Virgo

# Chapter One

Home. It was always good to be home—comforting and welcoming—the time for homecooked food instead of rushed crap at the apartment or a drive-thru.

Isabella Walker stepped out of her car, and, before shutting the door, she breathed in a lungful of air. Like somehow, the air at home was better than at Emerald. She didn’t have the energy to lug her stuff inside, but she had to. She made several trips, dropped the overstuffed laundry bag by the washer, then dragged her luggage upstairs to her childhood bedroom.

Finals were done. Hallelujah!

Her junior year at Emerald University was in the bag.

Normally, she would have stayed back with her friends and got her party on for the weekend. But Chloe’s parents had planned a family cruise, and she wanted to get home to get everything packed since they’d be gone for five days. And Brianne thought she was coming down with the flu and had driven home the night before.

Just as well, Iz was spent. Her finals went well overall. She’d studied her ass off and survived on Ramen, takeout, and lots of coffee.

Now, she had the summer to herself. She could reconnect with her girls in a few weeks. Her parent’s house was only a two-hour drive from Emerald, but Chloe lived just an hour south of the house, and Brianne was an hour west. Maybe she could have them over for Memorial Day weekend. They could hang by the pool and drink some of Reed’s delicious rum punches.

*Oh, yes!* Brilliant.

For now, she needed a shower—a nice, long hot shower. Then some food followed by hibernation. Well, at least a two-hour nap before dinner. *Maybe Mom will make meatloaf.*

Iz put away most of her clothes and plopped her toiletries on the vanity.

The house was quiet, as to be expected. Mom would be at the real estate office or showing houses. She tried not to office out of the home, she said because it distracted her. And Reed, her stepdad would, for sure, be at his office downtown. He was an attorney, in-house counsel with GS&M.

She stripped and turned the shower faucet on full. Dipping her head under the hot spray, she felt nothing could compare to being home. Her own bathroom, her own bed, no nosy neighbors or partiers coming in at three in the morning.

After several long minutes, Iz stepped out and wrapped a towel around herself. Her stomach growled. She needed sustenance.

She padded down the stairs to the kitchen and fished through the fridge for something that’d pass for lunch. Well, it wasn’t as stocked as usual. The past few years, her mom loaded the kitchen with ready-to-eat food and leftovers for Izzy’s summer and holiday breaks from school. Of course, Iz was home earlier than expected. They probably weren’t expecting her until Sunday afternoon.

She lifted the tinfoil from a bowl seeing goulash. Perfect. She set it in the microwave oven, hit start, then retrieved a glass from the cabinet.

She heard a noise.

*What was that?*

She froze. She thought she might have imagined it, except there it was again.

*Shit!* Someone was in the office.

Her little heart pounded in her chest. She scanned the countertops; her cell phone was upstairs. She quietly lifted a butcher knife out of the wooden block and stopped the microwave.

Did she forget to lock the front door behind her? This was a safe neighborhood, but one could never know for sure.

Clutching her bath towel and the other hand gripping the knife, she made slow steps toward the office.

The office chair creaked.

She swallowed hard and turned the corner, knife thrust straight in front of her. She turned the door handle, lunged through the doorway, and yelled. “Hey!”

Reed spun around in his chair, eyes wide. “Iz?”

Isabella lowered her arm. Her entire chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath.

“Reed? What are you doing here?”

The corner of his lip lifted. “I could ask you the same thing.”

She crossed the hardwood floors and set the knife on the edge of his desk. “Finals are done, so I came back early. I’ll see Chloe and Brianne later. Why are you home early from work?”

He rose and placed his hands on her bare shoulders as he kissed her cheek. “I had some stuff to do, so I took off work early. I didn’t hear you.”

He’d looked like he’d been staring out the window.

“I suppose you haven’t spoken to your mother lately.”

Iz tipped her head. “No. Why?”

He pursed his lips, took a breath, and began. “I figured. Iz, there’s no good way to say this so I’m just going to come right out with it. Your mother and I are getting a divorce.”

Her mouth fell open. “What?” Her voice was quiet as a church mouse. She heard the words, but she couldn’t believe it.

He looked down at her. “Why don’t you get dressed, and we can talk in the kitchen.”

“No, please, tell me now. I thought you two were happy.”

Reed was the best thing to happen to their family. When her mom married Reed, her life made a one-eighty. Iz had been busted for skipping school, cheating, getting into fights on the playground. After Reed, she got into competitive volleyball and won a partial academic scholarship to Emerald, which was notoriously challenging to get into. Reed came in and was like a stabilizing force in her life. Even her mom seemed less manic.

Thinking about her family being broken up ripped her heart into pieces.

Reed rested a hip against the desk and sighed. “It’s not pretty. I suspected she’d been cheating for a while, but I denied it. I confronted her last week, and she admitted it. Some thirty-year-old newbie realtor in the office.” He flapped a hand in the air like it was inconsequential. And it was. The *who* didn’t matter. All that mattered was the fact that Miranda’d cheated.

Her mother was always so self-centered. She valued people who could do something for her. The world revolved around her. She was first; everyone else was second.

Iz had come to accept it, of course, but as Miranda’s one-and-only child, she hadn’t experienced the *peculiarities* of her mother’s character like others had.

That explained why Reed looked so tired. He was still a handsome man, broad shoulders, handsome face, and expressive chocolate eyes.

Reed trained his eyes on her, and after a moment of processing, the tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She had family…that was breaking up. Her stability, her rock, suddenly a house of cards ready to tumble.

“Oh, gees, Iz, c’mere.” He opened his arms, and she stepped in. He wrapped her in a cocoon of warmth and caring, and she dared to wonder how long she’d get to keep that.

The flood gates opened, and she sobbed into his shoulder.

He held her tighter, and her arms looped around his neck. She didn’t want to lose him. Whenever her mother was acting crazy, Reed had always been a grounding force, talking sense into her and ultimately making her relationship with her mother better.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. It was missing him. She might never see him again and she loved him. He was more of a father to her than her *own* father.

The crying didn’t cease. Iz tried to pull herself together, but she could only think about Reed not being a part of her life.

Finally, she spoke. “Reed, I’m scared of what my life looks like without you.”

He pulled her away to meet her gaze, his eyes slightly glassy. “Without me?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “What’s the chance I’ll see you anymore after the divorce is finalized?”

“No, precious. I’m not going anywhere. I may not have adopted you, but make no mistake, you are mine.” His voice became firmer as he spoke. “I’m keeping the house, and this is your home too. You live here whenever you want, during college breaks. Hell, even after college.”

“Really?” The tears slowly dried up.

“Really. Your mother wants one of those new condos downtown. I’m keeping the house. I love this house.”

“I do too.”

He brushed away the last of her tears from her cheeks.

She pecked his lips and returned to their fierce hug. “God, I thought that was it. That after this summer, I’d never see you again.”

He shook his head. “I’ll share you during the holidays, if that’s what I have to do, but I’m not going anywhere.”

A small smile pulled at her lips. She pecked his lips again. “I’m so glad. I’m sorry about Mom, though. She was different with you, and I thought you were her happily-ever-after.”

He smirked.

There was nothing more to be said. Reed was resilient, and he still had her, even if she’d spend most of her time two hours away.

She cupped his cheeks and kissed his lips again, this time lingering longer, and she didn’t know why. She nearly gasped. Quickly, she regained composure and smiled big. “Well, Mom’s mistake because you really are a wonderful man. Now, I have to go eat something, I’m starved. Want anything?”

He paused, then returned the smile. “I’m good. I need to get some documents together for the attorney. Let’s have dinner around seven, okay?”

“Great.” She pivoted to make her way to the kitchen.

She let out a shaky breath. *Holy crap! What was that?*

She’d strung out that last kiss for some unknown reason. Maybe it was like a release of emotion because he would still be in her life. Maybe it was just plain brain fog and exhaustion from finals.

But how was it that she loved it so much? She was out of her mind.

Reed was her stepdad, a father figure. He taught her how to drive, how to jumpstart her car battery, and, ironically, how to dance. She admired him. The only emotion between them was familial, not romantic.

She quickly grabbed her goulash and water and high-tailed it to her bedroom to get dressed. She was a smart woman. There was likely a perfectly fine explanation for what had just happened, like a hormone spike or sympathy over his breakup with Mom.

Best thing she could do was to put this behind her. She had the summer to relax, find a part-time job and bank some cash, and hang with her friends. She didn’t have a boyfriend, but that was a possibility too.

It was all Reed could do to concentrate on making chili.

Iz was torn up about the divorce and, it turned out, scared of losing him. That would never happen. But then she kissed him. Although it was a closed-mouth kiss, and certainly not their first one, this one had been different.

*Fuck!* It sent some kind of damn lust racing through him in that instant, and that didn’t make any damn sense. She was his daughter, for all intents.

He was pretty sure she hadn’t thought anything of it, but he’d replayed it a thousand times and needed to get it out of his head. She *could not* be on his mind in that way. Sure, she was smart, kind, and had grown into a beautiful woman, but the age difference alone…

*No, don’t even justify not being with her because you’re* not *gonna be with her.*

Reed knew deep inside it was a fluke, probably long forgotten by the next day. He served the chili when he heard Iz’s footfalls down the stairs. A smile firmly pasted on his face because she was the apple of his eye, and they should enjoy their summer together since they might not have very many more together. Exactly.