

CHAPTER ONE

Andrea Morgan cruised up the stairs to the entrance of Hope Presbyterian Church, but when her booted foot hit the top step and her fingers curled around the metal door handle, she froze.

Holm Funeral.

Her eyes locked on the handwritten sign posted on the door and a bubble lodged in her throat. She'd never met the man. *Dwight*. Her mother's *significant other*. There was absolutely nothing to get choked up about.

Andi stomped her foot, let go of the handle and pulled at the corners of her eyes with impatient fingers. This was ridiculous. She mentally calculated her monthly cycle and confirmed that tears had no place in her day. She needed to put on her big-girl pants, get inside that church and move this weekend forward.

Quickly.

After all, that *was* the intention of this long weekend. In and out quickly. She'd booked her flight quickly, secured a rental car quickly and made her way, quickly, south on I-75 from Fort Myers Airport to this twelve-mile-long island off Florida's Gulf Coast to stand in front of this Spanish-style church building. And she planned to return home just as quickly as she'd come.

It didn't help that she'd just had the strangest encounter in the parking lot with a little old lady who'd spouted prophecies about Andi like she knew her. Something about her life unfolding and being on the wrong path. Already late, Andi had waved her off, hoping not everyone on Mimosas Key was so strange.

Now she did what she always did the few times her body betrayed her with a quivering stomach or the prickles under her eyelids that came before tears. She reminded herself how far she'd come on her own by channeling the coveted *thinking* personality-type of her boss, and how far she'd continue to go if she could keep her *feeling* personality under control.

With renewed resolve, Andi sucked in a breath of humid Florida air and gave the door handle a yank to remind the universe who was boss. The hollow wooden slab, lighter than she'd gauged, swung out of her hand and banged loudly into the metal railing.

Andi's hand hit her mouth at the same moment. "Oh!"

A tall frame appeared in the doorway, ushered her inside without a word and pulled the door closed behind her.

She blinked hard, trying to adjust her eyes to the indoors after being out in the blinding sun. She turned in a half circle to get her bearings and a good look at the man in front of her. His ocean blue eyes cut through the darkness of the foyer.

“I’m here for—” she pointed to the closed glass doors that led to the chapel.

“You’re late.”

Andi sucked in a breath. “I’m sorry?”

He watched her—stared, really—and the silence was deafening.

She had to fill it. “I, well, my flight from Minnesota took off late and the rental place was a zoo—”

He held up his hand and as her eyes fully adjusted, she saw his face soften.

“Teasing you,” he said, and when he squinted she caught his playful grin. “Minnesota, huh? Then you must be Andrea.” He extended his hand.

She reached out and the warmth of his touch sent a calming wave over her body. Melted her, actually. She pulled back. “You can call me Andi. Everybody does.” She looked him over. “And you are?”

“Matthew Cooke. Assistant pastor.”

Her heart dropped. *Oh, yes. The bearer of bad news.*

“But you can call me Matt. Everybody does.”

She smiled weakly, struggling to reconcile the voice on the phone with the man in front of her. During their brief conversation yesterday, she’d pictured an older man, shorter, maybe, with a beard and glasses. Because even though his voice was deep and soothing, pastors didn’t typically look like the boy next door. Yet this man had been the one to deliver the news that her mother’s boyfriend had died unexpectedly and she needed to get to Florida. *ASAP.*

She adjusted her purse strap on her shoulder. “I appreciate you calling to let me know about my mom’s... um, friend. This was the earliest flight I could get.”

Matt’s brows drew together. “Yeah, no problem. I think she really needs you right now.”

“I don’t know about that, but—” she held back a snort and waved her hand “—whatever, I’m here now.”

Matt gestured to the glass doors that led to the sanctuary. “Now, these doors are heavy and breakable, and would cost a fortune to replace—” he leaned in closer to her “—so let me open them for you.”

She mouthed, “Funny,” as he pushed open the door and guided her to a pew at the front of the church to sit next to a small, frail woman. Andi did a double take. “Mom?”

Mildred Morgan looked up and her droopy eyes sparked to life. “Andrea! You came!”

Andi gently shushed her mother and took her outstretched hand. The bubble was back in her throat as her mother grasped both her hands, a cold contrast to Matt’s warm handshake a few minutes earlier.

She barely noticed Matt had taken a seat at the end of her pew until the music ended, and he stood and moved to the small stage at the front of the church. He welcomed the guests and talked about the importance of supporting Mildred in her grief. Then he quoted scripture from Romans. “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”

Several people came to the pulpit to tell stories and share memories of Dwight. As they spoke, a different picture began to form in Andi’s mind of the man her mother claimed made her *feel love at first sight*. No such thing, Andi had thought. Love itself was an elusive thing, let alone instant love.

The service ended with a MercyMe song Andi had heard a few times on the radio, but its significance today, for a man she’d never met, seemed particularly poignant. Especially when she glanced at her mother, who, eyes closed, head tipped back, sang the words in a whisper.

“Surrounded by your glory/What will my heart feel/
Will I dance for you Jesus/Or in awe of you be still/
Will I stand in your presence/
Or to my knees will I fall/
Will I sing Hallelujah/Will I be able to speak at all/
I can only imagine.”

Hearing her mother’s frail voice choked with tears and an inexplicable joy, Andi’s shoulders curled forward and her chest felt hollow. Guilt found a clear path to creep up her spine and settle on her shoulders. All she could do was squeeze her mother’s hand more tightly.

Through blurry vision, she focused on the small, wet circles that formed, one after another, on the light gray fabric covering her thighs.

This might not be as easy as she'd thought.

The final notes of the song rang through the chapel and Matt invited the mourners to attend the post-funeral reception at Millie's house. Andi wondered how well her mother and the handsome young assistant pastor knew each other, considering her mother had always reserved that nickname for close friends.

An older woman sitting to her mother's left stood and Millie followed suit.

"See you at the house," her mother said, giving Andi a sweet wave. Andi watched, dumbfounded, as her mother linked arms with the other woman and ambled off.

Her mother hadn't seemed angry, quite the opposite, so what was with the flippant attitude? *See you at the house*. She had every right to be angry, considering Andi hadn't come to visit since her mother left Minnesota and moved to Mimosa Key to shack up with Dwight.

She stood, hoping she could shake off the renewed sense of guilt, and scanned the crowd. Her eyes quickly landed on Matt, who stood a solid foot taller than the much older men and women surrounding him. His dark brown hair and tanned face were a sharp contrast to the gray hair and translucent white skin of the others.

They adore him, Andi thought. And she could see why. His eyes were deep and comforting and his smile was full and genuine. He probably served as a reminder of the grandsons they had or wanted someday. Funny thing was, even in his black pants and crisp white shirt, he looked more like a baseball player than a pastor.

He turned and Andi looked away quickly, then back to catch his gaze. He mouthed the words, "Still here?" And moved in her direction.

She smiled, because, man, who could *not* smile around him? And if she wasn't mistaken, he'd spent more time looking at her during the service than anyone else in the small crowd of mourners. Which, understandably, led her to now glance at his left hand to check for a ring. When she didn't see one, she silently chastised herself for the gleeful tic that pulled at the corners of her mouth. *He's a pastor*, she reminded herself.

He stopped in front of her and she put her hands on her hips. "I have a problem," she said.

"How can I help?"

“I need directions to my mother’s house. She ditched me.”

“That’s right,” he said, his brows drawing together. “You haven’t been here before.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “I get it. I’m an awful daughter.”

“Didn’t say that.”

She mentally calculated the years since she’d seen her mother: Four. Or was it five? The years blurred together, but she remembered distinctly the day her mother asked her to go to lunch and revealed she’d met *the man of her dreams* on a girls’ weekend down south. She moved to Mimosa Key less than a month later.

“I’d have remembered,” Matt said.

“What’s that?”

“You,” he said, matter-of-factly. “I would have remembered you if you’d been here before.”

Andi’s ears grew hot. “Oh.”

He dipped his head to meet her gaze. “Your mom talks about you a lot.”

“I’m sure.”

He smiled. “No, really. I know that—” he ticked off one finger “—you’re an artist.”

“Graphic designer.”

“You own a fancy house in the city.”

“Loft, actually. And I don’t own it. I rent it from my boss.”

He held up a third finger. “And there was one more thing.” He looked at the ceiling as if searching for the answer, then snapped his fingers. “Oh, yes. You’ve loved baseball since you were a kid. Me, too.”

Andi laughed. “Now that is one-hundred-percent true.” And she was dying to learn what other nuggets her mother had shared, but she chose not to bog down this moment with family drama.

He pushed his hands into his pockets. “So, you wanna follow me?”

She nodded. *Anywhere.*

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