

Weddings by Design, #1

Picture Perfect

A NOVEL

JANICE
THOMPSON


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To the faithful prayer warriors on my dream team. You helped me breathe Bella back to life. What fun to see her through Hannah McDermott's eyes! Thank you for your prayers, your encouragement, and your ideas. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

In memory of the great Bing Crosby, whose movies and melodies filled my heart as a child. I couldn't pen a story about Irish Americans without including some of his best-loved songs as chapter titles.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Matthew 20:16

Prologue

Going My Way

May your troubles be as few and as far apart as my grandmother's teeth.

Irish proverb

My life has been a series of *almosts*. Take, for instance, the time I *almost* made the cheerleading squad in high school but lost out to my archnemesis, Jacquie Practically-Perfect-in-Every-Way Goldfarb. Then there was the time Matt Hudson, the hunkiest football player at my high school, *almost* asked me to the prom but ended up going with Jacquie instead. Oh, and we can't forget the time I *almost* got a photographer's dream job, shooting superstar Brock Benson's wedding. Yep. Another *almost*. That time, the opportunity of a lifetime slipped through my fingers and into the open palms of my chief competitor, Drew Kincaid of Kincaid Photography.

Some people are haunted by memories of things they've done. Me? I'm haunted by all of the things I nearly accomplished

but missed by a quarter of an inch. That's why, when faced with yet another unbelievable opportunity—a profile piece in *Texas Bride* magazine to promote my new Galveston-based photography business—I couldn't blow it. No more *almosts* for me. This time I would hit the finish line a winner. My meeting with the *Texas Bride* reporter would transform my career and propel me into the limelight, winning me the favor of the island's top wedding planner, Bella Neeley. If I could just keep from messing it up.

Oh, but this time I wouldn't! In fact, I could almost hear my grandpa Aengus cheering me on from the great beyond: “Hannah Grace, if you're lucky enough to be Irish, then you're lucky enough.”

I didn't happen to believe in luck, but if being Irish meant I stood a better chance at succeeding in business, I would embrace my heritage as never before. I would bathe with Irish Spring soap, dress in the vibrant colors of the family crest, skip through fields of shamrocks, and listen to my father's nightly tales of Clan McDermott's glory days. And I would do it all with a smile on my face and confidence in my stride.

From his mansion up in heaven, Grandpa Aengus smiled down on me, his gold-capped front tooth gleaming like the precious stones in the pearly gate. I could sense his pleasure as I made up my mind to do the McDermotts proud. Like my warring ancestors of yesteryear, I would fight to the finish, wielding my bloody sword—er, my two-thousand-dollar digital camera with stellar resolution and optical zoom—until I took the prize. I would come out a victor in the end, or make a fool of myself trying.

Either way, I wouldn't go down without a fight. A true McDermott never did.

1

Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral

May you have no frost on your spuds,
No worms on your cabbage.
May your goat give plenty of milk.
If you inherit a donkey, may she be in foal.

Irish saying

There's no denying the fact that my grandpa Aengus shaped the way I look at life. The man had a saying for everything. If I fell and scraped my knee, he mended it with an Irish proverb: "For every storm, a rainbow, for every tear, a smile." If I woke up with a head cold, he had an Irish remedy: "A good laugh and a long sleep are the two best cures." If I got into an argument with my BFF, he offered sage Irish wisdom: "Don't give cherries to pigs or advice to fools."

The man firmly believed that anything good that came to him in this life was in some way tied to his great fortune at being born Irish. No one ever debated him on that point. No one in the family, anyway. Since his passing three years ago, those quirky proverbs and blessings have brought those of us who loved him an ongoing sense of comfort and peace.

My father, God bless him, has done his best to keep Grandpa's sayings alive, but he usually ends up botching the proverbs. Still, a botched proverb is a proverb, so, on the third Saturday in September, as I buzzed down the road, I decided to give my dad a call. Surely he could come up with words of wisdom. I desperately needed them before meeting with the reporter from *Texas Bride* magazine.

My father answered with a jovial, "Hannah Grace! How's my girl?"

The moment I heard his voice come over the car's Bluetooth speaker, I wilted like a flower in an underfertilized garden. Something about my dad's happy-go-lucky tone always made me feel young again. Vulnerable. Once a daddy's little girl, always a daddy's little girl, right?

I turned my focus to the road, paying particular attention to a group of tourists on the edge of the seawall snapping photos of the murky gulf waters as they rolled in and out in predictable fashion. Funny how people liked to capture every little moment on film—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Even the mundane.

My hesitation must've prompted some worry on my father's end.

"You okay, Shutter Speed?"

I laughed at his funny nickname. "Yeah. Mostly." A lingering sigh followed. "Just needed some sage advice."

"So you called me?" His chuckle lifted my spirits. "You

must be desperate. Or forgetful. I've never been very good at advice, remember? I'm pretty sure I'm the one who told my friends to buy stock in Enron years ago, wasn't I? And I'm the one who convinced your mother to buy that over-the-top Christmas sweater you girls all make fun of. Oh, and remember that whole Y2K thing? Got people worked up for nothing and felt like a fool in the end."

A girlish giggle escaped on my end. "Yeah, but you've been forgiven for all of that. And I do need some words of wisdom, Dad. I'm just about to head into an interview with an important reporter and need to know how to change the subject if she brings up Sierra Caswell's wedding. I don't want to blow this. Bella Neeley from Club Wed will read this article, and I need to impress her."

"Wait . . . Bella Neeley, that's a name I know. But who's Sierra Caswell?"

"The bride I told you about a couple of weeks ago. The one with all the attitude."

"Ah. The country-western singer?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so worried about the reporter's questions?"

"Because I need to do my best to protect Sierra's privacy, and I'm afraid I'll blow it. You know? Sometimes we get to talking and things just slip out. I've got to be careful not to let that happen. You know me, Dad."

"Gotcha. You're a chip off the old block."

"Yep. But Sierra's a high-profile case, and she hasn't been easy, so I'm afraid I might accidentally spout off if the reporter gets too nosy." I turned onto Broadway. "You're not going to believe it, but Sierra's publicist sent me a note saying that I have to Photoshop out any wrinkles around her eyes." I thought about the email I'd read on my phone just

this morning. The whole thing seemed ludicrous, even now. “Seriously? Who has wrinkles at twenty-six?”

Oh, wait, I did. And they deepened every time I thought about Sierra’s wedding. Instead of seeing the event as a blessing to my career, I felt a strange and ominous sense of foreboding every time I imagined the big day. But I tried to push those feelings aside. They were just feelings, after all. And as a woman of faith, I knew better than to put much stock in feelings.

“Grandpa Aengus never had a wrinkle till he turned seventy-five.”

My father’s voice brought me back to reality.

“Then again, his hair turned gray at twenty-two,” my father continued, “so he always looked older than his age, even without the wrinkles. From what I hear, it never really bothered him, though.”

“Still, some people worry about such things, especially people in the public eye. Sierra’s famous, you know. She had a top ten song on Billboard last month, and she just recorded the new theme song for *Stars Collide*.”

“*Stars Collide*?”

“My favorite sitcom. The one about the talent scouts. You know?”

“Oh, right, right.”

I had a feeling he didn’t have a clue, but I kept going anyway. “My point is, she’s famous. So landing this gig is critical to my career. It will put me in good standing with Bella Neeley, and if I can stay in her good graces, my studio will become famous.”

“And this Sierra person holds the key to all of this? She’s really that important?”

“Definitely. You can’t pick up a magazine without seeing

her name in it. And she was on *Entertainment Tonight* just last week. But she's a pain in the backside to work with, like I said. Talk about a diva. I was really excited to get this gig, but it's been nothing but trouble so far. Even Bella has struggled with her, and she's handled every bridezilla known to mankind. If she's having trouble, can you even imagine *me* trying to manage it?"

"From what I've heard, Bella's one tough cookie."

"Oh, she is. But she's as sweet as sugar too. And right now she adores me. I'd like to keep it that way."

Up ahead the light turned red and I waited, though waiting didn't come naturally to me.

"How could she help but love you? You're a McDermott." He took a swan dive into one of his usual Irish tales about the joys of belonging to the clan.

As always, when he got to talking about our heritage, his brogue thickened. The *g*'s disappeared from the end of his words. The *r*'s were pushed. The *h*'s disappeared altogether. Words like *thirty* became *tirty*. The letter *i* became *oi*. In other words, we were no longer Irish. We were, without apology, Oirish. And very happy about it, from the lilt in Dad's voice. He continued to share his heart about how easy it would be for Bella to love me and my work.

"Hey, Oi read the *Daily*, kiddo. Oi know tat Bella named you one of te top five photographers in South Texas. Tat's got to be great for business, right?"

He had no idea. Picture This, the Galveston studio I'd opened just a year and a half ago, stood a chance at blossoming into something of great beauty now that the coordinator at Galveston's premiere wedding facility had taken notice of me. How many months had I prayed for such a miracle? Seemed like forever. And with one word from Bella, the Red

Sea had parted at last. I would forever be grateful. But I had to be proactive. Nothing—I repeat, nothing—could mess this up. Not now, after I'd worked so hard.

A little sigh escaped as I thought it through. “I just have this horrible feeling that the situation with Sierra Caswell could undo all of my hard work. She’s a royal pain. I’ve never met anyone so self-focused.”

The light turned green and I put my foot on the accelerator, ready to move forward—both physically and emotionally.

“Ah.” My father paused. “And you need to make sure you don’t give any of this information away to the reporter, should she ask.”

“Right.” I eased the steering wheel to the left, careful to avoid several parked cars on the side of the street. The closer I got to the Strand, the worse the traffic.

“Well, you know what your grandfather would’ve said on a mornin’ such as this, don’t you, darlin’?”

The lilt in my father’s voice made me smile, and a sense of calm settled over me as I anticipated his next words. “Nope, that’s why I called you.”

My dad chuckled. “Your grandpa would’ve said, ‘Put silk on a goat and it’s still a goat.’”

I eased down on the brakes as I approached the Starbucks parking lot. “You’re calling Sierra Caswell a goat?”

“Well, if the silk fits . . .”

Okay, that got a chuckle out of me. I turned my car into the lot, then slipped it into park and leaned back against the seat. “Don’t know how you’ve done it, Dad, but you have. You made me laugh. And feel much better about the situation.” Nothing new there. This daddy’s girl always felt better after a heart-to-heart, even a quirky one involving goats.

“I didn’t give you a lick of advice, but I’ve managed to

distract you, and that's exactly what you need to do with that reporter. Pull a Grandpa Aengus on her. Respond with an Oirish proverb. She'll think you're brilliant."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Well, you are brilliant, Shutter Speed. You're from good Irish stock, after all. Now get in there and knock 'em dead." He cleared his throat. "Well, um, not really. But you know what I mean. Let your confidence ring out loud and clear. Just give the reporter enough information to let your competitors know who's who and what's what. The rest will take care of itself."

As he said the word *competitors*, my thoughts shifted at once to Drew Kincaid. Would I ever get past the nerves when his name was mentioned? Okay, so my father hadn't actually mentioned my hunky competitor by name, but he might as well have. Why did Drew unnerve me so?

"You still there, kiddo?"

My father's voice roused me from my ponderings and forced my attention to the matter at hand. "Yeah. Just thinking about what you said. Wondering how I should go about putting Drew Kincaid in his place so that I come out looking like a pro and not some sort of bitter competitor with a chip on my shoulder." *Which I probably am, but I'm working on it.*

"Kincaid?" A string of words in lyrical Gaelic flowed on my father's end, followed by, "That's the competition? A Kincaid?"

"Yeah." I sighed. "Kincaid Photography."

"Well, why dinna ye say so?" Brogue now thicker than before, my father took off on a passionate rant. I couldn't make out much until I heard the words "fight till the death." Only *death* sounded more like *det*.

“Wait, what are you saying, Dad? We have some connection to the Kincaids?”

His tirade drew to an immediate halt. “You mean you really don’t know? You haven’t heard the story?”

“No.”

“It’s quite a tale, the story of the clash between Clan Kincaid and Clan McDermott. Are ye sure yer up for it?”

Have I ever been up for any of your Clan McDermott stories?

A quick glance at my watch told me I’d arrived twenty minutes early for my appointment. Probably just enough time for one of Dad’s tales. “Sure. Fill me in.”

His brogue deepened even more as the story began to unfold. Before long I felt he’d transported me all the way across the Atlantic to the green hills of Ireland, the lilt in his voice dancing across the phone line. “We’re talkin’ generations of fightin’ that took several lives. Almost wiped out both clans. Worse than the Hatfields and McCoys.”

I gasped at this news. “Over what?”

“Land, a’ course. What else?”

“There were no cameras involved? No photography businesses?”

Dad grunted. “A’ course not. We’re talkin’ hundreds a’ years ago. No such thing as cameras back then.”

“What happened?”

“The Kincaids lost their land in a bloody battle between the clans and vowed to fight till the death to get it back. So far they haven’t been successful. In fact, tempers still flare in the old country whenever a McDermott and a Kincaid cross paths.” He slipped into Gaelic, words laced with passion.

“No way.” My heart quickened at that news. “Are you sure about this?”

“Check it out in the history books. You’ll see it’s quite a story. So don’t fret over this Kincaid fellow. He comes from a long line of losers.”

“Wow.”

“You’re a McDermott, darlin’,” my father said. “We McDermotts always come out on top if we don’t give up. So don’t go down without a fight. Remember that and you’ll go a long way in this life. Remember what your grandfather always said too: ‘Enthusiasm is like a fire that needs an occasional poke with a stick.’”

He laughed and I joined in. In fact, I could almost envision my grandfather’s face.

“Just stir the embers,” my dad said. “Keep the flame lit, Shutter Speed.”

“Gotcha.” I released a slow breath. “Thanks again, Dad. Give Mama a kiss from me.”

“Always happy to kiss your mother.” He half mumbled something in Gaelic, then the call ended. I could almost picture him doing a little jig across the house to sweep Mama into his arms.

Ah, romance! When would it knock me off my feet like that?

Never, if I spent eighty hours a week focused on my business. Still, what else could I do? We McDermotts didn’t go down without a fight, as Dad said. Not that I needed to fret over the whole Drew Kincaid thing, apparently. Like my clan members, I would win the battle. I would claim the land, conquer my foes, and take some impressive wrinkle-free photos of the biggest diva in country music history.

And somehow manage to impress Galveston Island’s top wedding planner along the way.

2

The Little Things in Life

May those who love us, love us.
And for those who don't love us,
May God turn their hearts.
And if he cannot turn their hearts,
May he turn their ankles,
So we may know them by their limping.

Irish saying

After touching up my lipstick, I headed into Starbucks dressed in my most professional attire and carrying a portfolio that would've made a novice photographer shamrock-green with envy. Why, then, did I have to blow it the moment the reporter walked in the door by rambling as if I'd consumed nothing but caffeine all day? Oh, right. Because I hadn't.

The cup of cinnamon dolce latte that I purchased trembled in my hand as I took the seat across from the frazzled blonde reporter who introduced herself as Dani. She gave me a pensive look as she pulled an iPad out of her purse and turned it on. “Start over, Hannah,” she said, her thinly plucked brows elevating as she tried to keep up with me. “But slow down this time. I don’t want to miss a thing.”

After clearing my throat, I began my speech again, this time pacing my words. “I was just saying that wedding pictures don’t tell the whole story. Not even close.” Taking a sip of my latte, I tried to look poised and professional. Unfortunately, my acting skills had never been very good.

“Meaning?” She typed a few words into her touch-sensitive keyboard, using the two-finger method.

I released a slow breath and delivered my carefully rehearsed speech. “Photographers work hard to capture the glorious moments. The radiant smile on the bride’s face as she takes her first step down the aisle. The look of wonder coming from the groom as he catches a glimpse of his bride for the first time. The backdrop of a gorgeous wedding facility—especially if it happens to be Club Wed, the prettiest place to get married on Galveston Island.”

Dani looked up from her iPad and sighed. “Don’t you just love Club Wed? My sister Sharlene got married there a few years ago. Her ceremony made the papers because it was their first official themed wedding.”

“The boot-scootin’ country-western one?” I could hardly believe it. That wedding was infamous.

“That’s the one.” She grinned. “Now you see why I’m so interested in the place. I’d like to get married there myself someday.”

“Who wouldn’t? But you’d better go ahead and book it

now if you're serious. I hear they've got a waiting list a mile long."

Dani released a little sigh. "Well, I'm not exactly engaged yet. Just wishful thinking on my part. Every girl wants the perfect wedding."

"Of course. Club Wed is definitely the best venue on the island and the perfect place to capture those rare, once-in-a-lifetime photos."

"Like?"

"Like . . ." I paused to think it through, my eyes fluttering closed as the images presented themselves in my mind's eye. "Like the close-up of a lone tear as it slips down the cheek of the mother of the bride. And that made-for-the-camera moment when the bridesmaids and groomsmen take their places alongside the bride and groom, forming a perfect V-shape with the minister at the very center." At this point, I added all the dramatic flair I could muster as I punctuated each word. "*These* are the things we attempt to catch through the eye of the camera."

"And you do a lovely job." Dani continued to type in her notes, then glanced my way. "I looked through the photos you sent. I've never seen such beautiful wedding portraits, and I'm not just saying that. They're exquisite."

"Aw, thank you." Her words boosted my confidence and almost made me feel worthy of this interview. Almost.

With a bit of maneuvering on her screen, she pulled up the photos I'd emailed, and we both leaned in to have a closer look. I couldn't help but smile as a picture of my most recent bride filled the screen. Dani gave me a little wink as she enlarged it with a swipe of her fingers.

"I've already talked to my editor. *Texas Bride* is going to feature some of your photographs along with this interview.

Quite an honor.” She reached into her bag and came out with some legal-looking papers. “Of course, you’ll have to sign these copyright release forms and mail them to me. You okay with that?”

“Sure.” I was completely overwhelmed by this amazing opportunity.

I turned as the barista called out someone’s order—a caramel mocha macchiato. My stomach rumbled, another reminder that I needed real food, not more coffee.

Focus, Hannah. You may never get another chance like this.

I released a slow breath and faced the reporter once again. “As I was saying, there are some not-to-be-missed photo ops at a wedding, but I think it’s only fair to add that there are a few things we photographers deliberately leave out, things the average wedding guest never sees. This is what makes or breaks a photographer, in my opinion. And I would like to think that’s what sets me apart from the competition.” My eyes fluttered closed again, and an image of Drew Kincaid flitted across my mind. Remembering my father’s story about the Kincaids and McDermotts, I trembled. Better stay focused on the interview, not my competition.

“Things you leave out?” Dani’s brow wrinkled. “Like what?”

I opened my eyes and offered a confident smile. “Oh, say, the bride screaming at the bridesmaids just minutes before she walks down the aisle, or the flower girl throwing a fit in her beautiful dress. The caterer realizing she forgot to bring the duck a l’Orange, or the florist scrambling to make an extra bridesmaid bouquet with only seconds to spare. I’ve seen all of that and much more.”

Should I tell her about the drunk-as-a-skunk father of the bride who'd shown up fifteen minutes before his daughter's scheduled ceremony? I'd poured three cups of hot coffee down that man's throat to prep him for his walk down the aisle. Nah. Better not share that story just yet.

"Ooh, your life sounds so glamorous." Dani entered more notes, then looked up, her eyes narrowing. "What else have you got?"

I thought for a moment. "Well, I worked one wedding where the four-tiered cake toppled just before the reception. Thank goodness I got a couple of pictures before it hit the floor. See what I mean? It's all about knowing what to shoot and when. I always get a few shots of the cake before anyone arrives, just in case."

"Wow." Dani gave me an admiring look. "You've got this down to a science."

"Yep." I chuckled. "I've learned a lot from Bella Neeley, the coordinator at Club Wed. She's the best in the business." *Please make sure you print that.* I flashed Dani a smile, but her gaze had shifted back to the iPad. "We've done a couple of weddings together, and I'm so grateful for the things she's taught me. She's such a wedding pro, loaded with great information about the biz."

"Speaking of the wedding business, one of Bella's brothers is a photographer too, isn't he?"

"Yes, Joey. I've never met him, actually. He and his wife just moved to Italy to help with the family's wedding facility in Naples."

"Sounds like a dream job." Dani sighed.

"No kidding." I smiled, in part because losing Joey to Italy meant Bella would be calling on me more to take photographs at Club Wed. I hoped so, anyway. It probably wouldn't hurt

to mention her name a couple more times in this interview, just to be safe.

Dani shifted in her seat as the already crowded coffee shop took in extra patrons. As the table next to us filled with teenagers, the noise level rose, and so did the pitch of Dani's voice. "So, you were telling me about things *not* to capture on film at a wedding."

"Right. Well, I shot this one wedding where the mother of the groom refused to be escorted down the aisle because she hated her future daughter-in-law."

"What did you do?"

"Bella gave me the idea, actually." *Score! Another shameless plug for the woman who holds my career in her hands!* "We spent a couple of minutes before the wedding showing the mother photographs I'd just taken of her son in his tuxedo, looking content and happy. That won her over."

"Perfect. You're a master."

"Aw, thanks. I try." Another story came to mind. "This is the worst one of all. I worked an over-the-top wedding for a well-to-do Houston family where the best man and matron of honor were having a romantic tryst." I took a sip of my coffee to wash away the bitter taste that filled my mouth at the memory of the event.

"They met at the wedding and fell in love?" Dani giggled. "How sweet."

"Actually . . ." I leaned in to whisper the details so that the family at the next table wouldn't overhear. "They were married to other people. I happened in on them in the chapel after everyone else had gone to the reception hall."

"Oh, ouch."

"Right. I'd gone back in there to snag a few photos of the unity candle and candelabras. Found something else entirely."

A shiver ran down my spine as I relived that horrible moment. “I’m just saying some things are best not committed to film.” I picked up my coffee and took a sip, now deep in thought. Placing the cup back on the table, I continued. “After years in the business, I’ve become skilled at knowing which shots to catch and which ones to avoid.”

“It’s truly an art form, then.”

“I’d like to think so.”

The deep bellow of a ship’s horn sounded, and I glanced out the window of the Starbucks. Across the street, well within eyesight, a massive Carnival cruise ship pulled out of port. Twisted memories snaked through my mind as I watched the cruisers wave their goodbyes from the top deck. How many times had I stood in that spot, camera in hand? Another blast of the ship’s horn startled me back to attention. I rubbed my eyes, feeling a headache coming on.

“Hannah?” Dani gave me a curious look.

“Yes?” I turned to her with what I hoped would look like a confident nod. “Sorry. Just thinking about those cruisers.”

“Oh, that’s right.” She gave me a pensive look. “I think I read somewhere that you once worked on a cruise ship, taking photos of the passengers. Is that right?”

“Yes.” Not that I wanted to talk about it. I wouldn’t garner much respect from Bella or from future clients if *Texas Bride* printed the details of my very messy breakup with the cruise director of the *Clarity*. I cringed just thinking about it.

“Now tell me about . . .” Dani glanced at her notepad, then back up again. “Drew Kincaid.”

“Drew Kincaid?” I tried to maintain a calm expression, all the while sword fighting the demons of envy that danced in front of my eyes. “What about him?”

Dani referred to her notes. “Well, I see that the two of you have quite a competitive thing going on. Kincaid Photography took the number-one spot on Bella’s list, after all. You took the number two. Want to tell our readers about that?”

I’d rather not, thanks.

Who cared if my blue-eyed distraction made it to the top of Bella’s list? He wasn’t the one shooting Sierra Caswell’s wedding, now was he?

Swallowing hard, I chose my next words carefully. “I’ve known Drew about a year and a half. He’s very good at what he does.”

“Better than you?” she teased.

“Hardly.” I bit back the rest of the words that threatened to escape. “I mean, I’d like to think I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“Like the one where you make the competition disappear?” She gave me a wink.

“That’s the idea.”

“Well then, why don’t you tell our readers about some of those tricks you’ve been hiding. Let’s start with the wedding you’re photographing the first weekend in December. Everyone in town is talking about it. Must be quite an honor, working with Sierra Caswell.” Dani’s eyes sparkled. “I mean, a mega country singer like Sierra’s been photographed by hundreds of photographers all over the world. How are you going to capture her on the big day?”

With a net and a rope?

How could I explain the situation and still come out smelling like a rose? Frankly, I couldn’t wait for this wedding to be behind me so I could move forward with a saner, happier bride-to-be, someone who treated me with respect and kindness.

Divert her, Hannah. Come up with one of Grandpa Aengus's proverbs. Something witty.

"Every dog is bold on its own doorstep," I managed. Where the words came from, I couldn't say.

Really, Hannah? That's the best you've got—that stupid "dog on the doorstep" proverb?

"W-what?" She looked my way, the lines of concentration deepening along her brows and under her eyes.

I swallowed hard, feeling like an idiot. "Oh, I'm just saying that, um, the boldness I feel—or, rather, the sense of confidence I have in photographing Sierra Caswell—is much the same as a dog on his doorstep." I gave a weak smile, though I felt like a blithering idiot.

"Are . . . are you calling yourself a dog?" Dani looked more confused than ever.

"Oh. Well, no. Not really. Just saying that I am confident I'll do a good job of capturing photos of Sierra on her big day."

"Ah. Well, why didn't you just say so?"

Because I was trying to distract you. And apparently it worked.

I somehow diverted Dani's attention once again by talking about the most recent wedding I'd photographed, an Irish shindig featuring my younger sister Deidre as the bride. That seemed to put the reporter at ease. For a while. She finally came back around to her questions about Sierra Caswell, and with a smile plastered on my face, I answered to the best of my ability.

At three o'clock, just as several patrons headed out of the coffee shop, Dani glanced at her watch and gasped. "Oh, I can't believe we've been here this long. Do you mind? I really need to . . ." Her words drifted off as she glanced at the door.

“You have another appointment?”

“Yes, actually, I—”

“No biggie.” I rose and reached for my purse and portfolio. “I’ve got to get back to work. Can’t wait to see the article in print. And I’ll be sure to fill out the copyright permission forms so you can use those photos. I’ll sign them and fax them back to you this evening.”

“Great. I appreciate it.” Her gaze shifted to the door of the coffee shop as it swung open.

My breath caught in my throat as the ever-gorgeous Drew Kincaid stepped inside. Ribbons of sunlight reflected off his stunning blond hair. He flashed that cool smile of his, and those blue eyes shimmered with mischief as he walked toward us.

“Well now.” He stopped at our table and focused on me. “Never expected to see you here, Hannah.” He turned to Dani, still offering that boyish grin, his firm mouth curved as if on the edge of laughter. “And you must be Dani. From *Texas Bride*?”

He extended his hand, but my focus was on the broad shoulders and muscular arms. Why did the competition have to be so . . . hot? He looked devilishly handsome and forced my attention away from the conversation at hand. I did my best to shift my gaze, but how could I, with that deep blue shirt matching his eyes so perfectly? And why did his face have to be bronzed by the wind and sun? Who had skin like that in late September?

“I—I’m Dani.” The reporter took his hand, almost knocking over my coffee in the process. “Nice to meet you.”

His smile widened, his teeth strikingly white against his tanned face. “Well, I hope I haven’t missed all the fun.” Drew pulled up a chair between us and took a seat, then plunked his portfolio on the table.

“Oh, Hannah is full of stories. But I guess it’s time to shift gears.” Dani flashed a nervous smile and fussed with her hair in a flirtatious fashion. “I hope you don’t mind, Hannah. I just figured, well, both of you made the list . . .”

Yes, both of us had made the list, all right. Despite my best attempts to nudge out the competition, Drew had somehow won the top spot. Seemed like he always managed to steal my thunder. But not for long. No, if I played my cards right with Sierra Caswell, I would eventually knock him off his perch. If I kept my cool and handled things like a pro.

Deep breath, Hannah. Think about the McDermotts of old. Didn’t they end up with the land? Of course they did! This is going to end well, as long as you don’t crater.

I fidgeted with my necklace, a lovely silver cross Grandpa Aengus had given me for my thirteenth birthday. I happened to glance down and did a double take as my eyes landed on my feet. On my left foot—a comfy black flat. On my right—a luscious brown strappy sandal.

What in the world?

I looked again, just to be sure. Yep. Two mismatched shoes stared back at me. So much for looking and acting like a pro.

Stay calm, Hannah. Stay. Calm.

I shifted my gaze back up to Dani and Drew, but they were both staring down at my feet, cockeyed grins on their faces. Now what?

“I, um . . . it’s Wear Your Mismatched Shoes to Work Day. I’m surprised you two didn’t get the memo.” I reached down to grab my now-lukewarm coffee and offered Dani what I hoped would look like a confident smile. “Well, thanks for your time. Have a good day.”

“Happy to meet you.”

Judging from the fact that she never even looked up from my feet, I rather doubted it.

I gave her a curt nod, then pivoted on the heel of my black flat, caught the toe of my brown sandal on the leg of Drew's chair . . . and promptly dropped my cup of coffee into his lap.