navigated his life around the hole that was left by his father's death. Now, as we're on the brink of starting our own family, I can't be surprised that memories of the years he spent with his dad are flooding back to him.

"Did your brother say something to you about the baby?" I absentmindedly rub my hand across the front of the black sleeveless sweater I'm wearing. "He didn't want us to rush back here so he could talk about your dad, did he? That could have waited until we came back next week."

He shakes his head slowly from side-to-side, his gaze falling to my stomach. "What I'm about to tell you changes nothing, Bridget. We are still getting married as soon as we can and our baby is going to have the best life any child has ever had."

I feel the beat of my heart throughout my entire body. His tone is measured and calm. This isn't just about some fleeting doubts he may be experiencing. This is something more. "Just tell me. Tell me, Dane."

"Landon needed me to come back... he called my mother too," he begins before he pulls me tightly into his arms. "My father is alive. He's been alive all this time."

Up to this point, my pregnancy has been fine. I've been fortunate in that I skipped the part where you feel so nauseous that you can't keep anything down before noon. I've had more energy than usual and I've been convinced that the beautiful life growing within me has nurtured my creativity. I've drawn some of my most breathtaking portraits since I found out I was having a baby with Dane.

Right now, I feel as though every ounce of energy I have has been pulled from me. I slumped into the nearest chair when Dane told me about his dad. I'd held onto him as he rested his forehead against mine and I'd tried to form the words to ask what he meant but they'd gotten stuck in my throat.

"He contacted Landon a few weeks ago," Dane says quietly. "He hid from us since that day he drowned. He's been hiding for so long."

I know that I need to ask him to fill in all the blanks but the tremor that's there in his voice speaks louder than any of the words he's saying. He doesn't need to delve into the why's and how's right now. He needs me to hold him. He needs me to show him that nothing matters but the future we are planning.

"It's late," I whisper into the still air between us. "Do you want to hold me in bed?"

He doesn't answer. He only scoops me into his arms, stands and carries me back to the same bed where he made love to me for the first time and where our life together began.

Chapter 2

"This is exactly why people say that money is the root of all evil." Zoe taps her index finger against the edge of the coffee cup sitting on the table in front of her. "Dane's dad let money take control of him."

I look around the almost vacant café that I asked Zoe to meet me at. I needed her company after spending the morning listening to Dane explain in painstaking detail what his brother had told him. I didn't repeat it back verbatim to Zoe but after letting her talk for more than thirty minutes about all the hidden joys in being a mom, I'd told her a condensed version of what Dane shared with me. Her eyes had been glued to my left hand. I'd texted her a picture of my ring right after Dane slid it on my finger and when I handed it back to him earlier I tried to remain as stoic as I could even though the sense of loss I feel is palpable.

I'd asked him before I left the apartment if I could tell Zoe and he'd nodded before asking me what I wanted for dinner. It was a simple, maybe even expected, question that felt misplaced given the heaviness of the conversation that had consumed our entire morning.

"It's hard," I begin before I glance towards the café's door where an older man has just entered. His hair is gray, his handsome face etched by wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. If I had to guess, I'd place his age near that of Dane's dad, Frederick Beckett. Even though Dane told me that he doesn't want me or the baby to know his dad, I can't help but feel a pull towards him. His influence in

Dane's life before his death, and after, helped mold him into the man he is now.

"I know." Zoe reaches forward, resting her hands on either side of the now half-empty, porcelain mug. "I don't mean that I know exactly what you feel, Bridge. I just mean that I know it can't be easy dealing with all of this when you're trying to plan a wedding and get things ready for the baby."

She's right. She can't know what I'm feeling, just as I can't really understand what Dane's feeling. After he'd told me that his father had been able to swim to shore after the boat he was in capsized, I'd stopped asking questions and had just sat next to him, holding his hand while he shared everything he knew.

As Dane, his brother, and his mother worked through their grief over the past decade, the man they mourned had been living his life in different places, enjoying new experiences. The only thing that seemed to matter to him was staying off the radar of the police. He had stolen money from his clients, and he'd been unfaithful to Dane's mother before he disappeared. He wasn't welcome back in their lives and according to Dane he wanted to forget his father ever existed.

"Did you know that Beck's sister-in-law's cousin is dating Dane's brother?"

The words feel distant and if I hadn't heard them coming from Zoe, I might need more than a scant few seconds to process them. "Dane's brother is dating someone Beck knows?"

She smiles softly. I know that she blurted the words out as an attempt to get me to focus on something other than what my soon-to-be-husband is struggling with but I feel as though she just slapped me across the face. Apparently she didn't see the need to segue into this new topic of discussion.

"We had Jax and Ivy over for dinner last week." She picks up the mug and cradles it in her hands. "Ivy said that her cousin, Tess, is dating Landon."

I only met Landon yesterday and all the other names she's tossing at me aren't registering. Dane has told me that Landon's idea of commitment is a second date so I doubt that this woman, whoever she is, will be part of his life for long.

"It's a small world, isn't it, Bridge?"

I glance over her shoulder and out the plate glass window to the bustling street. "It is. Everyone seems to know everyone in this city."

"Did you make an appointment to see that doctor that Cleo recommended?"

I look up from the plate of food that Dane had put in front of me almost the moment after I walked back into the apartment after seeing Zoe. He must have spent all afternoon preparing the succulent chicken breast, baked potatoes and steamed vegetables. It's more food than I've ever ate in one sitting and right now, with my appetite nowhere to be found, I can't stomach the thought of eating more than a bite or two.

"We just got back yesterday," I mumble under my breath. "A lot has happened since then."

I hear the faint sound of his fork being placed on the edge of his plate. "Bridget, this baby is everything. I need you to make that appointment as soon as possible."

I look up and into his face. His mouth is drawn into a thin and harsh line. His eyes are sunken in. The toll of what's transpired these past twenty-four hours has caught up to him, even if he doesn't want to admit it.

"You should do it first thing in the morning." He rubs his hand over the back of his neck. "I can handle it if you're too busy."

I shouldn't absorb his words as sarcastic, but I do. Dane knows that I need to start work immediately on the gallery show that I'll have in just a few short months. We've talked about it non-stop

since the curator of the gallery in Chelsea contacted me when we were in Paris. He'd seen my work and offered me a full three-month showing. It meant long hours for me but Dane had told me he would do everything he could to support me, even after he goes back to work next month. Our plan for this month is to choose the pieces I'll show and have each portrait professionally framed while we work out the details of our small wedding. Dane wants to make certain the show is sorted, and we are man and wife, before he falls back into the routine of his job.

"I'll do it." My voice is small. "I'll call first thing tomorrow."

"If you can get in next week, make the appointment late in the day."

"Why?" I ask before I take a bite of the chicken knowing that I need sustenance. "Shouldn't I just take whatever they have available?"

"I want to be there with you and I can only go in the late afternoon. I'm going back to work on Monday and next week I'm on the early shift."

I stop mid-chew, my appetite suddenly vanishing again.

Chapter 3

"I thought we'd go look at baby furniture today." I rest my head on Dane's chest. After we'd finished dinner last night, we'd watched a movie in silence before retreating to our bed. He'd held me in his arms as I drifted off to sleep. His body wanted more but I was too rattled from his unexpected announcement about going back to work so soon. Logically I know that he's flailing because of what's happening with his dad and he wants things to go back to what he considers normal. I want to be understanding but the fact that he's shutting me out has me feeling untethered too.

"I have to be somewhere in an hour." He adjusts his body so he can lean down to brush his lips against my forehead. "I can meet you somewhere later this afternoon."

"Where do you need to be?" I ask as I push myself up to my elbows so I can look directly at him. "Can I go with you?"

The speed with which he drops my gaze answers my last question before he even utters a syllable. "It's a family thing, Bridget. I'm going to see my dad today."

His words bite deeply even though I know that's not his intention. He's building a barrier between us but I can't let that happen. I've worked hard the past few months to accept the reality that his former fiancé is close friends with his mother. I've tried to ignore the fact that until a few days ago I hadn't even met Dane's brother. Now, with the mention of him going to see his father, I feel isolated and alone. I don't want to but with the knowledge that we're on the brink of beginning our life together as a family I

can't help but feel as though he's pushing me outside the inner circle of his life.

"The baby and I are your family too." The words sound more peevish and whiny than I want them to. "I should be going with you. Don't you think I should meet your father?"

He swings his long legs over the side of the bed in one easy movement until he's seated, his back facing me. "You're never going to meet him. I don't want our child to know him."

"Dane." I inch forward so I can brush his bare skin with my fingertips. It's a subtle gesture that always brings comfort to both of us. "He's your father. He's the grandfather of our baby."

He pushes himself to his feet, breaking all physical contact between the two of us. It's the first time he's pulled himself away from my touch. "He's nothing, Bridget. The man is nothing."

I fall back into the sheets, wrapping the thin blanket around my naked body. I don't take my eyes off Dane as he marches across the bedroom, walks into the attached washroom and shuts the door behind him.

"I kept all of Vane's things." Zoe tips her chin towards a stack of cardboard boxes in the corner of the kitchen. "I was planning on having another baby. I know I'll have another but not for a few years so I want you to take all of it for your baby. I can have Beck's assistant drop it off whenever you want."

It's a generous offer that instantly overwhelms me. Since my portraits have started selling, I've been able to tuck a sizable amount of money into a savings account. When combined with the money that Dane invested after he sold his house, we have more than enough for a down payment on a place of our own.

I assumed we'd dip into that to get things ready for the baby. I thought we'd start that today but now I'm at Zoe's apartment having a cup of herbal tea while Dane, his mother, and brother go

to the prison where Frederick is being held. It feels like we stepped into an alternate universe when we landed in New York. In Paris, life was simple and straightforward. Now, it's anything but.

"That would help me so much, Zoe." I tighten my grip on the teacup not wanting my best friend to see the trembling in my hands. "I thought Dane and I would go shop for the baby today but he had to be somewhere else."

"Where?"

I'm not shocked at all by how direct the question is. Zoe doesn't pull punches. Part of that stems from her drive to be an attorney; the other part is just her personality. She's never been one to glide around the outskirts of an issue. If she has an opinion on something, I know that she'll express it, whether I asked for it or not.

Lying to Zoe about what's going on isn't going to benefit me at all. I haven't been able to confide in my parents about what's going on. That's not for fear that they'll judge Dane or his family. I know that they'll want to race to New York to help, even if there's no tangible way they can. They did it when the police car hit me. They come when they sense I need their strength and right now, I can't handle the thought of having to balance being supportive for Dane with maneuvering around the minefield of questions they'd have if they knew that Dane's father had abandoned his family for years.

"He went to see his father," I start before I glance down at my smartphone. It's been several hours since I said goodbye to Dane at the entrance to Zoe's building. He'd sat next to me in the taxi on the ride over, his thigh shaking and his hand clenched tightly to mine. After he'd kissed me tenderly and told me he'd call me as soon as he could, he'd gotten back into the car and it had pulled quickly away from the curb.

"In jail?" she asks in a hushed tone. Considering that the only other person in the room is Vane who is solely focused on the task of popping pieces of cereal into his mouth, I can't help but wonder who she thinks she's shielding that information from.

"Yes," I say matter-of-factly as I take another sip of the now tepid tea. "He went there with his brother and his mom."

"Why aren't you there?"

I shrug my shoulder as I bring the teacup to my lips again. I wish I could answer that question but I have no idea why I'm sitting here while my fiancé faces the biggest challenge of his life.

Chapter 4

"You're staying here?" I glance around our small apartment. "That's...it's wonderful."

The expression on her face is as easy to read as the shock in my response to Dane telling me that his mother is spending a day or two with us. Anja and I have found a common ground, that being her son and future grandchild. I resented her for a long time because of her friendship with Maisy, Dane's ex, but things have changed for us. She's accepted that he's moved on with me and judging by how happy she was when she came to see us in Paris, the baby is going to bring all of us even closer.

I don't fault her for wanting to be close to her son right now. Their lives have been tossed and turned around by a man they thought had died years ago. It's just that since I found out Dane has decided to go back to work in two days, I wanted time alone with him, to not only plan for our wedding, but to reconnect. It feels like we were thrown into a tidal wave of emotion when we got back to Manhattan and I can't quite hold on to him for long enough to find my center again.

I know it's selfish, but I wanted him all to myself and now I have to share him.

"It's been a difficult few days," Anja says quietly. Her voice is barely audible. "I needed to be near my son."

I gaze down at my stomach. Today in the shower I noticed the more pronounced curve of my belly. It's early for me to be showing, but I know instinctively that's what it is. The baby that is

growing within me is part of me. I'm not even officially a mom yet and I already need its strength and love.

"We can get the spare room ready for her." Dane brushes past me towards the hallway. "It's not a big room but there's a bed and a closet you can use."

I fall in step behind him, mindful of the fact that Anja is right on my heel. "I'll need to move my portraits. I still have some on display in there. They're the ones I didn't take with me to Paris."

As Dane rounds the corner and disappears into the room, I feel a light tap on my shoulder. I stop and turn. Before I can say anything, Anja's arms are wrapped around me pulling me into her chest. "Thank you for this, Bridget. I need my boy. I need you too."

I don't hesitate before I hug her tightly. "We're here for you. I'll do anything I can to help."

"Don't do that."

I look across the room to where Anja's standing with her hands firmly planted on her hips. Her stance reminds me of many of the stories that Dane shared with me the past few months about his mother when he was growing up. She took on the task of raising two teenage boys alone. She was spirited, strict and helped guide them both towards fulfilling futures. She'd essentially put her own life on hold to mourn the loss of her husband while she made certain that her boys knew the value of hard work and perseverance. It had paid off in spades.

"Don't do what?" I ask gently.

I had seen Dane watching his mother and I embrace before we let go of one another and walked into the room. As he helped her unpack the small suitcase she'd brought with her, I'd started to stack my portraits into a pile to take into the living room. I'd been displaying them on easels since I moved into this place months ago. It had become my makeshift studio but I haven't sketched in here

since before we left for France. Soon, we'll be transforming it into a nursery.

"Don't take those away." Her hand flies through the air towards me. "Why are you taking those away?"

"My portraits?" I stop what I'm doing and glance down at the paper in my hands. It's a portrait I drew years ago of a young couple sitting in a restaurant. I'd been there alone and when I saw them walk in I felt their connection immediately. They were in love and as I sat at my table a few feet away from them and sketched them I thought about my own life and how one day I'd want to have a lover who looked at me the way they looked at one another.

Her hands drop before she fists them together in front of her. "I don't want you to move them. There's more than enough room for me and them in here."

I glance at her face before I look towards Dane. The empty expression on his face offers me no help at all. I suddenly feel a pang of guilt for rushing in to move things. How could that not make her feel as though she's a bother? "I need to move them anyways. We're going to turn this into the nursery."

The only sound in the room is her quiet footsteps as she walks towards me. "They bring life to this room, Bridget. I need that. Your work is beautiful. Leave them."

I nod as tears well in my eyes. "I'll put them back."

"I'll help." She nudges her shoulder against mine as we work in silence carefully placing each portrait back where it belongs.

Chapter 5

"Move your legs. I need to taste you."

I shake the sleep from my eyes certain that the words I just heard were part of a lust filled dream about the man I want desperately to marry. Dane and I haven't been intimate in days. My body craves his, but now, with his mother just a few feet away in the spare room, any thoughts I have of crawling on him and taking him inside me are going to have to wait.

"Bridget, slide your legs apart."

I reach down to glide my hands through my folds. If I can't be with Dane the way I want to be, I can at least find my own release while thinking about him. My hand stalls when it feels his thick brown hair resting against my thigh. This isn't a dream and the pleasure that races through me when his tongue lashes against my core is all the proof I need.

"No." I arch my back to try and pull free. "We can't. Your mom is in the next room."

He yanks my body back towards him with one easy movement. He buries his face in my wetness, his tongue tracing a path over my sensitive flesh. The only sound escaping him is a series of low moans.

I try to stop my body from reacting but it's futile. My hips circle as my hands bury themselves in his hair, guiding his mouth. "Your mom will hear us."

His movements stop as he looks up at me. The moisture on his lips a sign of how close I am to an orgasm already. "You slept in,

Bridget. I had breakfast with her and then she left to have coffee with a friend. We're alone for at least a couple of hours."

"Alone?" I don't try to hide the smile I feel inside. "We can do anything we want?"

"I want to fuck you. After that we can do whatever you want."

"All I want is this," I say before I lean back, wrap the soft strands of his hair between my fingers and let myself feel everything he's giving to me.

"Tell me I didn't hurt you, Bridget." He's next to me now, his strong arms wrapped around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder. "I wanted you so much. I'm sorry if I was too rough."

He wasn't. Everything we just did was perfection. He'd brought me to the edge twice with his tongue before he used his fingers to push me into an intense orgasm. I'd clung to him tightly, trying to find my breath again but he wanted more. He'd kissed me softly and in one quick movement his cock was inside of me. There was the same sharp bite of pain there always is and then nothing but pleasure. I'd come hard right before he found his own release.

"I loved it." I press my back into his chest. "I love you, Dane."

His breath stalls but only for the briefest of moments. "You can't possibly know what those words do to me. You can't know how much I need to hear them."

I'm tempted to pull away from him so I can flip over to stare into his beautiful brown eyes. I want to but I know that he's feeling vulnerable. I've sensed it for days. As much as I want to push him to open up more to me, I know that I can't do that. Dane shares when he feels when he's ready. His soul is gentle, even if he appears strong and solid on the outside.

"I'm going to miss you when I go back to work tomorrow."

I sigh deeply. I'm still trying to adjust to the fact that the three weeks I thought we'd have together planning our wedding and my

gallery showing have been taken away. Tomorrow when I wake up he won't be here. "I wish we had more time."

"I thought we could spend the day today talking about the wedding." His lips graze over my neck. "You can tell me when you want to marry me."

"Today," I whisper. "I want to marry you right now."

"We'll make it happen soon," he says softly. "I promise."

Chapter 6

"I can't believe you'd tell me first," Vanessa taps her index finger against my chin. "I thought you'd just go to Zoe and talk to her about it."

The thought had crossed my mind but my own lingering pain stopped me. When Zoe was pregnant we only talked briefly about potential baby names. I didn't see a baby in my immediate future so I had clung to every experience she had. I'd listen intently when she told me about her doctor's appointments and I was overjoyed when she confessed that she'd found out it was a boy.

It wasn't until after she delivered and I stopped by the hospital to visit her that I overheard her and Vanessa talking about the baby's name. I'd stood in the corridor, far enough out of their view that they couldn't see me, yet close enough to hear the joy in their voices.

The spoke about how Vanessa had known the baby's name for weeks. He was named after her. Vane. As they shared tender words about how beautiful he was, I'd walked away from the room, my emotions a tangled mess in my chest. I'd been excluded, pushed to the edge of being a mere acquaintance. As I passed Zoe's husband, Beck, on his way into the room that day, he'd hugged me tightly after I congratulated him. To this day, Zoe, Vanessa, and I have never spoken about any of it.

"I didn't want you to feel left out," I say honestly. "You and Zoe are both my best friends but I can only have one matron-of-honor."

Her eyes scan my face before they lock on mine. "You actually came here to tell me so I wouldn't be hurt?"

There's not a drop of sarcasm in her tone at all. She's touched. I can tell by the way her bottom lip is trembling.

"You're both important to me, Van." I drop my gaze to the small circular table. "I've been friends with Zoe longer. It would mean a lot to me if she stood next to me when I marry Dane."

She nods. "She's going to be over the moon when you ask her."

"Promise you won't say a word. I want to tell her myself." I wince when I hear the words. The sound like the secretive confession a high school girl is making to a friend. "I just want to see her face when I ask."

She pushes the plastic chair she's sitting in a few inches across the cafeteria floor until she's right next to me. She gently reaches for my left hand, holding it between both of hers. "I promise but I need you to promise me something too."

"What?" I ask as I look directly into her eyes. "What do I have to promise you?"

"Promise me that you won't tell Zoe that I'm having a baby too." Her voice shakes. "I just found out this morning. Garrett is the only person I've told."

I swallow hard past the sudden lump in my throat. "You're having a baby?"

"About six weeks after you, if all goes as planned," she whispers as tears well in her eyes. "I wanted to be farther along before I told anyone but since our kids are going to grow up together..."

I pull her into a tight hug. "I'm so happy for you. I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"You weren't planning on us going on a honeymoon, were you?"

I can hear the smile in his words even before I round the corner to the living room to see the grin on his handsome face. We've

been talking about the wedding since Dane came home from work. I'd asked him twice how his first day back to the fire station was but each time the only response I was able to get was a sweet, soft kiss. He's not hiding the fact that he has no interest in talking about work tonight, and I'm on board for that. The only thing I like talking about more than our approaching wedding is our baby and now that Anja has gone back to Boston, things are finally settling back into as normal as they can be given the cloud of uncertainty about his father that is hanging over all of our heads.

"It feels like the last three months in Paris were our honeymoon," I snap back in a giggle. "I loved it there. Didn't you love it there?"

"If I could take you there and live the rest of my life with you and our baby, I would." He pats the soft spot on the sofa next to him. "Come sit beside me."

I scoot quickly across the floor, pulling on the thighs of the sweatpants I put on once I got home from visiting Vanessa at the hospital on her break. I'd stopped briefly at a bookstore on my way home to buy her a journal. I've been chronicling each day of my pregnancy in writing so that one day, when my child is old enough, I can show him or her what our days together were like before they were born. I want to give Vanessa a journal so she can do the same for her baby.

"You're wearing my pants again." Dane pulls on the waistband of the sweatpants. "I like them so much better on you than on me."

"They fit me better than some of my things," I admit cautiously. I've been concerned by how much fuller I feel around my stomach. I haven't gained more than a couple of pounds but I feel more comfortable in loose fitting things. Maybe it's just my lack of patience in wanting to meet the baby, but I do feel as though my body is already changing.

"Your body is beautiful." Dane runs his hand along my stomach over the fabric of the t-shirt I'm wearing. "You looked gorgeous

when we were making love the other morning. I couldn't take my eyes off of you."

I felt that. When he was buried deep within me, I'd opened my eyes briefly to find him staring intently at me. The tenderness that I saw there had brought tears to my eyes. I blamed it on my hormones then but I know now that it was more than that. I feel more connected to him in that moment than I ever felt before and a large part of that was the baby growing inside of me.

"We're going to go see the doctor next Friday." I glance towards where Dane's smartphone is resting on the arm of the chair next to us. "I stopped by her office on my way home from the hospital today and made the appointment in person. It's all she has available. I added it to your calendar when you were in the shower."

"Why were you at the hospital?" The concern in his voice isn't masked at all. "If you weren't feeling well you should have called me, Bridget."

No, I should have chosen my words more carefully. I know how concerned Dane is about this pregnancy. He wants it to go as smoothly as I do. "It wasn't anything like that. I went to see Vanessa during her break."

"Is she good? I haven't spoken to Garrett since we got back."

I stare at his face. The worry about what's going on with his father is still etched on his brow. I see it whenever I look at him now but he's calmer than he's been in days. Telling him about his cousin's baby can't hurt. It may actually brighten his spirits even more.

"She told me a secret. It's something she's not ready to share with everyone just yet." I nod, hoping that gentle gesture combined with my words will be enough fuel to get Dane to guess what's going on.

"What kind of secret?" He leans back on the sofa, his bare chest on full, and very welcome, display. "Can you tell me?"

I can tell him anything. I've told him everything. He's the one person in this world that I know I can confide in completely without any fear of abandonment. I doubt that there's anything I can do or say that would push Dane away. "You just can't tell your mom yet. It would upset Vanessa if Garrett's mom found out from Anja and not her own son."

His hand leaps to his mouth. I see the exact moment when the realization hits him. "They're having a baby too?"

"They are." I sigh as I snuggle in next to him. "We're all going to be parents."

Chapter 7

"My mom asked if we were going to postpone the wedding."

Dane's shoulders tense as the words leave my lips. After we'd shared a plate of scrambled eggs and toast for dinner, I'd taken a call from her. I'd sat on the edge of our bed trying to explain to her that Dane's father was going to be in the news. The questions she had all tumbled into one another and as I tried to answer one, she bombarded me with three more. I finally told her that I had to go but I'd call her back in the morning.

"What did you tell her?" He doesn't turn from where he's busy near the counter, cutting up fruit for dessert. "Do you want to postpone our wedding?"

As much as I know I shouldn't be surprised by his question, I am. I haven't pressed Dane on the subject of his father's miraculous return from the dead. I've only listened when he's offered me details. I've sat back while he's thrown himself back into his work in an effort to numb the pain he's feeling. I've been attentive, understanding and as loving as I can be. I've never once wavered on the fact that I want to be his wife.

"You know that I don't want to wait another day," I spit back. "We were supposed to work on our wedding plans after we got back from Paris. We haven't even picked a date yet."

He turns quickly on his heel, the apple that drops from his hands rolls off the edge of the counter. "My mind's been on other things, Bridget. I went back to work because I want to provide for us. I thought you understood that."

My hands drop to my stomach. "I know you have a lot to deal with. Maybe if we talked about it more we could work through it together."

"What's there to talk about?" He bends down to scoop the bruised fruit into his palm. "My father avoided me for most of my life. He made a choice to leave me. Is that what you want to talk about?"

I nod. "I want you to tell me how you feel so I can help you."

"You can't help me." He tosses the apple into the sink; the resulting dull thud only punctuates the sound of his voice. "No one can help me. I wasn't worth it. He didn't think me or Landon was worth it so he bailed on us."

There it is. There's the weight that has been pulling at his heart since the day we got back to New York. I've known it was there masked beneath his handsome grin and his concerns about our baby's well-being.

"He was selfish, Dane," I offer as I take a step towards him. "I doubt it had anything to do with you or your brother. I think he was just really selfish and driven by greed."

"You don't know that." His voice carries the same despair that his face does. "Tell me right now if you could leave our baby. Tell me if you could do it, Bridget."

I have to answer honestly. The thought of abandoning my own child makes me sick to my stomach. I can't even fully wrap my mind around the idea of it. Once I'm holding this baby in my arms, I'm never letting go. I'm going to be there whenever it needs me until I take my last breath.

"Answer me," he pushes. "Do you think you could just walk away from your own child?"

"No," I answer softly. "I wouldn't do that."

"I wouldn't either." He rubs his hand over his brow. "I will never leave my child because I already love it more than I've loved anything on this earth."

I swallow hard, emotions pouring through me. "We will love our baby. We'll be the best parents ever."

"I bet he said that too before Landon was born. I bet he said the same thing when I was born."

"What?" I ask not sure I'm completely following what he's saying. He's shaking. I want to walk across the room and grab hold of him but my better sense is telling me that he needs to find his own strength right now.

"He stuck around for years, Bridget. He was there when I was a baby, and a toddler. He taught me how to ride a bike and throw a baseball. He didn't bail until I was a teenager. That's when he stopped loving me."

I don't know what to say to him. I'm mad at Frederick for what he's done to his sons. I'm livid over the fact that he left a boy who needed him because of his selfish greed. He's taken something from the man that I love that I can't fix, regardless of how badly I want to.

"You didn't do anything to make him stop loving you, Dane." I hear the crack in my own voice as I try to level my emotions. It's futile though. I can't help but sense the pain that he's in and it's impacting me too. "What your father did came from his selfish needs. He's the only one to blame."

"How does a man do that?" he asks through a loud sob. "How does a man leave behind his wife and two children like that?"

I move quickly, scooping my arms around his neck as he slumps to the floor. I hold him, crawling in his lap as we both sit on the kitchen floor, holding each other while we cry for everything he lost and everything that might have been.

Chapter 8

"Have you decided on which portraits you're going to show at the gallery?" Dane walks into our spare room with a plate of cheese and crackers and a chilled bottle of water. "I'm still open to helping you decide if you want my input."

I smile at his offering. He's been exhausted every day after work. I can't say I'm surprised by that. In Paris, his schedule consisted mainly of a morning run through the city followed by cleaning our apartment or reading a book. He relaxed while we were there and now that we're back and he's working full-time, his body still has to catch up to the physical demands his job places on him. He's adjusting back into his life, just as I'm adjusting into mine.

"It would help a lot to have your opinion." I turn back towards the bed where I've laid out a dozen portraits I drew last year. Dane's far from an art expert, but he sees what I see in my portraits. He recognizes the emotions beneath the pencil's shadings. He sees the life experience that I've pulled into the lines around the eyes and the mouths of the people I've drawn. He values my work more than anyone I know. I sometimes wonder if he cherishes my gift to draw even more than I do.

"There's someone else who offered to help you get ready for the show." He places the plate and bottle of water on the bedside table.

His words surprise me enough that I push one of the portraits aside so I can sit on the bed. "Who? Is it Zoe or Vanessa?"

It actually wouldn't be much of a shock if either of my close friends offered to help at Dane's urging. I know both would do anything they could to help me or my fiancé right now. Although

Vanessa and I didn't talk about what's happened with Dane's father and the charges he's facing, I could see the compassion in her eyes and feel it in her touch when she hugged me when I arrived at the hospital to visit her. Dane's a proud man though, so asking anyone else for help, isn't something he often does.

"No, it's not your friends." He rakes his hand through his hair as he lowers himself to sit next to me. "It's actually my mom."

"Your mom?" I almost hear the shriek in my own voice. "Your mother wants to help me?"

He nods slowly, his eyes floating over the portraits. "She hasn't stopped talking about these since she went back to Boston. She's impressed with your work, Bridget. She wants to help you."

"What did she say about them?" Containing my curiosity isn't going to work right now. I've long wanted a close relationship with Dane's mom but I've known that her friendship with his ex-fiancé was the stalling point for that. I've tried to respect her relationship with Maisy even though I'm the one who is going to be a part of her family soon.

"She asked if she could buy one." He chuckles deeply. "I told her you wouldn't want that. You'd want to give her one."

"Of course." I reach towards a portrait I drew before we left for Paris. It's a young woman. My eyes sprint across the bed to one of a small boy who was playing with toy cars in Central Park. I'd asked his mother if I could draw him and she'd nodded absentmindedly with a flip of her hand in the air, as she talked non-stop on her smartphone. The boy had stood next to me with his small hand on my knee as I'd finished the fine lines of his hair before his mother pulled on his collar and lead him away. "She can have any of these. Or I can draw her. I'd love to draw your mom."

"I've been thinking about that." His gaze drops to my stomach before it settles back on my face. "I thought for her birthday next year you could draw a portrait of her holding the baby. He'll be here by then. He'll be a few months old by then."

We haven't found out whether our baby is a boy or girl yet. We will in a few weeks but that hasn't stopped Dane from calling the baby a boy. I smile softly. "Or she. I'd love to draw your mom and our baby."

"I'll tell her that. She'll be happy."

I know his mother's happiness means the world to him. I hear him talking on the phone to her often. He's gentle, loving and tender and tells her how much he needs her each time he says goodbye to her.

As focused as I've been on helping Dane deal with his father's unforgivable betrayal, I can't help but think about Anja often and how she must feel. She still wears the wedding band that Frederick placed on her finger so many years ago. Her devotion to him was unwavering until now. She lost much more than her life's partner and the father of her children. She's lost her life's purpose and decades to a man who abandoned her and her children.

"I'd love your mom's help," I offer sincerely. I suspect that Anja's drive for perfection is exactly what I need to make my showing the best it can be. I also know that spending more time with her will give her something she needs right now. If my gallery showing can become a distraction to the turmoil in her life, I want it to be. It may not be the ideal circumstances for the two of us to spend more time together, but it's a start and it will definitely benefit me.

"Seriously?" He cocks a dark brow. "You know how my mother can be, right? She's going to take over."

I look past him to the portraits on the bed and the box filled with portraits sitting on the floor. "I need someone exactly like that to help me. Call her tomorrow and tell her I'm ready whenever she is."

Chapter 9

"I'm ready, Bridget." The words are wrapped so tightly into a moan that I can't be sure I heard them correctly.

I run my tongue over the tip of his cock while I grip tightly to the base. "What did you say?"

His hands tangle in my hair. "I'm so close. I'm really close."

I don't need him to tell me that. I can sense it not only by the sound of his breathing but I can feel it in his flesh. He's harder now. He's throbbing and each time I take him into my mouth, his hips buck. He wants to gift me with his release. I want that too.

I groan loudly as I slide my mouth over him. I feel his body tense before he pulls back just a touch.

"Bridget, please," he whispers the words into the darkness of our bedroom. "I want to fuck you so badly."

I want that too. I've wanted it since we took a bath together after he came home from work. He'd gotten the tub ready for me before he lowered himself in behind me. He'd washed my body slowly, taking extra care around my tender nipples and stomach. By the time he reached my core, I was so aroused that it only took a few strokes of his fingers over my clit before the orgasm overtook me. I'd held tightly to him wanting the moment to last.

Once he dried my body I'd fallen to my knees to take him into my mouth. I wanted to give him what he'd given me but as soon as I felt him growing beneath my touch, my body craved more. Now, with him this close to his own release, I need this intimate taste of him.

"Yes, please," he hisses the words between clenched teeth as he pushes his hips forward.

I pull back just a touch so he can watch as I take everything he gives to me and as he falls over the edge, I moan knowing that I love this man more than life itself.

"I think it's great that Dane's mom is going to help you with the gallery stuff." Zoe leans forward in the car's seat to tap the driver on the shoulder. "I gave you the address, right? You have it?"

"You gave it to me when we left your apartment, Mrs. Beck." He steals a glimpse at both of us in the rear view mirror. "Sit back and relax. I'll have you there in no time."

I pat Zoe on her knee as she settles back, pulling the seat belt around her chest again. "You're nervous. This must be a big case."

She nods as her eyes jut from my face to the street. "I've never taken on such a big role before. They haven't given anything like this to any of the other students."

Zoe's been working hard to prove herself at the law firm she's interning at. Being a lawyer is her goal and with all the extra work she's been taking on lately, I have no doubt that if I ever happen to break the law, my best friend will be my first phone call. She's professional and confident. She's really come into her own. I noticed that as soon as I got back from Paris.

"I'm proud of you," I say with conviction. "I don't know how you do it all. You're a great mom, you go to school and you work hard."

"That means a lot to me." She smiles. "If Vane is as proud of me one day as you are, it will all be worth it."

I haven't given birth yet but I sense that I'll feel the same about my own child. I want to sculpt my career so I have time for Dane, the baby and my passion. I don't anticipate giving up drawing when I become a mom. Instead, I picture myself bundling the baby

into a stroller and taking a walk to find inspiration. I'm determined to work hard every single day to have the life I've always wanted.

"He will be," I offer back. "How could he not be? You're a powerhouse."

"So are you. Beck told me it's rare for a new artist to get a showing all to themselves." She runs her index finger along her bottom lip smudging her lipstick. "I don't think you realize how successful you're going to be, Bridge."

I reach forward to wipe the wayward lipstick with my thumb. "As long as I can help pay the bills with my drawings, I'll be happy."

Her hand catches mine as her eyes fall to my fingers. "You don't have a ring yet. I thought you and Dane were going to pick one out."

I thought that too but with everything that has been going on, an engagement ring has fallen to the bottom of my priority list. I don't need a symbol on my hand that shows the world that I'm marrying the man of my dreams. I haven't pushed him on the subject, because I know it will happen when he wants it to. Dane loves me. He's committed to me. That's all that matters.

"We're going to figure that out soon." I chuckle as I pull my hand away. "I'm really not comfortable with Dane spending too much on a ring right now. We're saving to buy a place of our own."

"With the way your career is going, you're going to have both," she says before she taps the driver on the shoulder again. "Are we almost there? I don't want to be late."

Chapter 10

"This is your client's office?" I peer at the quiet, residential street. We're in Queens now and judging by the large trees and charming houses, it's an escape from Manhattan that is welcome for everyone who lives here. "Your client's office is in a house?"

"He's an architect," she mutters under her breath. "His office is in mid-town. He lives here."

I nod, not really understanding why she had to trek out here to see him if he works only a few blocks from where she does.

"I'm just picking up some files." Her hands run over the skirt of her dress. "It's a personal case we're working on. It's not related to his corporation."

"I see," I say because I suddenly feel embarrassed. I know that Zoe can't go into details about the actual cases she's been assigned to help on. She's shared bits and pieces in the past but they haven't meant anything to me other than that they've proven to me how much she values the trust the clients of her firm place in her. "I guess I'll just wait here for you?"

"That would be great." She slides her fingers across the screen of her smartphone. "I made a reservation for an early dinner for us back in the city. We can go there right from here."

I nod. "I'll call my mom while I wait."

"I won't be more than ten minutes." She taps my forearm, before she steps out of the car door the driver is holding open for her. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Bridget?"

I turn towards the sound of Zoe's voice. It's been well over an hour since she walked through the door of her client's house. I'd called my mother before I told her driver that I was going to take a walk so I could stretch my legs. I had only made it around the corner before I stopped.

I've been standing in the same spot for more than twenty minutes. It's a spot that I feel drawn to. It's a spot where I belong.

"You're crying." She wipes one of the lingering tears from my cheeks. "Did something happen? I'll call the driver to bring the car here."

"No," I whisper softly as I bat her hand away from her phone. "I'm fine. I'm really fine."

"You're standing in the middle of a sidewalk crying." She wraps her arm around my shoulder pulling me closer to her. "That's not fine."

"Look." I sweep my hand in front of me. "Tell me what you see."

Her eyes scan my face before she turns. "I see a blue house. I see a roof that needs to be repaired and a lawn that has seen much better days."

"No." I push open the small wooden gate to take a step inside the yard. "Look again."

Her brow furrows as she takes a step towards me. "I see a For Sale sign. Tell me what you see."

"I see Dane on the porch watching our little boy playing with a truck." I motion towards the front door. "I see me in the back room sketching while my baby naps."

Her eyes are locked on my face. "Bridget."

"I see my mom and dad coming out of a taxi and running up this path to the front door on Christmas Eve. I see my life. This is my house."

"You want to live here?" She motions towards the street. "We're in Queens. Didn't Dane live in Queens right before you met him? Now you want to live here too?"

"I see it now." I turn directly towards her. "I see what he saw. I can see us here. I can see my family growing up here. I see Dane and me on that porch when we're too old to remember living anywhere else."

She slides her thumb across her smartphone. "I'm calling a friend of Beck's. He's a broker. He'll be able to take you and Dane inside so you can see if it's really what you want."

"It is." I smile wildly. "This is exactly what I want."

Chapter 11

"You don't mean that, Bridget." Dane pulls the navy blue t-shirt he's been wearing all day over his head. "You don't want to move away from Manhattan."

"I do." I hold my hands together to calm the constant shakiness I feel. "Wait until you see it, Dane. It's so perfect."

"I thought you loved the energy of the city." He leans against the kitchen table, his hands resting against its edge.

He can't possibly know how gorgeous he is. Even now, after he's spent hours at work, and sat in the crowded doctor's waiting room with me, he still looks as handsome as he always does. I know he'll always be the most beautiful person in the world to me.

"There's just something about that house." I brush past him to grab a glass from the cupboard before moving to the refrigerator to retrieve the orange juice. "I wasn't even thinking about moving to Queens until I saw it. It's home. I feel it inside of me."

The corner of his mouth pulls up into a small smile. "You'll have to commute to go back-and-forth getting things ready for your gallery showing. Our doctor is here too."

She is and she's wonderful. When we saw her for the first time today I knew that she was the perfect fit for Dane and me. Our baby is growing just as it should be and in a few weeks we're going to have a sonogram to find out if it's actually a boy or a girl.

"I can meet you in the city when we have appointments." I take a long drink from the glass. "I'll schedule them so they're on the same days when I'm at the gallery."

"You're doing this for me, aren't you?" He reaches past me to refill the glass to the top with juice before he takes a drink himself from it. "I don't miss living in Queens. I'll live wherever you want to live."

I take back the glass before I lower myself onto one of the kitchen chairs. "I admit that I didn't really understand the appeal of living there until I was there with Zoe yesterday. It's so quiet and peaceful. I saw a mom with her two children walking down the sidewalk. They were running and playing. I want that too."

"We can have that anywhere, Bridget." He crouches down directly in front of me. "I don't want you to do something this big just for me. I want it to be for the both of us."

"It is for us both. It's for the baby too."

"Tell me the real reason." He leans forward to kiss my hand. "Tell me why you suddenly want to move to the suburbs."

"Everything has felt off balance since we got back to New York." I sigh heavily as I lean forward in the chair so I can cup my hand around the back of his neck. "I know that your dad complicated things for you. I know it was devastating, Dane."

He nods slowly, his brows popping up briefly. "It was devastating, Bridget. It made me question everything about myself. It made me question whether I'm going to be a good dad and husband."

I knew that. I'm grateful that he's admitting it but I've felt it since he asked for my engagement ring back. I've tried to put myself in his shoes but the thought of my father willingly walking away and then pretending to be dead for years breaks my heart. The reality of it would be a burden I wouldn't have the strength for. I know Dane does and I'm proud of him for it.

"Knowing that my father abandoned me and Landon changed me." He swallows hard in an effort to curb his emotions. "I'm an adult. I'm getting married and I'm going to be a dad but I wish things were different. I wish he hadn't left."

"I know," I offer. "I wish he hadn't either."

"It's made me look at everything differently." He reaches past me to pull the cup of juice into his hand. He brings it to his lips and swallows every last drop. "We were called out to a fire two days ago. It was a foster home. The kids were so hungry they tried to cook and started a fire."

"Oh no," I say softly. "Was anyone hurt?"

"A little boy." He blows a puff of air from between his lips. "He's three, maybe four-years-old at the most. His little hand was burned."

Quieting my emotions is hard when I hear about things like this. Now that I'm going to have a child of my own, I feel an almost instinctive need to protect other children too. "Will he be okay?"

"He'll be fine. He's a fighter. I went to see him at the hospital during my break today. He wants to be a fireman when he grows up."

I smile at the grin on Dane's face. He loves when children tell him that. He's proud of what's he's accomplished in his life. "I bet he will be."

"He was left alone in that apartment with four other kids." He shakes his head from side-to-side. "Their foster mother was out at a bar. It's ridiculous."

"That's horrible." I feel anger welling inside of me. "She won't get those kids back, will she? I mean something has to happen to protect them."

"They'll be moved to new homes." He rakes his hand through his hair. "I see that too often. There's a break in the system somewhere. Kids who have been tossed aside by their parents get forgotten and put wherever there's room."

I watch the way his jaw tenses as he speaks. I hear the emotion in each word. He's not reacting this way just because of what he saw today. This is touching him deeper. This is because of what his father did to him.

"I'm never going to let our child down." He leans forward to graze his lips over my cheek. "I will take care of you and our baby until I take my very last breath."

I push my lips into his for a long, lingering kiss. I know he will. I know he means every last word he's saying to me.

Chapter 12

"I told you that was my son," Dane says proudly as he sits next to me in the examining room. "I knew I was having a boy."

My mother reaches to grab hold of Anja's hand. "We are having a grandson. A grandson."

Anja nods quietly, her free hand resting on her lips.

I look up at Dane. We had decided last night that we wanted both of our mothers in the room with us when we found out our baby's gender. It felt right and as soon as the technician found the baby's heartbeat, they both started to weep.

"Have you thought about names?" Anja asks, her gaze drawn to me. "What do you want to name your son?"

Dane and I have volleyed potential names back and forth since we found out I was expecting. Each time we mentioned one, we'd both shake our heads in unison, knowing that it wasn't quite the right fit.

Our baby has to have a name that speaks to who he is. I don't want to burden him with the expectations of a name that carries the weight of another person. Naming him after Dane, or my father would be lovely save for the fact that our son is going to carve a niche for himself in this world. He's going to chart his own course and to do that he needs a name that will reflect who he is.

"I think we're going to wait to meet him before we name him." Dane stands. "We'll know his name when we see him."

Our mothers both look at each other, their confused expressions a mirrored reflection.

"You can sit up." The technician taps me on the shoulder. "Everything went well. You're right on schedule."

"Can we each get a picture?" My mother grabs hold of Anja's hand. "We each want one if that's possible."

"I'll print those out and have them ready at the front desk." The kind woman pushes the sonogram machine back into a corner of the room before she takes her leave.

"Bridget and I are going back to the gallery to work on the finishing touches of her show," Anja says to my mom. "Do you want to have lunch with us before we go back?"

As I hear my mother saying she'd love to, I turn to look at Dane. I knew we'd be sacrificing a special moment by having both our mothers in the room with us, but as my eyes meet his, I know he's thinking exactly the same thing I am. Now is the ideal time to tell them.

"We're having two boys," Dane blurts out with his eyes locked on my face. "Bridget and I are going to have another son."

They turn at exactly the same time towards his voice. Neither says a word.

"His name is Seth." Dane's voice cracks as he starts to cry. "He's three. I met him when I was called out to a fire a few weeks ago. I have a picture on my phone."

I cling to his arm as he shakily opens the picture app on his phone, pulling up an image of the little boy we've both fallen head over heels in love with. "A lawyer Garrett introduced us to is working on getting an emergency custody order in place. If that happens we can have him tomorrow and then we'll apply for adoption after we've fostered him for a year. He's going to be our son."

Both our mothers inch forward and tentatively look at the picture of the boy with the crooked smile, bright blue eyes and blond hair.

"Does he... I mean...he looks like..."

"He has Down Syndrome, mom." I swipe my fingers across the phone to open another picture of Dane holding him. "He's perfect. He's going to be such a good big brother."

My mother's tears flow again as she reaches forward to pull me into her arms. "I can't wait to meet him, Bridget. I can't wait."

I turn to the left to see Anja's hand as it rests on the cheek of her son. "You, my boy, are going to be the very best father any child could ever have."

I nod in agreement, knowing that is only the beginning of the adventure that awaits us both.

Epilogue

One Year Later

"Your work has only gotten better, Bridget," Dane says as he walks into my home studio. It's a small space at the back of the house that used to be a porch. Once we settled into the house last year, we had opted to put all the renovations on hold until after our son was born. We'd spent the first two months after Shayne arrived, adjusting to life as a family of four. "It's no surprise that you're selling as many portraits as you are."

"I thought it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding." I gesture towards the doorway. "Aren't you supposed to be getting dressed for the ceremony?"

"I'm going to do that right away." He sits on the leather chair in the corner of the space. "Come sit on my lap."

"We don't have time for that." I teasingly wiggle my finger in the air. "The house is filled with people and you want to fool around?"

He cocks his left brow. "For the record, I never fool around with you. I make love with you. I fuck you sometimes, but I never fool around."

I blush. Our intimacy has only gotten more intense since we've moved into our house and started raising our children. The moments we have alone are a gift and I've never felt more comfortable sharing my body with Dane as I do now.

"Garrett and the baby are here." He taps his hand on his lap again. "Everyone is fawning over that little princess so they're busy."

"Where's Vanessa?" I ask as I walk over to where he's sitting. "She's going to get here in time for the ceremony, right?"

"She stopped to pick up the flowers." He leans back slightly, motioning for me to sit. "It means a lot to her that you asked her to be your matron-of-honor too."

I know that it does. After Vanessa gave birth to her daughter, Ruthie, I'd felt an extra special connection to her. She had been ready to help us whenever we asked for it. She'd been the one who had helped us get the assistance we needed to understand how to nurture Seth in the best way possible. Both Zoe and her have become like sisters to me.

"We're getting married in our backyard," I say as I settle onto his lap. "We can break some rules. I am wearing a sundress after all."

"Landon and Tess are on their way." He pushes a hair back from my face. "I don't think we can outdo their wedding, but we definitely have them beat in the kid department."

Dane's brother and his wife had been spending more and more time with us. They aren't quite ready for a baby yet, but they're following the path that works for them. I see the best in Landon when he's with Tess. She's strong, fearless and loves both of my children like her own.

"I picked up the rings this morning." Dane motions towards the pocket of his jeans. "I can't wait for you to see them."

Our decision to forgo an engagement ring in favor of matching wedding rings was perfect. Dane had contacted Ivy Marlow-Walker to help him design the rings. She's Landon's wife's cousin and Beck's sister-in-law. I agreed to let him handle it all. I can't wait to see my ring when he slips it on my hand in less than an hour.

"I want you to know something," I whisper into his cheek. "You are by far the most incredible man I've ever known. I'm proud to be the woman you're marrying."

"You are my everything, Bridget." He moves his head until his lips are hovering over mine. "You and our boys are my life."

"Dane, would you like to share your vows first?"

I look at the face of the justice of the peace we contracted to officiate our wedding. She's kind, compassionate and actually delayed the ceremony herself so she could play with our boys for a few minutes.

Dane nods as he reaches forward to grab both of my hands. I glance quickly over his shoulder to where Landon is standing. He's cradling Shayne in his arm, while Seth holds tightly to his other hand.

"Bridget." Dane's voice is soft and low. "My dream in life was to meet a beautiful woman. I knew that she'd be kind, compassionate and strong."

I nod, knowing that if I try to speak now, that my voice will only fail me.

"When I saw you at the restaurant that first night, I saw every single moment of my future. I saw all of my tomorrows."

I hear the faint sound of a heavy sigh behind me. I don't turn but I know it's Zoe.

"You have given me a life that transcends each and every dream I've ever had. You have given me a family that I'll cherish until my last days on earth. You have given my heart a partner that it will never let go of."

I stare into his deep brown eyes. My lips part briefly even though I know I'm not going to say anything.

"My heart is yours. Keep it forever. Never let it go."

I lean forward to kiss him softly, knowing that I'm going to have to try and remember the vows that I wrote for him. I've been working on them for weeks but right now the words fail me.

"Bridget. It's time for your vows."

I glance briefly at the officiant before I brush my lips against Dane's ear. "I can't remember what I want to say."

"Let your heart tell you. Don't think. Just look at me and tell me how you feel."

I edge back a touch so I can look at his face. I nod before I pull in a breath.

"Every girl dreams of her own hero." I look towards where my father is standing next to my mom. "You're my hero, Dane."

"I'm a fireman," he whispers softly. "It's my job."

I giggle. I love that he still finds the same satisfaction in his job now as he did when we first met. He loves going to work each day. It's a big part of who he is.

"You are the bravest man I've ever met. You are the most honest man I've ever known and you love me in ways I'm not sure I always deserve."

"You deserve it." He nods. "I haven't even begun to show you how much I love you."

I pull my hand to my mouth to try and quiet my emotions. "You have given me more than any girl could ever want. I feel loved every second of every day."

He closes his eyes briefly and when he opens them I see the tears.

"My heart is yours. Keep it forever. Never let it go."

I let out a small sigh.

"We're going to exchange the rings now. I think a handsome young fellow is holding those for me."

Seth's face brightens at the mention of the rings. He dips his small hand into the pocket of his pants and pulls out two rings. Just as he reaches to place them in the officiant's palm, Dane scoops him into his arm.

"You're going to put mommy's ring on her finger, okay?" Dane kisses him softly on the cheek.

"I can do it," he says happily.

I hold out my left hand as my breath catches in my chest. I look at the face of my baby, asleep now in Landon's arms and at the face of my beautiful son who is holding my wedding ring in his small fingers.

As I look down my eyes fill with tears again as I watch Dane guide Seth's hand as they both slide a simple silver band with four gemstones onto my finger. Each is a different color. Each one is a reflection of the month of my birth, Dane's and our two children.

"I love the ring. I love you."

"I love you, Mommy." Seth leans forward to kiss the top of my nose.

I sob from sheer joy and as I slip the matching ring onto the finger of the man I love, I know that my life's path brought me here because this is my forever.

This is where I've always been meant to be.

Preview of HAZE

Featuring Gabriel Foster

"How long have you worked here?" His voice is cultured, deep and smooth. It's not uncommon to hear a voice like that in this boutique. I've worked here for six weeks now and at least twice a week a man with too much money and an insatiable need to see young women dressed in expensive lingerie will come waltzing through the doors.

"Welcome to Liore," I say softly as I glance to my left to where he's standing.

I have to look up. He's large, not just in height but in his shoulder's breadth. His eyes are a rich brown, his hair just as dark. His nose is sculptured and his jaw has a definite curve to it. The suit he's wearing is dark blue, perhaps even black. It's hard to tell under the chandelier lights that decorate this opulent space.

"Isla." His eyes hover over my chest before they settle on my nametag. "It's nice to meet you, Isla."

"It's lovely to meet you..." I pause. It's not only because I've been instructed to grab the name of each customer to give them a personal shopping experience. I want to know his name.

"Gabriel," he offers with a light touch of his hand on mine.

The name is oddly familiar. As I work to place it, I see him peering across the boutique at my boss. "Is there something I can help you find, Gabriel? Are you purchasing something for a girlfriend, or perhaps, your wife?"

His expression shifts slightly. "I have neither."

That's a pity but it's not. This is exactly the type of man I envisioned in my mind's eye when I arrived in Manhattan. I graduated from high school less than two years ago and my dreams

of attending Julliard on a scholarship had vanished as quickly as my clean record when I broke one too many rules in high school.

"Is there something in particular that you're looking for?" I catch the faint wave of the hand of one of my co-workers across the aisle. I ignore it because when a customer is ready to buy, the store could be engulfed in flames, and I'm not moving an inch. The commissions here are the highest I've ever earned in retail and the secret to guarantee a big sale is to make the customer feel as though they're the only one in the boutique.

His eyes scan the various bras we have displayed before they move to the lace panties and garters. "If I asked you to try something on for me, Isla, would you do that? Would you take me into one of the change rooms with you?"

I've read the employee handbook. No, I skimmed it briefly while on my way to work that first day weeks ago. The number one rule is to never take a customer into the rooms. Men who lead you into those quiet spaces are craving more than a private fashion show. I know that. "I'm sorry, Gabriel. That's against company policy."

He studies my face carefully. The dark shadow around my blue eyes looks hideous in the alarming bright light of the morning, but in here it's sensual and alluring. My shoulder length blonde hair is straight today, a sharp contrast to my high cheekbones. I'm here to sell lingerie and the light pink wrap around dress I'm wearing accentuates everything it needs to. He hasn't walked away yet, so he's still primed to buy.

He closes the short distance between us as he steps towards me. "You don't strike me as the type of young woman who follows all the rules."

It's tempting. Not just because of the extra money I'd find in my pocket. "I don't follow rules, Gabriel. If you want a private show, I can come to your office after work."

His brow cocks with the suggestion. "Is that something you offer to customers often?"

I've never offered it before. "I only offer it to the ones who peak my interest."

"I'll give you my card." His hand dips into the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

I take it from his long, elegant fingers and look down at it. I don't have time to read the details before my boss is upon us.

I turn to look at her but she's staring at Gabriel. Her hand leaps to his shoulder.

"Mr. Foster," she says slowly. "I see that you've met our newest girl. Isla, you're explaining everything we offer to Mr. Foster, yes?"

I look down at the card of Mr. Gabriel Foster, the CEO of Foster Enterprises and the man who owns this boutique.

"Isla has been very cordial." He glides the tip of his index finger along my wrist. "She's coming by my office today. I'll expect you at four, Isla."

"At four," I repeat back. "I'll be there at four, Sir."

His eyes skim slowly over my body before they stop on my face. "Don't be late and bring those samples we spoke of."

I freeze as his hand runs up my arm before he brushes past me towards the front of the shop.

Coming in November

Preview of TORN

Featuring Asher Foster

"Are they low enough?"

"Pull them up." I wave my arm in the air towards one of the three female assistants he walked in with. "I need them higher."

He pushes their eager hands away as he adjusts the waistband of his button-fly jeans. I'd told him to strip down to just his pants as soon as he stepped foot into my studio. He had done that effortlessly. His hands tugging the white sweater he was wearing over his head to reveal a toned chest and stomach covered by the expected tattoos.

I'd walked closer to ask him to remove the bracelets and necklaces he had on. His eyes had been glued to mine the entire time.

I admit he's much more attractive than most of the men who traipse through here. His hair may be a tousled mess of brown but his eyes more than make up for that. They're framed by long lashes, the irises a shade of chestnut I haven't seen before.

It's no surprise that he warrants the attention he does in the media.

Asher Foster has the number one song in the country right now. On top of that, he wrote it. I listened to it on my smartphone before he arrived. It's moody, soulful and surprisingly brilliant.

I look through the lens of my camera. "I need that light moved to the left."

My assistant, Remy, darts into action. She pulls it over just a touch. I'd be lost without her, especially right now, given that the small space is filled with at least ten people, all part of the entourage that arrived with the Asher.

I take another glance. It's almost perfect save for the fact that when I asked him to show me some skin, he took it to a level that's bordering on obscene.

I step around the tripod and walk back towards where he's standing in front of a pale, grey canvas hung from the ceiling.

I point towards his jeans. "You can button those back up."

He looks down. "I thought you wanted me almost naked."

He's taller than I am, but only by an inch or two. It helps that I'm wearing boots with heels today. I wouldn't have chosen this short of a skirt if I'd have known that he'd be here. I try my best to always look professional but when it's over 100 degrees outside, you have to make concessions. I'm thankful I at least took the time this morning to wash and sweep my curly brown hair up so it looks controllable.

I've already established myself as the go-to photographer for celebrities in New York City. Granted, it only constitutes part of my business, but it's the most lucrative part. I'm making enough off this shoot today to pay my rent for both the studio and my apartment for the next two months.

"It was my understanding that the photograph needed to be tasteful."

"You don't think this is tasteful." There's a low growl to his voice. "Tell me what's not tasteful about it."

The room may be milling with people, but his focus is entirely on me. I've felt that since he walked in. I imagine he's used to women taking him up on everything he offers to them. There's no denying it's tempting. I only need to look down to where a hint of his cock is visible through the opening of his jeans to know that the man is very comfortable with his body.

"I'd prefer if you buttoned your jeans up."

"Why?" His eyes darken. "You don't think I look good like this?"

There's no way in hell this man needs his ego stroked. If that's what fuels his fire he need only turn around to where every single

woman in the room, including Remy, is standing with their lips at the ready.

I've always been mildly curious about why so many women are drawn towards musicians. I don't have to wonder anymore. His confidence is undeniable but it hasn't crossed the line to cocky yet. He's just the right balance of tenderness mixed with blatant aggression.

"I think I look good." He playfully nods towards his groin. "You think I look good too, don't you, Falon?"

I look around the room before I rest my hand against his shoulder and lean in just a touch. "As impressive as your dick is, I don't want it in my pictures."

Coming soon

Preview of HEAT

A Three-Part Series Featuring Tyler Monroe

"I once had one in my mouth twice that size," I boast as I adjust the collar of my chef's jacket. "I had it all the way in before it exploded. I swallowed most of it."

"You what?" Drea, the newly hired sous chef stares across the counter at me, a knife at the ready in her hand. "There's no way you did that, Cadence. I don't believe you."

"Whether you believe me or not isn't relevant." I turn back towards my prep station. "I know what I'm capable of and I know that if I was given the chance, I'd happily prove that I could take Tyler Monroe's in one swallow. I'd do it right now if I have the chance."

"You'd think I'd have a say in that, no?"

I stop with my hand in mid-air. No one else is supposed to be in the kitchen right now. The only people in the entire restaurant are the two front-of-the house staff who are busy confirming reservations. They're both also women. That means that there's no way in hell either of them just asked that question considering the voice attached to it is all kinds of deep and sexy. I know that voice. I've never heard it in person but I've heard it whenever he's been on television, which seems to be all the time recently.

"Who are you?" Drea asks because she's not only new, she's naïve. She must also be one of the few people working in the restaurant industry in New York who has never seen a picture of him.

"I'm Tyler." I hear footsteps behind me. "I'm Tyler Monroe and you are?"

"Drea Hernandez," she offers. "You're not actually Tyler Monroe, are you?"

"I'm actually him." He chuckles.

I hear shuffling behind me and then in a way too excited tone, Drea screeches out the words no one working in this kitchen should ask. "Can I get your autograph? I have all of your cookbooks at home, but can you sign my jacket?"

I pick that moment to turn around because I know inevitably I'm going to have to face him. He's one of the reasons I applied for this position after I graduated from culinary school. His career is astounding and his accomplishments are nothing short of impressive. He's only twenty-nine-years-old and he's already the owner and chef at one of the most prestigious restaurants in Manhattan.

"I sign your paycheck." He ignores the offer of the pen that Drea is dangling in front of him. "I assume that whatever you're working on needs your attention."

She purses her lips together in a grimace before she tucks the pen back into her pocket. "I thought you were on a book tour."

"I thought you had work to do," he counters. "I'm here for dinner service tonight. I want everything in order."

I stare at his profile. He's striking. His dark hair is long enough to touch the collar of his jacket. His face is covered in stubble. It's no wonder that women come to the restaurant in the hope that he'll be here. I've lost count of how many of my classmates from culinary school have asked if they can stop by to meet him.

"You and I should talk." He suddenly turns to the side so he's facing me directly. "Come with me."

My breath catches at his words. "I have a lot of work to do."

His tongue darts over his bottom lip before he runs it over the top. It's a thoughtless gesture that shouldn't impact me the way that it does. "That can wait."

I lower the knife in my hand onto the cutting board. I smooth my hands over the front of my chef's jacket before I take a deep

breath and silently follow him down a corridor toward a makeshift office that I've seen the restaurant manager use to fire those who don't pull their weight.

"If this is about what you overheard, I can explain that," I say the moment we're through the doorway.

He slides the leather jacket he's wearing from his shoulders revealing his muscular, tattooed arms. I look to the open doorway hoping someone, anyone, will save me from this moment.

"I don't need an explanation." He tilts his head to the side as his eyes rake me from head to toe. His gaze stalls on my name, which is sewn on the front of my jacket in red thread. "I'm going to assume you were talking about one of my signature dishes when you said you could fit the entire thing in your mouth."

I bite my bottom lip when he takes a step closer his eyes riveted to my face.

"That's what you were talking about isn't it, Cadence?"

My lips part slightly as I pull in a deep breath. "No. I was talking about... I was actually talking about your..."

Coming soon

About the Author

Deborah Bladon has never read a romance hero she didn't like. Her love for romance novels began when she was old enough to board the bus, library card in hand to check out the newest Harlequin paperbacks. She's a Canadian by heart, and by passport, but you can often spot her in New York City sipping a latte and looking for inspiration for her next story. Manhattan is definitely her second home.

She cherishes her family and believes that each day is a gift for writing, for reading, and for loving.