



SOMETHING
IN THE
WINE
A ROMANCE



Jae



CHAPTER 1

Elbow-deep in financial reports, Annie nearly bit off the rubber eraser on the end of her pencil when the phone rang.

The ringing sounded overly loud in the otherwise silent office. Everyone else had gone home hours before.

One eye still on her reports, she snatched up the receiver. “Cargill & Jones. Annie Prideaux speaking.”

“Annie, you’ve got to come!” her brother Jake’s breathless voice came through the other end of the line.

She threw down her pencil. “What are you talking about? I’m still at work and can’t—”

“Please,” Jake said. “It’s really urgent. I need you here.”

Annie’s heart started racing. The last time he had sounded so desperate, he’d called her after crashing their father’s car. She shut down the computer and locked her notes in her desk. “What happened? Are you hurt? In trouble? Did you—?”

“Please, just get here as quick as you can.”

“Where are you?”

“At home.”

“I’m on my way.” Annie hung up the phone, grabbed her keys, and rushed out of the door to find her car.

For the first time in her life, she broke the speed limit in her hurry to get to Jake. In front of his house, she brought her car to a screeching halt and jumped out.

The building wasn’t on fire. No ambulance in the driveway either. Instead, a few sports cars and SUVs were parked out front.

Not sure whether that was a good sign or something even worse awaited her, Annie raced to the front door. Blood rushed in her ears. She rang the doorbell several times in succession, hoping Jake was well enough to open the door since she had left his spare key in her apartment.

When the door swung open, she froze.

Rob stood before her, with two ample-busted women hanging on to his muscular arms. Music and laughter came from inside the house.

“R-Rob?” Annie stared at her brother’s best friend and business partner. “Where’s Jake?”

After letting go of one woman, Rob pointed over his shoulder. “In the living room.” He stepped forward and wrapped one arm around Annie. “Come on in and celebrate with us. There are a lot of guys here who’d love to meet you.”

Celebrate? Annie dug in her heels and shook off Rob’s grip. *He tricked me. Again.* Her heart hammered against her ribs, this time in anger—anger not just at Jake, but at herself too. *I should have known better.* The last time he’d tricked her, she had sworn she would never fall for one of her brother’s pranks again. But how was she supposed to know that he would stoop so low as to imply there was an emergency and scare her half to death? She whirled around to stride back to her car.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Rob called.

When he grabbed her arm, only years of self-control prevented Annie from slugging him. “Home.”

“Oh, no, come on, you can’t go home just yet. You’ve got to celebrate with us.” Rob pulled her around and gave her his most charming smile. “It’s not every day I come back from conquering Mount Everest.”

Annie pressed her lips together. Now she remembered that Jake had invited her to the party weeks before. She’d declined, knowing she would stick out among the climbers, jocks, and adrenaline junkies like a mule at the Kentucky Derby. But for Jake, a “no” was never a no—just an invitation to get what he wanted in a more creative way.

“Congratulations,” she said, trying not to take her irritation out on Rob, “but you’ll have to celebrate without me.”

“You know you could really give a man a complex,” Rob said. “Why come over if you don’t want to have a drink with me?”

Annie suppressed a snort. None of Jake's friends had ever suffered from lack of confidence. "It's got nothing to do with you. Jake has..." She let her voice trail off. If she told him how Jake had lured her to the party, she would humiliate herself even more. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and when she opened her eyes again, she gave Rob a nod. "Okay. One drink, but then I go home."

She regretted her decision the second she stepped into the living room. The screeching of electric guitars and the deafening crash of drums made conversation nearly impossible. But apparently, Jake's guests weren't there for the conversation anyway. Most of them were too busy drinking and gyrating to the beat even though it was too fast to really dance to.

The two women on Rob's arms pulled him toward the improvised dance floor. He followed them, walking backward for a few steps so he faced Annie, and said with a broad grin, "Duty calls. Get yourself a drink and toast my success. Your brother is paying." He turned around before Annie could answer.

That was typical of Rob and Jake's other friends. They could charm the socks off a nun, but their attention was fleeting. The women at Jake's parties weren't any better either.

Just decoration hanging on the arm of the next best guy. What a waste. Annie shook her head and looked around. Her eyes narrowed when she spotted Jake. He was holding court in a corner of the room, lounging on his black designer couch and impressing a gaggle of women with his stories.

Maybe stories of how he had tricked his stupid sister.

Annie clenched her teeth. Her first impulse was to storm over and give him a piece of her mind, but she didn't want to cause a scene in front of his friends and employees from the gym. Besides, if she shouted at him, it would let him know how much he had gotten to her, and she didn't want to give him that satisfaction. She turned away and made her way toward the bar Jake had set up. One drink and she'd be gone.

Empty glasses, crumpled paper napkins, and abandoned plates littered the bar. Apparently, the party had lasted for some time already, and the catering staff struggled to keep up with Jake's hard-drinking friends.

Automatically, Annie reached for an empty tray and began gathering glasses. She paused. Why was she cleaning up his mess after what he had done to her? But at least this way, she would escape the party and avoid a confrontation

with Jake. She would have a glass of wine in the kitchen, just because she had promised Rob, and then leave through the backdoor.



Drew leaned against the wall, a glass of red wine in her hand, and watched the other guests mingling in Jake's spacious living room.

The bulky coffee table that converted into a pool table had been pushed against the wall, and now a group of guests played some kind of spin-the-bottle game on it. A burly blond man she didn't know by name decorated his girlfriend's hair with little cocktail umbrellas. Another guy whipped off his shirt to show off a scar that crisscrossed his chest. Others encouraged their friends with a chorus of shouts and cheers to drink as many shots as they could. No one was paying much attention to the photos of Mount Everest flashing on Jake's giant flat-screen TV.

Drew shook her head. *These people need to grow up. I haven't acted so brainless since college.* Jake and his friends hadn't changed since then, though, and now she found she had little in common with them anymore. She knew she would keel over if she tried to keep up with their drinking.

Boy, I'm getting old. She smiled ruefully. *Come on. Drink up, say hello to Jake, and get out of here.* She took a big sip of red wine. Flinching, she spat it out and frowned at the glass. *Ugh! What's this? Wine or vinegar?* She shook herself. Apparently, Jake had bought the cheap stuff again. She craned her neck, searching for a member of the catering staff weaving around the party guests. *Ah, there.*

A woman in black slacks and a white blouse gathered empty and abandoned glasses from the bar.

Drew headed toward her to get rid of the swill masquerading as wine. When the woman turned around with a tray full of glasses, Drew's steps faltered. She stopped a few yards away. *Oh, wow. She's cute.* Still watching the woman, she moved closer.

The server wasn't the type of stunning beauty Drew was usually attracted to, but something about her caught her eye. Maybe it was the strange mix of strength and vulnerability in the woman's features and her posture. She moved like a mouse—quietly, but efficiently, as if she didn't want to draw anyone's attention.

Even from a few steps away, Drew could tell that the woman was tall, but despite her height, she didn't appear imposing. Her gaze was too shy for that. A cute nose and the gentle curve of her lips contrasted with a stubborn chin. Golden hair—the color of a fine, mature white wine—brushed against her slender shoulders. The woman took a hand off the tray to sweep an unruly strand behind her ear.

The tray tilted to one side.

Drew set down her glass and jumped forward in full knight-in-shining-armor mode to rescue the tray and the damsel in distress. She reached out just as the woman realized what was happening and straightened the tray.

Unable to stop her forward momentum, Drew collided with the tray, which catapulted one of the half-filled glasses through the air.

Cold liquid hit her in the chest. Reflexively, she caught the now empty glass before it could fall to the floor and shatter.

She froze. So did the woman.

Wide green eyes stared down at her from behind horn-rimmed glasses.

Drew realized that her damsel was at least four inches taller than her own five foot six.

“Oh, my God! I'm so sorry!” With trembling fingers, the woman balanced the tray in one hand and picked up a napkin.

For a moment, Drew imagined the woman's hands on her, dabbing at her drenched shirt, but instead, the woman handed her the napkin. She tried to soak up the worst of the spill but realized her shirt was ruined. *Guess I'm more of a knight in wine-stained armor now.*

“Are you okay?” the woman asked.

“I'm fine. No harm done.” Drew wiped a drop of red wine off her chin. “Well, almost none.”

A blush brought color to the woman's cheeks, lending a hint of vulnerability that softened her earnest features. “I'll pay for the dry cleaning, of course.”

Drew smiled. *How cute.* She couldn't remember ever seeing any of her worldly, confident girlfriends blush. “Don't worry about it.”

Laughter from the people around them made Drew tear her gaze away from the woman.

A few of Jake's friends pointed out Drew's stained shirt to one another and seemed to find it hysterically funny.

The woman's cheeks went from pink to a dark rosé.

The swift surge of protectiveness rising in her chest surprised Drew. She made eye contact with the worst offenders. "What?" She pulled the wet shirt away from her skin and grinned. "Haven't you ever seen a woman wearing a glass of wine? It's all the rage, really."

A few of the guests laughed and finally directed their gazes away from Drew and her damsel.

"Your shirt looks expensive," the blonde woman said. "I could pay for—"

"No, you don't need to do that. I was the one who hit the tray, so if anyone needs to apologize, it's me. I saw the glasses sliding to the edge of the tray and thought I could help, but instead I gave you quite a scare, plowing into you like that." She gasped, only then realizing she hadn't taken a breath between sentences. "I'm really sorry. Maybe I could invite you for coffee to make up for it." She had casually asked out many women in her life, but now she found herself rambling.

The woman glanced at her. Drew thought she saw puzzlement in her eyes, which, at this distance, were the color of vine leaves in spring. Then the woman frowned and shook her head. "And risk spilling hot beverages on you too? Better not."

When the woman moved to walk around her, Drew quickly stepped forward and blocked her way, not ready to give up yet. "That's a risk worth taking. So how about it? Will you have coffee with me?"

"It's nice of you to offer, but it's not necessary. It was just an accident, and I really need to go now." The woman turned her wrist to glance at her watch, making the tray tilt again.

Ignoring the possibility of further damage to her clothes, Drew grabbed for the tray. Her fingers wrapped around the stranger's, her tanned hands contrasting sharply with the ivory of the woman's skin.

"Sorry." Another blush stained the woman's cheeks. "I'm not usually such a klutz."

"Don't worry about it." Drew relinquished her hold on the tray, but not without letting her index finger linger against the blonde's hand for a moment. "Being a bit clumsy has a certain charm," she said with a wink.

The woman lifted an eyebrow but didn't return the flirtatious smile.

Damn, she's straight. Drew suppressed a sigh.

"I need to go," the woman said. "Again, I'm sorry. Maybe you can borrow one of Jake's shirts for the evening."

She's on a first-name basis with Jake? For a moment, Drew wondered whether the blonde was one of Jake's many lovers, but then she shook her head. With her horn-rimmed glasses, stubborn chin, and make-up-free face, this woman wasn't Jake's type.

She glanced down at the wet shirt plastered against her full breasts. "I'm afraid Jake and I are not quite the same...um...size."

The woman blushed for the fourth time, and Drew caught her glancing at her chest.

Maybe she's not so straight after all. Drew grinned and decided to help her cover the awkward silence. "It's okay. I was just about to go say hello to Jake and then head home anyway." She nodded toward the tray. "You need any help with that?"

"No, thanks, I can manage."

"All right." Drew was running out of reasons to keep talking for a while longer, so she reluctantly stepped out of the way.

Her damsel said good-bye and walked away.

Drew stood watching the gentle sway of her hips. *Nice.* She pinched the wet shirt between two fingers and pulled it away from her skin. After a final glance at the stranger, she went in search of Jake.

"What the hell happened to you?" Jake asked when she found him. "I go to the bathroom for a minute, and when I come back, you look like a murder victim."

Drew glanced at her wine-drenched shirt and shrugged. "I met a woman."

A teasing grin formed on Jake's lips. "Don't they normally wait until after dessert to throw their drinks at you?"

"They? One woman, okay? It was just one woman who threw her drink at me, and that was ages ago."

"And you deserved it. Dude, you were a dog back in the day!"

Not those old war stories again! Okay, she had dated a lot of women in college, but she had left that part of her life behind when she had taken over her family's vineyard. "That was in college, and you slept with more women in a week than I did during my entire freshman year!"

“Yeah, the good ol’ times.” Jake’s dreamy sigh ruffled the shaggy blond hair falling into his face. “So, what have you been up to? I haven’t seen you since the AIDS fundraiser we did at the gym. And that was what? Two months ago?”

“Three,” Drew said. “I just finished bringing in my first harvest. I’ve been out in the vineyards every day since we started harvesting the grapes for the sparkling wines back in August.” She rubbed her eyes. The past weeks had left her exhausted but also filled with a sense of accomplishment. She hoped her parents would have been proud of her.

“Ah, work, work, work.” Jake wagged his finger at her. “You’re beginning to remind me of my sister.”

When they had gone to college together, Drew had heard stories about Jake’s sister, Annie—or rather about the practical jokes Jake had played on her when they’d been children. She had never met her, though. “Are you ever going to introduce me to your mysterious sister?”

“I would have introduced you years ago, but convincing Annie to come to one of my parties is harder than getting an audience with the pope.”

Good for her. Drew bit back a grin.

“And you,” Jake slapped her shoulder, “never had the time in all these years to meet my folks during spring break.”

Drew hit him back, but her slap bounced off the wiry muscles he had developed as a climber. “Yeah, because I had to help in the vineyard while you, the slacker, partied the whole time.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll introduce you. I saw her talking to Rob earlier, so she has to be around here somewhere.” Jake turned and looked around, then pivoted to face Drew. “But remember: no flirting. She’s straight.”

Drew lifted her hands. “I’m not interested in your baby sister. In fact, I just saw a woman at the buffet. For some reason, she really caught my attention. I think she’s working for the catering service.”

“The brunette with the killer legs?”

“No. This one is a blonde, and if her legs kill you, it’s probably because she’s a bit clumsy.” At the memory of the woman almost dropping the tray of glasses a second time, Drew had to smile.

A frown carved a deep line between Jake’s brows. “I don’t think I hired a blonde.”

“Yes, you did. She knows you by name.”

“The only clumsy blonde I know at this party is...” Jake paused and laughed. “Is she tall, green-eyed, and serious as a heart attack?”

Drew suppressed the urge to defend her clumsy damsel. “Sounds about right.” Belatedly, she realized she had never found out the woman’s name.

“Ah, that blonde.”

“So you do know her?” Drew asked. “Could you introduce us?”

“Sure, no problem.” A sound almost like a giggle escaped Jake’s mouth.

Someone should tell him that straight men don’t giggle. But for now, Drew was more interested in finding out more about the woman. “Do you know if she’s family?”

The giggles turned into a belly laugh. Jake slapped his thighs, nearly spilling his drink all over himself. “Oh, yeah. She’s family.”

“Really? She is?” When the woman hadn’t flirted back and hadn’t even seemed to notice her interest, she had given up hope. “Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent,” Jake said, still grinning madly.

“And she’s single?”

Jake rolled his eyes. “Has been for ages.”

Drew couldn’t believe her good fortune. “Sounds like you’ve known her for a long time.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Jake turned. “Wait here. I’ll go get her.”



Annie carefully weaved around the busy catering staff in the kitchen to avoid spilling wine on anyone else. Once had been embarrassing enough. *Make that almost twice.* She breathed a sigh of relief when she set down the tray on the kitchen counter. *Okay, get out of here before Jake—*

“There you are!” Jake’s voice wrecked her escape plan. When she turned, her brother squinted up at her, looking annoyed—as always—that his younger sister had outgrown him. “Great party, isn’t it? I bet you’re glad you came.”

Glad? Annie pierced him with a disbelieving stare.

“What are you doing in here?” He pointed at the tray. “I hired a catering service to take care of that.”

Annie glared at him. “You called me over for help, so that’s what I’m doing,” she said in the coldest, most controlled tone she was capable of mustering. “If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I’ll—”

“Oh, come on. Don’t sulk. Lighten up. Would you have come over if I said we’re having a party?”

“No,” Annie said, “I—”

“See?” Jake wrapped one arm around her. “You would have missed out on all the fun.”

Annie resisted the urge to shove him away. “Our ideas of fun couldn’t be more different, and you know it. If I’d wanted to come to your stupid party, I would have said yes when you asked me. You scared me half to death with your call, you jerk!”

“It’s not a stupid party,” Jake said.

God. Annie wanted to hit him. Discussions with Jake were like trying to reason with a three-year-old. Even if she got him to apologize, his regret wouldn’t be sincere. At the next best opportunity, he would do the same thing again. *This is useless.* “Forget it. I have to go.”

“Now? It’s not even nine!”

“I’m meeting with a client early tomorrow morning.” Annie shook off his arm. Besides, an excellent book awaited her at home, but she wasn’t about to tell Jake that. Her brother already thought her life was boring.

“Oh, come on! All work and no play makes Annie a very dull girl.”

That joke was getting old. “And all play and no work makes Jake a very bankrupt boy,” Annie said. “Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

Jake waved his hand through the air as if chasing away an irritating fly. He gulped his drink and grinned. “Sasha can open the gym for me. What are employees good for if not for covering for me after a party like this? Come on.” He nudged her. “Stay. Just a little longer. Let me introduce you to a friend of mine.”

One more reason to leave. Jake’s friends tended to be adrenaline junkies who talked about nothing but their sports cars, partying, and their latest free-climbing adventure. Annie drove an electric car, hated parties, and didn’t regard hanging from a rock without a safety net a fun vacation. If she said yes to meeting Jake’s friend, she would be bored within seconds.

“No, thanks.” She tried to push past him.

Jake shoved his arm out, blocking her way. “I’ll let you leave on one condition.”

“Let me?” Annie’s voice rose. “I’m no longer the little girl you can boss around.”

“Me?” Hand on his chest, Jake laughed. “Boss *you* around? You told me what to do from the moment you learned to talk!”

“Because you needed it.” Even as a child, Jake had constantly gotten himself into trouble. She still remembered the chaos twelve-year-old Jake had produced at their cousin’s christening when he had poured ink into the basin with the holy water.

When he made no move to withdraw his arm and let her leave, she sighed. “So what’s the condition?”

“My friend Drew wants a date with you.” His eyes twinkled, and his lips twitched in a way that told Annie he was trying to hide a mischievous grin.

Was this another one of his pranks? But even Jake wouldn’t try to play a second practical joke on her on the same evening, would he? “Drew?” She had heard that name before. Maybe one of his college buddies? Every spring break, Jake had come home and boasted about the pranks he had pulled on his friends, but at one point, she had stopped listening. Or was Drew that weird guy Jake had introduced her to when she had helped him paint his house? “Isn’t that the one with the BDMS fetish?”

“That’s BDSM, sis.” Jake laughed at her blush. “And no, that’s Dave. Drew doesn’t have any fetishes as far as I know.”

“Still,” Annie said, “I told you I’m not going out with another one of your friends.”

“Oh, but Drew is not like any of my other friends.” His lips twitched again. “In fact, you have a lot in common.”

Now that would be a first. She eyed her brother, but he looked completely serious now. “Okay, if it’ll get you off my back, I’ll go out with him sometime.” She waved and hurried past him. With any luck, Jake would have forgotten all about it by tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

“You’re a miracle worker, Ms. Prideaux.” Mr. Alvarez grinned at Annie from across her desk. “I never thought we would make it through the jungle of my tax chaos in just one afternoon.”

Annie stood and followed her client to the door. “It wasn’t that bad.” In fact, his bookkeeping was awful, but he was a client, so diplomacy was the better part of valor. “Just remember to use the software I showed you. It’ll keep track of all the expenses and earnings for you.”

“Will do.” Mr. Alvarez shook her hand, moving it up and down as if it were a pump handle. “Thank you again.” After one last pump of her hand, he let go and nearly skipped out of her office.

With an amused shake of her head, Annie returned to her desk. It was half past five already, so her workday had officially ended thirty minutes before. Most days, Annie was one of the last accountants to leave the office, but today she wanted to get home at a reasonable time and pamper herself a little. Images of a bubble bath, the newest Tana French novel, and a glass of Merlot danced in her head.

She made a few more notes in Mr. Alvarez’s file, saved and shut the open documents, and was just about to power down her computer when a knock on the open office door made her look up.

Mr. Cargill, one of her bosses, stood in the doorway, a large pile of folders balanced in his thin arms. “Do you have a minute?”

The images of bath, novel, and wine wavered and collapsed. Annie suppressed a sigh. “Sure.”

The office’s fluorescent lights bounced off Mr. Cargill’s bald head as he folded his long, slim frame into the visitor’s chair and set the folders on Annie’s desk. “I’m sure you heard that we were able to win Paul Dettman as a client for our firm.”

Annie nodded. Dettman was one of the biggest landowners in the area, so of course everyone at Cargill & Jones had talked of nothing else for days.

“I need you to take over his account,” Mr. Cargill said.

Me? Annie stared at her boss, caught between elation and panic.

“I know you’re up to the task.”

Annie sucked in a breath and squared her shoulders. She had never worked on an account of that size, but she knew she could handle it. Even if it meant a bigger workload, she was determined to show Mr. Cargill that his trust in her had been justified. “Yes, of course. I won’t disappoint you or the firm.”

“I know you won’t. You always do a good job.” Mr. Cargill leaned forward and gave her arm a grandfatherly pat. “Dettman’s bookkeeper dropped off his files this morning. We need an overview of what we’re dealing with as soon as possible, so you should start reviewing them tonight. Do you think you can stay a few hours longer?”

Annie eyed the stack of files he had placed on her desk. A few hours wouldn’t be enough to work through them all. She inwardly sighed and added sleep to the list of things she wouldn’t get tonight. But now that she had agreed to taking over Mr. Dettman’s account, she wouldn’t back down. “Sure,” she said.

A smile spread over Mr. Cargill’s face. “Good. I knew I could count on you. Make sure to give me a quick report tomorrow, and if you need any help, ask Sarah or Virgil to lend a hand.”

Annie nodded but already knew she would try to manage on her own.

As soon as her boss had left the office, she reached over and pulled the stack of files to her side of the desk. Sighing, she opened the first folder and began to read.



“Don’t you ever go home?”

A voice from the door made Annie jump. Her head jerked up. When her vision blurred for a moment, she realized she had skipped dinner.

The figure in the doorway swam back into focus. Her colleague Sarah stared at her with a frown.

Annie took off her glasses, rubbed her tired eyes, and searched her desk drawer for a chocolate bar. That would have to do for dinner tonight. “You’re still here too.”

Sarah's red curls bounced when she shook her head. "I left two hours ago and only came back because I forgot my cell phone." She crossed the room and dropped into the visitor's chair. Her feet dangled like that of a first grader before she adjusted the chair's height for her shorter frame. She straightened the hem of her knee-length skirt, leaned forward, and ran a red-painted nail over the files on Annie's desk. "Don't tell me the boss gave you Dettman's account."

Annie gave up the search for a chocolate bar and put her glasses back on to study her colleague. Did Sarah think she couldn't handle it? "Yes, he did."

"Girl, you really need to learn to say no."

Annie stiffened. "Why should I?"

"Oh, Annie, the boss didn't ask you because you're the best accountant he has." Sarah lifted her manicured hands. "Don't get me wrong. You are the best. Everyone knows that, including Mr. Cargill. But he asked you because he knows you're the only one who will stay late and work her ass off to meet his spur-of-the-moment deadlines." She blew a red curl out of her eyes and looked at Annie. "If you don't start standing up for yourself, you'll end up overworked and lonely."

Annie fiddled with the edge of a folder. "It's not that bad."

"Really? You missed spinning class yesterday," Sarah said. "And I bet it wasn't because you were out on a date."

Of course it wasn't. Time had gotten away from her while she prepared monthly accounting reports for a client, and by the time she had checked her watch, spinning class had already been halfway over.

The ringing of Annie's cell phone interrupted the silence.

Phew. Saved by the bell. Annie dug in her messenger bag and lifted the cell phone to her ear.

Sarah waved and pointed at the door. When Annie nodded, Sarah stood and left.

"Yes?" Annie said into her cell phone.

"Hey, how is my favorite sister today?" Jake's cheerful voice came through the receiver.

Annie frowned. The last time he had greeted her like this, she had to come get him out of jail because he had partied a little too hard and ended up in a fistfight. "Well, that depends. Do I have to sell a kidney to pay for your bail?"

Jake's belly laugh resonated through the phone. "No bail. Your kidney is safe. I'm calling to tell you you've got a date."

“Date?”

“Yep. At the party last Saturday, you promised you would go out with my friend Drew sometime, remember?”

Sarah’s words echoed through her mind: *you really need to learn to say no*. “I don’t have the time to date right now.”

“Oh, come on. You have to eat sometime, so you might as well do it with Drew.”

Annie hesitated. She had never broken a promise. Once she committed to something, she went through with it, even if she regretted it. And saying no to her brother was even harder than saying no to her boss. When he used his boyish charm on her, she forgot about the tricks he played on her.

“It’s not like I’m asking you to marry Drew. One date, that’s all.”

Annie blew out a breath. “One date. Then you never bother me about dating one of your friends again.”

“Deal,” Jake said. “So when and where should Drew meet you?”

“How about next year,” Annie mumbled with a glance at her stack of files.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Annie thumbed through her calendar. “How about Saturday at seven? No, make that eight.”

“Sounds great. How about Fettuccine’s? That’s your favorite restaurant, right?”

Annie grimaced. No one in her family ever remembered her favorite places. “It’s good, but it’s not my favorite. And the name is Francucci’s.”

“Right. Saturday, eight o’clock, Francucci’s.” A pen scratched over a piece of paper as Jake wrote it down. “I’m sure Drew will be over the moon.”

That makes one of us. “Jake, I need to go back to work now.”

“Work?” Jake echoed. “You’re still at work? Damn, Annie, no wonder you’re single. How are you supposed to meet someone if all you do is sit in the office and work? I’ll arrange—”

“Oh, no, you’re not arranging anything else.” Annie gritted her teeth. Why couldn’t he accept that she was perfectly happy on her own? “One date, that’s our deal. If you don’t stick to it, I’ll tell Mom who put the vinegar into the perfume bottle she gave Aunt Edith for her birthday last year.”

“Um, one date sounds great, sis. Don’t work too late, okay?”

Annie looked at the files. She wasn't even halfway through. "Don't worry. I won't," she said, even knowing it was a lie. Her brother wouldn't understand. She finished the call and opened the next folder. "Once more unto the breach."



When Drew unlocked the door, the ringing of the phone greeted her. She kicked off her muddy shoes and hurried toward it. "Yes?"

"Got a pen and paper?" a male voice asked.

"Jake?"

"No, the Easter bunny." Jake chuckled. "Now grab something to write with."

Drew reached for the notepad and pen she kept next to the phone for wine orders and plopped down on the couch. She had been on her feet, supervising the pressing of her Syrah grapes, since five in the morning. "What am I writing down?"

"Francucci's, this Saturday, eight o'clock."

After scribbling it down, Drew stared at the page. What was this? A dinner invitation from Jake so soon after his party? "Sorry, pal, but I won't be able to make it. I've got a group coming in for a wine tasting on Saturday."

"Oh, come on. What's a wine tasting compared to a date with your clumsy blonde?"

Drew jumped up, suddenly no longer tired. "You got me a date with her?"

"I couldn't introduce you at the party, because she had to leave, but she was very interested in meeting you."

"Really?" The blonde hadn't seemed all that interested in Drew.

"Would I lie to you about something like that?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, you would." When they had gone to college together, Jake had tricked her more than once. But on the other hand, he had also been a loyal friend. When her parents had died within a few months of each other and she had holed up at home for weeks on end, Jake and her other friends had forced her to go out and rejoin the living. "So, don't I get a name?"

"Caroline."

"No last name?"

"Not yet," Jake said. "She's shy and asked me not to tell you."

Warning bells went off in Drew's mind. The woman had seemed like the quiet, reserved type, but not giving her last name was weird. Something about

this semi-blind date was off, but Drew had nothing to lose. If things didn't go well, she could make up some kind of emergency at the winery and leave.

"So you'll meet her Saturday at eight?" Jake asked. "I made dinner reservations under your name."

Drew's thoughts raced as she tried to figure out which of her employees could take over the wine tasting. Somehow, she would find a way. She wouldn't miss out on meeting her damsel. "I'll be there."



Her date hadn't arrived yet when the hostess led Annie to the table. *Of course not.* Annie was always the first person to arrive for meetings or dates. Today, she had contemplated taking a page from Jake's book and showing up late, but she couldn't change her overly punctual nature any more than she could change her height.

Annie chose the chair with her back to the wall so she could observe the men entering the restaurant.

The hostess handed her a menu and a wine list. "Your waiter will be with you in a minute."

When the hostess walked away, Annie looked around. The room was filled with cozy tables draped in snow-white tablecloths. Soft Italian music played in the background, and candles flickered in the center of each table. The dim lighting added to the romantic atmosphere. Her gaze lingered on couples who seemed engrossed in each other, hardly aware of their surroundings. Annie rubbed her temples. *What am I doing here?*

The waiter stepped up to her table and introduced himself. "May I start you off with something to drink?"

Annie considered it for a moment and then decided that a glass of wine might help to get her through the evening. "Can you recommend a Merlot from a local winery?"

"The Corbin Merlot is excellent," the waiter said.

"Then could you bring me a glass of that, please?"

"Of course. I'll get your wine and give you a minute to look at the menu. The special we have today is Pollo al Forno, chicken breast served on a bed of mushroom risotto."

“Someone is joining me.” Annie glanced at her watch. Ten to eight. “He should be here any minute now. I’ll order when he gets here.” *If he even shows up.* Jake’s friends weren’t known for their reliability.

The waiter nodded and leaned forward to light the candle in the middle of the table.

Don’t bother, Annie wanted to tell him. Romance wasn’t on her mind. She already knew the three different ways the evening might end.

Option one: her date would ask her what she did for a living and then yawn or smirk when she told him she was an accountant.

Option two: if this Drew was a businessman, he might try to get free advice from her. Well, that wouldn’t be so bad. At least then Annie would be on familiar ground.

The worst was option three: Drew would be perfectly nice, trying to draw Annie out and engage her in conversation, but Annie would feel no connection at all. She would focus on her food, self-conscious about every word she said, already thinking about how to get out of a second date. At the end of the evening, she would return home frustrated, feeling as if something was wrong with her.

She glanced up as the waiter approached with her glass of wine and another guest in tow. But it was a woman, not Jake’s friend Drew.

Annie opened her mouth, about to tell the waiter he had made a mistake, when she noticed something familiar about the woman. She had seen that tan face and the short, wind-blown brown curls before, hadn’t she?

When the stranger smiled, revealing deep dimples, the realization hit Annie. *Oh, God! The woman from the party.*

Smiling broadly, the woman took a seat at Annie’s table.

What the heck was she doing? That little incident at the party didn’t give her the right to act as if they were old friends. But Annie was too polite to tell her to get up and leave.

“Hi,” the woman said. “Good to see you again—and under much nicer circumstances.” She tugged at her blouse, this one a pristine white, not stained with wine.

Great. Now Annie would be forced to make small talk with her. She threw a glance toward the entrance.

No sign of her date.

Annie sighed and decided to let her stay until Drew arrived. At least then she wouldn't be the only person sitting alone in a restaurant full of couples.

The woman stood, reached across the table, and offered her hand. "I'm Drew Corbin, but I guess Jake already told you that."

"What?" Annie's mouth fell open. "You? You're Drew?" She jerked back the hand she had already extended, nearly toppling over the burning candle. *What the heck is going on?*

The woman withdrew her hand and sat. "Yes." She tilted her head. "Something wrong with my name?"

"No. It's just..." Annie squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, Drew was still staring at her. Annie scrambled for something to say. "It's just a rather androgynous name."

"Yeah." Drew combed her fingers through her hair, which barely brushed her collar. Her dimples made another appearance as she grinned at Annie. "You'd think my parents already knew their little girl would grow up to be a lesbian, huh?"

Lesbian? Oh my God, Jake set me up on a date with a lesbian! Annie slumped against the back of her chair. How humiliating. Once again, she had fallen for one of Jake's tricks. She had dressed up, put on her only pair of semi-high heels, and sat in this restaurant with its romantic setting, feeling out of place and worrying about what kind of impression she would make on her date—only to find out that it was all a prank. She clenched her teeth. "Just wait until I get my hands on you, you little rat."

"What's going on here?" Drew's bright smile dimmed. "Jake tricked us somehow, didn't he?"

Annie nodded emphatically. "He told me I couldn't say no, because his friend Drew bent over backwards to get out of some work obligations to go out on a date with me."

"I hate to admit it," Drew rubbed her neck, "but that might not be all that far from the truth. I was really looking forward to meeting you tonight."

Heat rose up Annie's neck. "Yes, but Jake let me assume his friend Drew was a man."

"Oh." Drew's shoulders slumped.

The waiter chose that moment to approach the table. "Can I get you—?"

“Would you give us a minute, please?” Drew said. As soon as he disappeared, she leaned forward and regarded Annie. “So you’re straight?”

Annie nodded.

“Great. I should have known he would set me up with one of his straight friends,” Drew said.

“Straight sister, actually.”

“What?” Drew’s eyes widened. She shook her head as if to clear it. “You’re Annie, Jake’s sister? Jake told me your name is Caroline.”

“It is,” Annie said. “My middle name.” After a moment, she added with a small smile, “Annie Caroline Prideaux. Hello.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Drew slapped her own forehead. “Oh, man. I should have known Jake was up to no good.” She sighed but then straightened, returned Annie’s smile, and reached out her hand. “Pleased to meet you anyway.”

Annie slid her hand into Drew’s and shook it. Drew’s grip was steady and warm. “What now?” Annie asked with a glance at the waiter who lingered nearby. “Do we stay or go?”

“Why don’t we stay? We’re both here, dressed to the nines,” Drew’s appreciative gaze slid over Annie’s elegant silk top, but there was nothing leering the way she looked at her, “and I don’t know about you, but I haven’t eaten all day and I would appreciate the company. Would you mind?”

For a moment, Annie was tempted to just go home, but she felt bad about someone else being the victim of Jake’s practical joke. The least she could do was stay and have dinner with Drew. In a way, it was a relief to have dinner with a woman instead of one of Jake’s male friends. At least Drew had already seen her at her worst, so she could relax. “No,” Annie said, “I don’t mind.”

Smiling, Drew opened her menu.

The waiter approached again. “Have you decided on something to drink?”

“Just a glass of water for now,” Drew said.

After the waiter walked away, they went back to studying the menus. Silence settled between them.

Annie searched for something to say, but now that she couldn’t rely on her first-date script, she struggled to find a safe topic of conversation. “I think I’ll get the vegetarian lasagna.”

Drew glanced up from her menu. “You’re a vegetarian?”

“Yes,” Annie said but didn’t explain. She had gotten into enough heated debates with her meat-loving family, and she didn’t want to justify herself to a total stranger.

“Can I ask why you made that choice? Is it for ethical reasons, or do you just not like the taste of meat?”

Annie hesitated, not eager to talk about herself, but Drew looked at her with a friendly expression, just curious, not judging. And they had to talk about something after all to make it through this dinner. “When I was fourteen, I saw a documentary about how chickens are raised. I won’t go into detail, or I’ll spoil your dinner. Needless to say it’s beyond cruel.” The memory of those scenes made Annie shudder. “I don’t want to contribute to that.”

Drew nodded. “It couldn’t have been easy to stand by that decision at fourteen.”

The respect in Drew’s voice made Annie relax a little. She shrugged. Drew was right. Her parents had tried several times to smuggle meat onto her plate—putting ground meat on her veggie burger, for example—because they thought she needed meat for a healthy diet. She bit her lip at her family’s continued disrespect of her choices.

“I don’t eat much meat either,” Drew said, “but tonight I have a craving for seafood. Do you mind if I get the shrimp pasta?”

The question surprised Annie. None of her dates had ever been this considerate. “Go ahead. I don’t mind.”

The waiter returned with Drew’s glass of water, and they placed their orders.

“Do you want garlic bread with the house salad?” the waiter asked.

Annie and Drew looked at each other; then Drew grinned. “Sure, why not. I guess there won’t be any good-night kisses on this date.”

The casual comment startled Annie. She peeked at the waiter to see how he would react to Drew’s words, but his face was a polite mask. On the one hand, Drew’s joke in front of the waiter embarrassed Annie, but on the other hand, she marveled at how at ease with herself Drew seemed to be. Drew seemed out and proud and not afraid of what people might think. *I wish I could be more like that.*

“Would you care for a glass of wine to go with that, ma’am?” the waiter asked.

Drew pointed at Annie’s glass and then looked into her eyes. “What are you drinking?”

“A Merlot from a local winery. It’s pretty good.”

“Do you want us to get a bottle of it?” Drew asked.

Normally, Annie never drank more than one glass of wine when she was on a date. But this wasn’t a date, and after what Jake had put her through tonight, she deserved a second glass, so she nodded.

The waiter brought the bottle of wine and presented it to Drew, who gave a pleased smile. After he opened the bottle and poured a small taste, she swirled it around in her glass, then sniffed and took a sip. Finally, she looked up and nodded.

The waiter filled her glass and walked away.

Drew clinked her glass to Annie’s. “To your brother.” After a pause, she added, “A first-rate jack-ass.”

Annie had just taken a sip and now nearly spat wine all over the table. She coughed until she suspected her face was redder than the Merlot.

“I’m sorry.” Drew looked as if she wanted to get up and pat Annie’s back.

“No, you’re right.” Annie took a more cautious sip of wine, soothing her burning throat. “Jake can be a real jerk.” Sometimes, she wondered how she had survived her childhood—or how he had. After all the silly little pranks he pulled on her, she had wanted to kill him more than once.

“Oh, yeah. I nearly throttled him during freshman year.”

“You went to college together?” Annie asked. Drew didn’t seem like Jake’s usual kind of friend.

Drew nodded.

“What did he do?” Annie asked.

“He sent me little love notes,” Drew said.

“But he wasn’t...?”

“In love with me?” Drew laughed and held her open palms out to her sides, indicating her sturdy frame. “No. I’m not his type. He’s not exactly mine either.” She winked. “I had a major crush on Ruth Calverson, not knowing that she in turn had a crush on Jake and was sending him love letters. So when he pinned those notes to the door of my dorm room, I thought Ruth was smitten with me too, and I finally found the courage to show up at her dormitory with a bunch of roses and ask her out.”

Annie winced.

“Yeah.” Drew nodded. “Needless to say that didn’t turn out so well. Who knew a bunch of roses could hurt so much when someone hits you in the face with them?” She made a pathetically sad face.

The sound of her own laughter surprised Annie. She took a sip of wine. “After a prank like that, you’d think you would stay far away from Jake. Why are you still friends with him and even stayed in touch after college?”

Drew swished the wine in her glass around. “Despite all his faults and his weird sense of humor, Jake isn’t a bad guy. When I told him I’m gay, he was cool with it. Up until then, my lesbianism has been a disappointment to everyone I came out to—my parents, boys who wanted to date me...”

“And Ruth Calverson,” Annie said with a smile.

Drew returned the grin. “And Ruth Calverson. But to Jake, it was never a big deal. Once, a homophobic asshole made a derogatory comment about me during a business lecture. The day after that, the guy found his beloved convertible filled with gravel.”

“Jake did that?”

Drew nodded. “No one ever made stupid comments about me again.”

Wow. For the first time in her life, Annie was proud of her brother.

“So,” Drew said after a while, “what pranks did he play on you? He told me some stories, but I admit that after a while, I stopped listening.”

Annie pressed her napkin to her lips. She wasn’t eager to recount the embarrassing tales, but Drew had shared the Ruth Calverson story, so Annie felt obliged to answer. Over the years, Jake had played so many pranks on her that she hardly knew which story to tell Drew. She adjusted her cutlery while incidences flashed through her mind like photos in a slideshow. Finally, she settled on one of the less humiliating pranks. “Once, he made me believe that the cat had eaten my bunny.”

“And you believed that?” Drew asked. “Cats don’t eat bunnies.”

“How was I supposed to know? I was five years old.” Warmth penetrated the sleeve of Annie’s silk shirt. When she looked down, she discovered Drew’s hand on her arm, giving her a comforting squeeze. Annie froze. In her everyday life, few people came close enough to touch her, and knowing Drew was a lesbian made Annie even more aware of her touch.

Drew followed her gaze and pulled away her hand. “Sorry. I’m a touchy-feely person.” She cleared her throat. “What else did he do?”

Annie rubbed her fingers over her forearm, where Drew's hand had rested. She hesitated again.

"Come on," Drew said. "Don't be embarrassed. It's not like I haven't been duped by Jake a few dozen times too."

Annie sighed. Her mind leafed through the impressive collection of Jake's pranks and chose one at random. "On my first day at my job, he switched the contents of my shampoo for hair dye." She scrunched up her nose. "I ended up going to work with pink hair."

Now it was Drew's turn to nearly spew wine across the table. She laughed and dabbed her mouth with the napkin. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at you. That must have been embarrassing, but the mental image of you showing up at work with pink hair..."

"Pretty funny, yeah." Annie didn't smile. "But not if you had to endure Jake's pranks for thirty years."

Drew leaned forward. "Didn't your parents ever interfere when Jake pulled a prank on you?"

"Sometimes." Annie pressed the tip of her index finger against her fork until the metal dug into her skin. "But usually, they were too busy with their art."

"Oh, that's right. I have one of your mother's paintings in my living room. Her use of colors is amazing. What does your father do?"

The questions about her and her family kept throwing Annie off stride, but she couldn't find a good reason for not answering without coming across as impolite. "He's a conductor."

"Not a train conductor, I take it?"

Annie laughed as she imagined her father's reaction to being mistaken for a train conductor. "No. He's with the Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra."

"And you?" Drew asked. "What do you do for a living?"

There it was: the question that always came up sooner or later. People often seemed disappointed by her answer, maybe because they expected the daughter of a musician and an artist to have a creative job too or at least to do something fun and unusual for a living, as Jake did.

The waiter brought their food, allowing Annie to stall for a moment.

When Drew looked at her expectantly instead of focusing on her pasta, Annie said, "I'm a CPA."

Drew didn't smirk or yawn. A shrimp still hovered on her fork, forgotten for the moment. "Which firm?"

Annie dug a mushroom out of her lasagna. "It's a small firm, so you probably haven't heard of it."

"Try me." Drew continued to look at her.

"I'm a senior associate at Cargill & Jones." Annie chewed the mushroom, expecting Drew to redirect the conversation to a topic she found more interesting.

"Actually, I have heard of them. One of your colleagues manages my business accounts. Your firm does good work. So do you like your job?"

None of her dates had ever asked her that question. If they had, Annie wasn't sure she would have answered honestly. While being an accountant was her passion, it just wasn't interesting to other people. But she didn't feel the need to impress Drew, so she nodded.

"Even during tax season?" Drew asked with a teasing smile.

"Yeah, the hours can get crazy in the spring, but I still like it."

"I know what you mean. My work hours are crazy in the fall, but I wouldn't want to do anything else."

Amazing. Drew really seemed to understand. Annie's tense muscles relaxed. "What do you do for a living?" she asked, glad to talk about something other than herself. "You have your own company?"

"I own a winery." Drew stroked her thumb over the label on their bottle of Merlot. "Actually, this is one of mine."

"Really?" Annie took another sip, enjoying the fruity taste. "It's very good."

Drew reached across the table and nudged Annie's shoulder. "Don't sound so surprised."

When Annie blushed, Drew chuckled. She seemed to delight in making Annie blush, but unlike Jake's boisterous ribbing, her teasing was gentle.

"I'm not surprised," Annie said. "I've just never met anyone who owns a winery and makes such excellent wine."

"And I've never had dinner with an excellent accountant."

Annie pierced her with a skeptical glance. "You can't know whether I'm any good."

Slowly, Drew laid down her fork, dabbed her mouth with her napkin, and regarded Annie with her deep brown eyes. "You don't seem like a woman who

would do anything halfway.” When Annie stared at her, not knowing what to do with the compliment, Drew added, “Besides, you said you’re a senior associate. If you weren’t good at your job, I don’t think you would have that position.”

Annie shrugged.

Drew laughed. “I can see that you’re the modest one in the family.” She shook her head. “I still can’t believe you’re related to Jake. You couldn’t be more different if you tried. Has it always been that way?”

“Yes.” Annie busied herself cutting the rest of her lasagna into little squares while she thought about how much to tell Drew. She normally didn’t tell strangers that much about her life, but she realized that she had already told Drew more than usual. Maybe it was just this strange situation that had caught her off guard. Or maybe it was that after tonight, she would probably never see Drew again, so whatever Drew knew or didn’t know about her didn’t matter. “Jake... Well, you know how he is. He’s not a bad person, but he thinks having fun and playing pranks on people is all there is to life.”

“Yeah,” Drew said. “I bet he’s having a drink right now, celebrating that he set up his straight sister on a blind date with a lesbian.”

I bet that’s exactly what he’s doing. Annie didn’t look forward to having him call her as soon as she got home. He would gloat about another successful prank until she hung up on him. She clenched her hand around her napkin until her fingers started to hurt. “Just once, I’d really like to get back at him.”

Drew swallowed the last of her pasta.

Blinking, Annie glanced at her own half-full plate. Usually, she was the first to finish her meal because her dinner companions prattled on and on while she contributed just enough to keep the conversation going.

A slow smile spread over Drew’s tan face. “We could, you know?”

“Could what?”

“Get back at Jake.”

Annie leaned forward. *God, if we could really do that...* She usually considered herself above petty things like revenge, but Jake had tormented her with his pranks for too long. “How?”

“Jake is expecting you to be angry at him for setting you up with a woman, right?”

“Yeah.” *He thinks his uptight sister will react like Ruth Calverson and hit Drew with the nearest object.* Annie took another sip of wine to get rid of the bitter taste Jake’s judgment left behind in her mouth.

“But what if we both enjoyed having dinner with each other?” Drew asked.

I am enjoying it, Annie found to her surprise. But how was that getting back at Jake? “I don’t understand.”

Drew leaned forward. “What if the blind date was such a success that we started dating?”

Annie nearly choked on a bite of lasagna. “But...but I’m straight!” She ducked her head when she realized how loudly she had spoken.

A grin dimpled Drew’s cheeks. “Well, nobody’s perfect.” She patted Annie’s forearm. “Relax. I’m just kidding. But just think about it. Jake would have a heart attack if he thought he was to blame for his little sister turning gay.”

Annie couldn’t help grinning as she imagined Jake with his mouth gaping open. “Definitely.” After a moment, her smile dimmed. “So we would just pretend, right?”

“Right. I already have a toaster oven.”

“Toaster oven?” What did tricking Jake have to do with kitchen appliances?

Drew chuckled. “It’s a lesbian recruitment joke. If you convert a certain quota of straight women, lesbian headquarters awards you a toaster oven.”

“Oh. And you already earned one?”

“No.” Drew lifted her hand to her mouth and, behind the cover of her palm, whispered, “I bought it. Don’t tell anyone, please. I have a reputation to uphold.”

Annie laughed and relaxed. After finishing the last of her lasagna, she leaned back and regarded Drew across the table. *It’s crazy. But if it works...* Just the thought of Jake being on the receiving end of a prank made her grin. It was time that someone gave him a taste of his own medicine. “And you really think it could work? That we can make Jake believe that I...that we...?”

“Why wouldn’t it work?”

“I can’t even make a relationship with a man work, so I’m not sure I can pull off convincing Jake that I’m in love with you.” Annie crossed her arms over her chest, feeling as if she had said too much.

Drew shrugged. “That could actually work in our favor. You could tell Jake that your relationships with men failed because of your latent lesbian tendencies.” She waggled her eyebrows.

Someone cleared his throat next to them. “Did you ladies enjoy your dinner?”

When Annie turned her head, she found the waiter looking at her. *Oh my God.* Her cheeks burned. Had he heard what Drew had said about her *latent lesbian tendencies*?

“It was wonderful, thank you,” Drew said without missing a beat.

Again Annie couldn’t help giving Drew an admiring look. Drew didn’t seem to care what people thought about her. She vowed to follow her example.

“Would you care for dessert?” the waiter asked.

With her stomach still in knots, Annie didn’t think she could eat another bite. “No, thank you.”

“Their cheesecake is to die for. Want to share a piece with me?” Drew asked.

The idea of eating from the same plate seemed strangely intimate. If she really wanted to make Jake think they were a couple, she needed to get used to such harmless intimacies. Annie straightened her shoulders. “All right. Let’s share a piece of cheesecake and talk about teaching Jake a lesson he’ll never forget.”



“So,” Drew said, leaning against Annie’s electric car that was just as cute as its owner. “Can I have your number?” She gave Annie a teasing wink, aware that it sounded like some kind of pickup line.

Annie narrowed her eyes. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Me? Flirting? No, that’s my normal style of communication.” Hand on her heart, Drew added, “I’ll save the flirting for when Jake is watching.” In a more serious tone, she said, “I’ll need your number to talk about our plan.”

After unlocking her car, Annie reached into the glove compartment for a pen, wrote something on a business card, and handed it to Drew.

Annie Prideaux, CPA. Senior Associate. Cargill & Jones.

Annie was exactly what she had said she was. Drew could already tell that, unlike her brother, Annie wasn’t one to exaggerate to get attention. She looked at the cell phone and home number Annie had written on the back of the card. Her handwriting was clear and strong. “I assume you want me to call you at home, not at work?”

Nodding, Annie clicked off her pen. “That would be better. Speaking of calling me... What do I tell Jake when he calls me to enjoy his little joke?”

“What do you tell him when you had a date with a man that went really well?”

“Nothing.”

Drew looked up from the business card. “Nothing?”

Annie stared at her car keys, avoiding eye contact. “Not much to tell anyway.”

“Why not?” Getting personal information out of Annie was like cutting old vines—hard work. “You don’t date?”

“I do. Sometimes. But...”

“But?” Drew stepped closer. “Annie, I don’t want to be nosy and intrude on your privacy, but if we want to pull off making Jake think we’re a couple, I need to know a bit about your relationships.”

“Not sure you can call them that,” Annie mumbled. “I usually have one date, and that’s it.” Her cheeks reddened at the admission.

“That’s it? Why?”

Annie shrugged. “Usually, either my date is completely bored by the end of the evening, or I am, and neither of us wants a repeat.”

Drew could imagine why. If Annie was as reserved and as hesitant to share information about herself as she had been tonight, her dates would be full of awkward pauses in conversation. But of course if she told Annie that, she would retreat even further. “I know what you mean,” she said instead. “I had a few dates that were more boring than watching grass grow.”

“So what do I tell Jake?” Annie asked again.

“Let’s try to stay as close to the truth as possible. Otherwise, it won’t be long until we get caught.”

Annie’s eyebrows rose. “Sounds as if you’re speaking from experience.”

Drew sighed. “Years of trying to hide my sexual orientation from my very conservative father. When I finally told him, it turned out he suspected all along. I’m not a good liar.”

The skin above Annie’s nose crinkled. “But you still think you can pull off this,” she pointed back and forth between them, “in front of Jake?”

Pretending to be smitten with you? Sure, no problem. Despite Annie’s cautious reserve, Drew still found her cute and interesting. She tapped her own leg to admonish herself. *Careful. She’s straight, and you’re doing this to have some fun at Jake’s expense.* “Shouldn’t be a problem. We’re not going to do this for years, just until we get some revenge.”

“Any other advice for the phone call with Jake?”

“Don’t try to convince him you have fallen in love with me tonight,” Drew said.

Annie frowned. “I thought that was the plan. To make him believe I fell in love with you?”

“Yeah, but not so fast,” Drew said. “I have a feeling you’re not someone who falls in love at the drop of a hat.”

Annie’s lips compressed into a tight line. “No, I’m not.”

“Hey, nothing wrong with that.” When Annie looked down, Drew realized she was touching Annie’s forearm. She pulled her hand back. “We just need to wait a few weeks until we tell Jake we’re ready to rent a U-Haul and adopt a Golden Retriever together.”

“Cat,” Annie said, a tiny grin lurking at the corner of her mouth. “Jake knows I’m a cat person.”

“Let’s get both. Then when we experience lesbian bed death and split up, you can keep the cat and I’ll keep the dog.”

Annie lifted a brow but didn’t comment on the *lesbian bed death*. After a moment, she reached out to shake Drew’s hand. “Deal.”



Annie stared at her reflection in the mirror above the bathroom sink.

Something soft brushed against her ankles and made her look down.

Amadeus’s green eyes looked back at her.

“I’m da’ing a w’man now,” she told the cat, toothbrush in mouth.

When Amadeus walked away, not interested in her confession, Annie shook her head at herself. She then paused and squeezed her cheeks between her thumb and her other fingers. A strange tension resided in her cheeks, and it took her a moment to figure out that her muscles ached from laughing about the stories Drew had told her during dinner.

Drew had a great sense of humor. She seemed to delight in making Annie laugh or blush. While her teasing and her constant questions caught Annie off guard and sometimes pushed her out of her comfort zone, Annie had still enjoyed herself tonight. *Who would have thought?*

The ringing of the phone startled her. She spat a mouthful of toothpaste all over the sink. *I bet that’s Jake, calling to gloat about duping us. Jerk.* After wiping

her mouth, she rushed to the phone and nearly stumbled over Amadeus, who was crouched into a sphinxlike position in the middle of the living room. “Yes?”

“I was starting to think you’d gone home with your date,” Jake’s smug voice greeted her.

Annie gritted her teeth. *Stay calm. Remember the plan.* “I’ve never gone home with anyone after just one date. You know that.”

When she answered with the calm rebuke instead of angry shouting, Jake was silent for a few seconds. “Let me guess. You didn’t go on your date?”

“Of course I did. I always keep my promises.”

Another pause. “Then Drew didn’t show up?”

“Why would you think that? Of course she showed up,” Annie said, emphasizing the *she*.

“And?”

Annie bit her cheek to keep from laughing. “We had a wonderful evening. I wish all of your friends were like her.”

A rasping noise at the other end of the line sounded as if Jake had trouble breathing. “What?”

“I wish all—”

“I heard what you said. You’re not angry?”

“Angry?” Annie imitated the innocent tone Jake had used whenever he had been caught doing something wrong as a boy. “Why would I be angry?”

Jake hesitated. Her answers clearly threw him. “Um. You did notice that Drew is a woman, right?”

“I’m not blind, Jake.” Despite her short hair, Drew couldn’t be mistaken for a man.

“And I’m sure Drew told you she’s a lesbian, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did, but if she hadn’t, you would have outed her just now. That’s for her to do, not you.” Sometimes her brother didn’t think before he opened his big mouth.

“Jesus, sis, one date and you’re already getting protective!” Jake laughed at his own joke. “Drew is out to everyone and their dog, so don’t worry about it.”

Giving away personal information about someone else still wasn’t okay in Annie’s book.

When she didn't answer, Jake asked, "So you really stayed and had dinner with her?"

"Why wouldn't I? Drew is very nice. She even invited me to a private wine tasting at her winery." Drew hadn't, but mentioning plans for further contact would make it more believable when she finally told Jake she was in a relationship with Drew.

"A *private* wine tasting?" Jake repeated. "Didn't you tell her you're straight?"

"Of course I did. She didn't seem to mind and said something about earning a toaster oven."

"What?" A banging noise resounded through the line, as if Jake had just dropped the phone.

Annie bit back a laugh. She waited until she heard Jake's breathing through the phone again. "Maybe it's some kind of prize winemakers get if they have a certain number of wine tastings per month or something like that." Jake had always thought she was hopelessly naïve, and now she was taking advantage of that.

"No," Jake said. "Trust me, sis, it has nothing to do with wine tastings. I don't think you should go."

"Why? You were the one who set me up on a blind date with Drew, and now you don't want me to go to a harmless wine tasting? Jake, you're being ridiculous."

After a second of silence, Jake said, "It was meant to be a prank, but I'm not sure Drew is getting the joke. Toaster oven, my ass! You'd better be careful."

Annie laughed. "You're telling me to be more careful?" Normally, he told her to take a few risks, have fun, and not be so damn reasonable all the time.

Now Jake laughed too, but it sounded halfhearted. "Yeah, hell must be freezing over. Just remember that Drew is a lesbian. Her expectations for this wine tasting might be different than yours. If a lesbian is wining and dining another woman, it's usually to get her into bed."

"Nonsense," Annie said. "Lesbians are still women, and for us, not everything is about sex."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Jake said in a sing-song tone.

Their sudden role reversal felt strange. How often had she warned him about something or someone, just to have him ignore her advice and do the opposite?

Now she took a certain satisfaction from ignoring him. “Don’t worry. We talked about it. We both know what we can expect from this acquaintance.” *Revenge*, Annie silently added.

“Okay. Listen, I have to go.”

When Jake ended the call, Annie scratched a speck of half-dried toothpaste from her sleep shirt and headed to the bedroom, Amadeus in tow. “So far, so good,” she told the cat. “Your uncle Jake bought it hook, line, and sinker.”



“What the hell are you doing with my sister?”

Drew leaned back against the headboard and dangled one hand out of bed to pet Cab, who let out a contented doggie sigh. When Jake stopped shouting, she repeated, “Doing?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. Annie said something about you trying to earn a toaster oven!”

Wow, had she really said that? Obviously, Annie had a hidden devious streak.

“Jesus, Drew, Annie doesn’t even know what that means!”

Oh, yes, she does. Drew grinned. *Let’s see if I can rile him up even more.* “Don’t worry. I have a feeling she’s a quick learner.”

A deep growl echoed through the phone. “If you put your hands anywhere near my—”

“Jake, calm down. I haven’t touched your sister. I just had a good time with her tonight. She’s really nice.”

“Nice?” Jake spat out the word as if it were a curse. “Since when do you want a woman who’s nice?”

“Since I grew up,” Drew said. “Maybe you should try it too.”

Jake snorted. “Oh, yeah, playing around with an unsuspecting straight woman...very grown up! I’m telling you, if you hurt—”

“Now you’re playing the protective big brother? You should have thought of that before you set your sister up on a fake date with a woman.” Drew clutched the phone more tightly. “If you knew anything about Annie, you’d know that dating isn’t easy for her. What you did was really cruel.”

She hung up on Jake before he could reply, then reached for the card on the bedside table and dialed Annie’s number. “Hi,” she said when Annie answered.

“It’s Drew Corbin. I’m just calling to warn you. You better turn off your phone if you want to avoid more calls from Jake. He’s on the warpath, trying to save his innocent little sister from the big bad lesbian.”

Annie chuckled, a sound that made Drew’s skin tingle.

Stop it!

“He already warned me about your devious intentions,” Annie said.

Drew laughed. *She’s got a great sense of humor once she lets herself relax.*

“I told him you invited me to a private wine tasting,” Annie said. “I know we said it would be best to stick as close to the truth as possible, but—”

“It’s fine.” Drew grinned. “Are you trying to ask me out on a second date, Ms. Prideaux?”

For a moment, only the soft sounds of Annie’s breathing filtered through the line, and Drew imagined Annie blushing, searching for words.

“That could be arranged,” Drew said before Annie could answer. “How about next weekend? I could give you a tour through the vineyards, followed by a private wine tasting.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Annie said, all hints of laughter now gone from her tone. “We just need to pretend to have a second date, not actually have one.”

“Like I said, it’s better to stay as close to the truth as possible, so why not do that wine tasting? It’ll give us a chance to get to know each other a little.”

“All right,” Annie said after hesitating for a few seconds.

“How about Saturday at four?”

Paper rustled, then Annie said, “Can we make it five?”

“Sure.”

“Can I bring anything?”

Amazing how different from her brother Annie was. Whenever Jake dropped by, he emptied a bottle of her best wine without ever thinking to contribute anything. “No,” Drew said. “Just yourself. Do you need directions?”

“No, I’ll just punch your address into my GPS.”

Ah. Drew smiled. Of course she has a GPS. I should’ve known. She’s such a geek.

Annie cleared her throat. “So I guess I’ll see you Saturday.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Drew said. “Sweet dreams.”

After Annie answered with a simple “good night,” Drew ended the call and turned off the light. She settled down to sleep with a smile on her lips.

CHAPTER 3

“Do you have a minute?”

Annie looked up from her progress report to see Jonathan Poynter, her new colleague, lingering in the doorway. She waved him in. “Sure.” She made another note in the report before she focused on her visitor.

He smoothed down his well-groomed blond beard while he walked toward her. When he reached her desk, he stopped and looked around. “Nice office. I like the way you arranged the furniture.”

Annie raised one brow. He wasn’t here to compliment her sense of interior design, was he? “What can I do for you?”

“Virgil explained the software the firm uses yesterday, but it’s very different from the one I used before.” He sent her a helpless smile. “Can you show me again how to import the data and create a chart for the client’s expenses?”

One glance at the clock showed her that she had twenty minutes before her next appointment, so she nodded. “Come around this side, and I’ll show you.”

When Jonathan rounded the desk and leaned over her shoulder to see the screen, a wave of his too-heavy aftershave hit Annie.

She wrinkled her nose and started to breathe through her mouth. A few clicks of her mouse and she had the software open. She showed Jonathan how to import the client’s data from QuickBooks.

“You’re really good at this,” Jonathan said. “How long have you worked for Cargill & Jones?”

Annie kept her gaze on the screen. “Six years.”

“Are you a local, or—?”

“No, I’m not,” Annie said in a tone that didn’t invite further questions. Discussing the details of her private life always made her uncomfortable,

especially in a work context. “Make sure you check the imported data for any mistakes. Once you’ve done that, you—”

The ringing of Annie’s phone interrupted her.

She lifted one finger to tell Jonathan to give her a moment and reached for the phone. “Cargill & Jones, Annie Prideaux speaking.”

“Good morning, Ms. Prideaux. This is Bill Moxley. I’m not sure if you remember. I was thinking about investing in a new tractor the last time we spoke.”

“Of course I do, Mr. Moxley. You said it might be better to wait until next year.”

“Yes, but now I’m not so sure.”

Annie suppressed a sigh. Why did her clients change their minds all the time? “Okay,” she said, careful not to let any hint of impatience show, “how can I help you with your decision?”

“I know this is short notice, but I have a good offer. The thing is just that I need to make a decision today. Can you pencil me in to go over the numbers with me?”

Typical. First he waited until the last moment, and then he expected her to work miracles. Annie clicked on her appointment book. If she pushed the appointment with Mrs. Baker back a little and shortened her lunch break, it could work. “Can you meet me at half past twelve?”

“Yes, that works out great for me. Thank you so much.”

When Annie put down the phone and looked over her shoulder, Jonathan smiled at her. “You’re really good with the clients too.”

“It’s necessary if you want a career in accounting. You’ll work with people just as much as you’ll work with numbers.” It hadn’t come naturally for Annie, but by now, she was used to dealing with even the most difficult clients.

“No problem for me. I like people.” Jonathan grinned at her.

Annie nodded and turned back to the screen. “Where were we? Ah, yes. You click on this icon,” she used her pen to point out what she meant on the screen, “choose the colors and categories, click here—and voilà: the software creates the chart you want.” She enlarged the multi-colored pie chart. “See?”

Jonathan leaned close to take a look at her computer screen. “That’s all I need to do?”

“Yes. It’s easy once you get to know the program.”

“It seemed much more complicated when Virgil explained it. You’re a great teacher.” Jonathan lightly touched her shoulder. “Thank you so much for taking the time to help me.”

Annie interrupted the contact by leaning forward and putting her pen back in the penholder. “You’re welcome.” She still remembered how at sea she had felt when she had first started working as an accountant, so she didn’t mind sharing her knowledge. “If you have any other questions, just come over and ask me.”

“Thanks. I will.” Jonathan straightened from his bent-over position behind Annie’s desk chair and headed to the door.

“Oh, and Jonathan?”

He turned and looked at her with the expectant expression of a child on Christmas morning. “Jon, please.”

Annie didn’t nod. She had known Jonathan for just three days, so calling him by a nickname felt too familiar. “Remember to back up all your data before you close the software.”

Jonathan’s smile dimmed. “Oh. Yes. Of course. Thanks again.” He squeezed past Sarah, who was just entering Annie’s office, and hurried down the hall.

“What’s going on with Jonathan?” Sarah asked as she plopped down in the visitor’s chair. “He didn’t even say hi to me.”

Annie shrugged and picked up a pen to twirl it through her fingers. “He seemed a bit hyper, but maybe that’s just the stress of starting a new job.”

“Stress? I don’t think so.” A knowing smile spread over Sarah’s face. She twisted a reddish lock of hair around her finger. “Has he asked you out yet?”

Annie blinked. “Who?”

“The pope.” Sarah rolled her eyes. “Jonathan, of course! Don’t tell me you didn’t notice that he’s totally smitten with you?”

“What?” Annie threw her pen down. “Where did you get that crazy idea?”

“I’m not the only one who thinks so,” Sarah said, still twisting her hair around her finger. “Linda said he almost fell over himself to help you make copies of Mr. Dettman’s files yesterday.”

Great. That’s how office rumors get started. Annie rubbed her forehead. “He was just being friendly, and it gave him a chance to learn the copy machine. That’s all.”

“Maybe. But he’s also grinning like an idiot every time he sees you, and I don’t think he’s wearing that extra splash of aftershave to impress Mr. Cargill.”

“You’re imagining things. He’s just grateful for my help. And maybe he just puts on so much aftershave because he has a body odor problem.”

Sarah freed her finger from her hair and pointed at Annie. “Think what you want, oh clueless one. But if he asks you out before the end of the week, you owe me lunch.”

It wouldn’t happen anyway, so Annie nodded. “Fine. And if he doesn’t ask me out, you pay for lunch.” Maybe that would teach Sarah that not everything was about dating, romance, and relationships.

“Deal. So are you coming to the book club meeting on Saturday?” Sarah asked.

Annie shook her head. “Not this week.”

Sarah’s bright red lips twisted into an expression of dismay. “Oh, come on. You can clean your apartment—or whatever it is you’re doing—another time. You’ve got to come. We’re discussing that Carol O’Connell novel you wanted us to read for months.”

“Yeah, I know.” Part of Annie was tempted to cancel the wine tasting. Maybe this whole idea was just crazy. But if she gave up, Jake would have the last laugh—as he always did. For once, she wanted to beat him at his own game. “I’ve already got plans.”

“Ooooh!” Sarah leaned forward. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a date!”

Now it was Annie’s turn to roll her eyes. Sarah saw romance everywhere. “No date. A...a friend invited me to a wine tasting.”

Sarah grinned. “Friend, huh?”

“Yes, friend. Did anyone ever tell you that you’ve got a one-track mind?”

“Oh, yeah.” Sarah stood and sauntered toward the door, where she turned and winked at Annie. “My boyfriend. But, of course, he doesn’t mind.”

Annie folded her arms on her desk, rested her head on top of them, and groaned.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

SOMETHING IN THE WINE

BY JAE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com