

Fools Rush In

by Shirley Jump

Chapter One: October

The leaves rushed to the sides of the road, scuttling across the pavement and escaping before Kate Weaver's convertible red Miata pulverized them. Kate pressed the pedal harder, the wind coursing through her hair, half tempted to blow through Brightview, Indiana, and keep on going until she hit a coastline or another country or even better, the moon.

But she'd made a promise, and if there was one thing Kate did, it was keep her promises.

Well, most of them.

The road dipped, and the roadster's tires skidded against a wet patch of leaves, fishtailing to the right. Kate should have slowed down, but instead she gunned the engine and squealed around the corner, then down a shady tree-lined street and finally into the third driveway on the right. The tires fanned a spray of gravel in her wake.

She'd arrived. And if she had anything to say about it, she'd be leaving before the engine had time to cool.

The front door opened, and a small, thin woman stepped onto the porch. In an instant, Kate's irritation evaporated. She hurried out of the car and up the stairs—the first one creaking its standard greeting—and barreled into the arms of her grandmother. Maria Weaver, whom everyone had called Mimi for as long as Kate could remember, had been Kate's mother, father and everything in between. Kate's parents had divorced when she was little, with Dad heading to Florida and her mother...well, her mother embarking on adventures that left her little girl back in Indiana. Mimi was the one and only constant in Kate's life, no matter how far she traveled or how long she stayed away. "Oh, Mimi! I missed you."

“I missed you too, Katie-girl.” Mimi’s tender voice was muffled in the tight embrace. The familiar scent of her L’Air du Temps hung in the air, mingled with the sweet fragrance of baking bread.

Mimi had gotten so thin. Frail. The grandmother Kate remembered had been an iron woman, a forceful personality. In the space of a couple years—*no, four, God, had it been that long?*—she’d shrunk into herself, like a corn stalk withered by drought.

Kate drew back and forced a smile to her face. “Is that honey bread I smell baking?”

“Of course. And a batch of chocolate cherry cookies for later.”

“I knew there was a reason I nominated you for grandma of the year.” Kate chuckled, then thumbed toward the car. “Let me grab my bag and I’ll be right in.”

Mimi reached up and placed a gentle hand on Kate’s face. “I’m glad you’re here.”

She covered Mimi’s papery fingers with her own. “Me too.” She headed back inside. Kate turned away and headed back to her car before Mimi saw her cry.

Not that Kate cried. Ever. She sucked it up, and held the tears at bay. Mimi would tell her she was being too strong, but for Kate, strong was a way of life. Not an adjective. The minute she’d gotten Mimi’s call, asking her to come home and help while she “recovered” from an illness she wouldn’t name, Kate had told her boss that she needed a few days off from the travel magazine, then she’d hopped in her car and made a marathon trip from her apartment in Miami to Mimi’s house in the Midwest.

Kate thumbed the remote, popped the trunk on the Miata and reached inside for her bag. Just enough clothes for a weekend visit, which should send a clear message to everyone that Kate wasn’t here to stay. Ever since she’d left town, more than eight years ago, her visits back

had been quick, nothing more than an overnight stay. She'd left Brightview for a reason, and stayed away for the same reason.

"I guess hell really did freeze over. Kate Weaver's back in town."

Kate stood stock still. She knew that voice. Knew it too well. Hadn't Mimi told her he'd moved away years ago? Got himself a wife and a dog, and a job in Chicago? She slipped her sunglasses up onto her nose, then turned around, keeping her expression neutral, nonchalant. "Sam. Didn't expect to run into you."

"Likewise." Sam Turner shot her a grin, the one she remembered. She used to think it made him look a little cocky, a lot sexy. Now it didn't affect her. At all. He was still the same tall, lean man she remembered, with deep blue eyes, dark brown hair and a smile that could charm the dress off a prom queen. That, she knew firsthand.

"You in town to see your grandmother?" he asked.

"Yup. Just a quick stay." She hoisted the small bag, evidence of her imminent departure. "See you around."

The grin widened. "Oh, you will. More than you know."

She gave him a curious look, but didn't ask. The days when she cared about seeing Sam were over. They'd ended eight years ago, when she'd ditched him at their engagement party and headed for the coast. Now, she turned away and strode up the walkway. It wasn't until she reached the porch and heard a creak behind her that she realized Sam had followed. "What are you doing?"

"What I came here to do. Which has nothing to do with you. I'm here for Mimi." He gestured toward the door. "After you."

She propped a fist on her hip. "Why do you need to see my grandmother?"

The grin faded and a somber shade dropped over Sam's features. "I'm her doctor, Kate. I'm paying a housecall."

Kate jerked away from the door, grabbed Sam's hand and hauled him to the side of the porch. She let go, but that didn't stop her palm from tingling where she had touched Sam. Or stop the flash of memory of his hands on her, his hot, gentle touch, and the way he used to turn her world upside-down.

Kate cleared her throat. Refocused on what Sam had said. "Wait. Why is she seeing a doctor? And why *you*?"

"For one, she's sick. For another, it's a small town. I'm the one and only doctor here."

"My grandmother said you moved to Chicago, got married, got a dog..." She stopped talking before it sounded like she'd wondered about him in the last few years. Because she hadn't. Not one bit.

His jaw hardened. "I did. Got divorced. Wife kept the house, I kept the dog. Moved back here to be the Brightview doc."

Kate glanced back at the house, and had the feeling she'd missed something. A doctor. Paying a housecall. "Mimi told me she was recovering, but I assumed it was from a cold or the flu or...?"

His face softened. A stone dropped to the pit of Kate's stomach. She wanted to get back in the car, put the pedal to the metal and get the hell out of here before Sam said whatever he was going to say next.

"How long are you planning on staying?" he asked.

"A couple days, tops."

“If you can, you might want to change your plans. Your grandmother needs you for a while.”

Kate didn't do dependable. She wasn't there in a pinch. Wasn't the one you counted on. She was none of those things, and never wanted to be. It was the reason she hadn't gotten married, had yet to settle in one place, and had run from a life filled with expectations. But now her gaze went to the small gray bungalow behind her. The woman inside had given everything but never asked anything of Kate in return. No matter what irons Kate had in the fire or what destinations headed on her list, they could wait. Mimi mattered more.

“I'll stay as long as it takes,” she said.

Sam smiled, and it hit her hard, in a place she thought no longer existed. “Good. Because I'm going to need all the help I can get.”

CHAPTER TWO-November

If someone had asked Sam Turner to name the eight biggest wonders in the world, he could have gotten through seven, at least, but right there at number one would have to be Kate Weaver's return to Brightview. When she'd left eight years ago—running out in the middle of their engagement party like her hair was on fire—he'd excised her from his life.

Or tried to.

For most of the last eight years, Sam had lived in Chicago, going to med school, then interning at a busy hospital downtown, and telling himself the job fulfilled him. But the roots he'd been born with called like a siren, and when Doc Watkins retired, Sam had offered to take over his practice. He'd come home, and for Sam, there was no truer statement.

Brightview *was* home. The shady streets, the wide open farmer's fields, the friendly, warm people. He'd found something far more fulfilling here than the money he could have made in Chicago.

"She looks good, Mrs. Fairfax," Sam said, leaning back and dropping the tongue depressor into the trash. "No more infection. You're all better now, Megan."

"I can go back to school? Cuz it's almost turkey day and Mrs. Lindsey's gonna show us how to make presents for our mommas with our hands." Then Megan clapped a hand over her five-year-old mouth. "Whoops. That's s'posed to be a surprise."

Angie Fairfax gave her daughter's blond locks a gentle tussle. "I'll be surprised, peanut." Then she raised her gaze to Sam. "Thanks, Doc."

“Anytime.” His patient and her mother headed out of the exam room. Sam crossed to the sink to wash his hands when he heard a step on the tile. He turned, expecting Mrs. Fairfax, and found Kate.

Kate, the wild, untamable woman who had once held his heart. She still had that wild spirit about her, in the long, dark hair that twisted and turned like honeysuckle vines. In the deep green eyes that sparked to life with mischief, flashed with anger. And in those crimson lips that begged for him to come closer, to taste just one more time—

“Kate.” He cleared his throat. Tried not to stare at the form-hugging red sweater she wore, dropping into an enticing V over the swell of her breasts, and the denim skirt that whooshed across her legs, all paired with scuffed cowboy boots that gave the whole thing an unexpected sexy edge. “I didn’t expect you.”

“I wanted to talk to you about my grandmother. I’m worried about her.” Kate paced the room, her boots clacking against the floor. Kate’s hands moved as she talked, adding punctuation marks to her sentences. “She does too much. She insists she’s fine and doesn’t need any help. Every time I try to get her to take it easy, or give her a helping hand, she brushes the offer away.”

Sam bit back a grin. “I wonder who that sounds like.”

“That’s not fair. I’m nothing—“ She shook her head. “Okay, maybe I’m a little like her. But this is different. She’s had a heart attack, for Pete’s sake. She needs to take it easy. To listen to your advice.”

“I agree.” He chuckled. That was Mimi, true to form. “You know you’re grandmother. She’s...determined.”

“Difficult,” Kate corrected.

“That too. She hates being down for the count, even for one second. That heart attack took her by surprise, but it was a mild one.” He tempered his words, kept his tone upbeat, to help allay the worry on Kate’s face. “With proper diet and exercise, she’ll be fine. It’s good for your grandmother to keep busy, but not overdo it. The worst thing she can do is just sit around.”

“But she’s sick, Sam. She could...die.” Tears filled Kate’s eyes, unraveling the last of Sam’s resolve.

He closed the distance between them in two quick strides, and gathered Kate into his arms. Strong, determined, willful Kate stood resolute, even now. Instinct had drawn him to embrace her, but common sense and the memory of their breakup made him step back again. They were no longer together, and for all he knew, Kate had a man in her life.

“She could,” he said softly, “but I think that’s a long, long way off.”

Kate raised her gaze to his. He’d seen the look in dozens of patients, that question mark. “Are you sure?”

“Nothing in medicine is ever a hundred percent, but I’d give her better odds than the mayor winning a second term.”

Kate’s laughter echoed in the room, bright, happy, relieved. “Those are pretty good odds. I hear he’s a shoe-in.”

“It’s a small town. Who else wants the job?”

“Not me. That would be a disaster.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You might shake things up around here. And if you ask me, this town could use a little shaking up.” Even as he told himself to keep his distance, that getting close to Kate would only lead him down a path of regret, Sam reached forward and brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. His touch lingered, and the part of him that had never really forgotten her

roared to life. In one simple movement, he could be kissing her, taking her in his arms. He knew how amazing that would be—the way she would curve against him, then reach for him, demanding *more, more, more*. He knew, oh how he knew, what kissing Kate would be like—

And where it would lead.

He had put a ring on her finger and she had walked out on him. Left the ring on the table. No note, no call. She'd been gone for eight years, and would probably be gone another eight once Mimi was well. He had to stop letting her in, because all Kate Weaver did was break his heart.

“I, uh, have appointments the rest of the day,” he said, “but I can swing by after I get done here and give Mimi a stern warning not to overdo it.”

Relief bloomed in Kate's face. “I'd appreciate it. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem.”

She smiled, then stepped to the door. At the last second, she turned back and those hypnotic dark green eyes met his. “My grandmother told me to tell you that she's making chili for dinner tonight. I don't know if that's still your favorite, but...”

“With her brown sugar crusted cornbread?”

“Of course. She'd never serve it any other way. She made me promise to invite you over to thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“I'll be there. My own cooking leaves something to be desired. It'd be great to eat something that didn't come out of a can or a frozen box.” Yeah, that was why he was accepting the invitation to dinner. Not because he wondered about Kate. Not because he told himself that if he sat down and spent time with her, he could finally get her out of his system.

Yeah, not that. At all.

“I can’t cook either and end up eating way too much junk on the run,” she said. “Half the time I’m rushing to catch a plane or a cab. Being here for the last month has been great, but probably bad for my waistline.”

His gaze dropped to her lithe figure. “I would disagree. Heartily.”

A blush flared in her cheeks. “Anyway, dinner’s at six.”

“It’s a date.” Damn. Why had he said that? “Uh, sorry, I didn’t mean—“

“I know. Sometimes I forget too.” Then she shrugged, like it was no big deal, and left, before he could ask if she meant sometimes she forgot they were no longer together or sometimes she forgot what they used to have.

Kate Weaver’s return had shaken things up, in a big way. The problem? Sam was having a hell of a time pretending her presence no longer affected him.

CHAPTER THREE—December

Two days had turned into three months before Kate realized it. Every time she mentioned leaving, Mimi's condition would take a turn for the worse. She'd complain of chest pains and need to lie down, or take a pill. Sam came by often to check her heart and offer admonishments. Kate turned down assignments, refused trips, and concentrated on her grandmother. Underneath, she chafed at the bit to leave, to get back on the road, but Mimi needed her, and the hours Kate had spent playing cards, chatting about the neighbors or just enjoying Mimi's company had been worth the extra weeks here. For the first time in a long time, Kate felt like she could breathe and just...be. She'd worked too many hours, traveled to too many places in the last few years, and the break was a nice de-stresser. As long as she stayed away from Sam Turner, that was.

"Okay," Kate said, returning from the attic with an oversized plastic box. "That's the last of the outdoor lights. I'm going to get out there and hang them before the snow starts. They're predicting three to five inches tonight. Though, given how often the forecasters are wrong, I doubt we'll get even a flake." Kate went to the window. A clear sunny sky belied the snow prediction. She sighed. "The one thing I do love about this town is having snow on Christmas. It seems like forever since I've seen that."

"You gotta stay put long enough for a storm to hit," Mimi said with a smile. "Maybe this time you will."

"I'm not going anywhere until you're better." The words clogged in her throat. She shifted the box's weight. "Anyway, let me get these hung."

Instead of looking at her grandmother and worrying. Instead of facing the fact that her beloved Mimi could die. Instead of thinking about mistakes and choices and things Kate could not undo.

And especially instead of thinking about Sam. Kate had done altogether too much speculation about the man. Sam Turner had small-town-settled-down written all over him. Always had. She was a vagabond, a wanderer. Didn't matter if every time she saw him she wanted to kiss him, or if being with him had made her realize how much she'd missed him over the last few years, she and Sam were the proverbial bird and the fish. Never meant to be together.

"I can help you, dear." Mimi started to rise, but Kate waved her back.

"Sit, rest, or work on dinner plans. If you rely on me to cook for us, we'll be having peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

"It's a wonder you didn't pass out from malnutrition when you lived on your own." Mimi shook her head, then crossed to the kitchen. "Okay, let me see what I have in the fridge. Somebody's got to take care of you—"

"Because I do a terrible job of it myself." Kate laughed, then headed outside.

She lifted the garage door, got out the stepladder, then set it against the house and began unwrapping the first string. There were clips and hangers and all kinds of thingamabobs that she had never seen before. She cursed the lights and the surge of domesticity that had risen in her this morning when she heard the snow forecast. Just because she liked a little snow in December didn't mean she was the Christmas at home type. What was she thinking?

"Need some help?"

She spun around at the sound of Sam's voice, her heart rising in her throat, her pulse skittering in her veins. He stood there, looking sexy as hell in jeans, work boots, a thick

turtleneck sweater and a dark green parka. He had the hood back, and the breeze toyed with his dark brown hair.

She'd seen him at least a dozen times over the last month, and she'd thought she'd gotten used to the sight of him, but judging by the way she had to remind herself to breathe and swallow, maybe not so much. Three times, he'd ended up staying for dinner after checking on Mimi. At some point, he had become a regular, expected, anticipated part of her day. How did that happen?

“Here let me—“

“I've got it.” She yanked the string back, but ended up tangling the wires around her hands.

“Stop being so stubborn.” Sam stepped forward, lifting the string of lights off her hands. “You look like you were decorated by a bunch of kindergarteners on a sugar high.”

“Okay, so maybe this is harder than I expected. There are all these things that go on the gutters somehow and then the lights...” She threw up her hands. “Whatever happened to just putting up a Charlie Brown Christmas tree and calling it a day?”

“Aw, where's your Christmas spirit, Kate?”

“It flew the coop when the weatherman promised me snow and I got sunshine.” She waved toward the sky. “I think it'll take a miracle to have a white Christmas now.”

Sam grinned, then gestured for her to come down from her perch. “Grab some of the clips and I'll help you.”

She did as he asked, and in a few minutes, Sam had several strings of lights draping a multicolored swag across the front of the house. “I can't believe you got that done so fast. You are the Christmas light whisperer.”

He laughed. “Nah. I just have experience at this. I’ve been hanging the lights on Mimi’s house for the past few years.”

“You have?”

He nodded, then climbed down the ladder and reached for the next set of lights, connecting them to a power cord, then beginning to weave them in and out of a thick green shrub. “I just did it as a favor to her. To thank her. She’s more like my grandmother than my own.”

“She always did say you were favorite bonus child.” Kate stood on the other side of the shrub and passed the lights back and forth with Sam.

He chuckled. “She called me a bonus child?”

“It’s what she called the kids who were my friends, the ones who sort of latched onto Mimi and hung out here all the time. You were the only one that stuck.” All Kate’s high school friends had moved on. To jobs, families. Sam had come back, and kept those old connections.

There was something... nice about that. Just like Kate knew she could come back here and see Mimi on the porch of this bungalow, she also knew now that Sam would be here to take care of her grandmother, too. He was dependable. Steady. All the things Kate wasn’t.

Kate handed the next set to Sam as he climbed the ladder to reach the top branches of the Japanese maple tree. “Thanks.”

“I told you, lights are no big deal.”

“No, I meant, thank you for being here for my grandmother. I should have come home sooner. If I had known...”

Sam came down two steps, until he was even with her. “She didn’t want anyone to know. Heck, it took me three days to convince her to call you. She didn’t want to worry you.”

“Which is what I’ve been doing for the last three months.” Kate ran a hand through her hair. All this time, she’d kept her worries to herself, not wanting to add stress to Mimi, and not wanting to rely on Sam. But as she glanced at the lights and his strong blue eyes, she wondered if maybe letting him in a little would make all of this easier. “I don’t know what to do, Sam. I’m so worried about her. I feel powerless.”

“Just keep doing what you are doing, Kate. Be there for her. She appreciates it, even if she doesn’t say it.”

The front door opened and Mimi stuck her head out. “How’s chicken pot pie sound, Kate?”

“Delicious,” Kate said. She turned to Sam, and realized that she had started to look forward to him being there for dinner. A danger-danger alarm went off inside her, but she ignored it. Dinner was merely to thank him for his help, nothing more. “What about you? Would you like to stay, Sam?”

He quirked a grin at her. “Is that an invitation? From you?”

She took in a breath, and with it, opened a door she’d vowed to seal shut. Always before, Mimi had been the one to ask Sam to stay. This time, Kate was making the offer. “Yes, Sam, it is.”

“Then it sounds perfect to me, too. Thanks, Mimi.”

Kate’s grandmother waved to Sam, then went back inside, a smile on her face that Kate hadn’t seen in a while. Mimi had always liked Sam. If it was up to Mimi, Kate and Sam would get married, settle down in Brightview and have a bunch of kids for Mimi to spoil.

For a second, Kate imagined that. Stringing lights with Sam every year. Sitting down over pie and talking about their days. Seeing his smile in the morning, then last thing at night. The kind of cozy domesticity people enjoyed every day.

People other than Kate Weaver. People who didn't break out in hives at the thought of a marriage license. She didn't stay put—

Except she kinda had for the last few months.

"I've been here an awful lot lately," Sam said. "I'm starting to spend more time here than at my own house. It's almost like..."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "Like when we were dating."

"It's just dinner, Sam," she said, quick, before he got the wrong impression. She still had a great big NO TRESPASSING sign over her heart, and no intentions of taking it down. Sam was everything she was not—and wanted everything she didn't. Soon, Mimi would be well and Kate would get back on the road, and back to her life. "We'd be crazy to get back together."

"Absolutely. Totally crazy," he agreed. "And we're adults now. We don't make irresponsible decisions anymore. Right?"

"Right. We're practical. Smart." Then she laughed. "Okay, maybe I'm not any of those things, but you are."

"You are, Kate." He closed the gap between them and cupped her jaw with his hands. He was warm and tender, and a part of her craved more of that, craved his touch, craved him. "You are capable and intelligent and amazing. And absolutely incredibly beautiful."

"And you are still the biggest liar I've ever met." A smile curved across her face and she leaned just a little more into his touch. Then panic set in, the same panic that had driven her out

of her engagement party, and onto the road. It made her jerk back, look away, put up that wall.

“But that’s okay. It is Christmas, after all. Lying goes with the holiday.”

His blue eyes filled with concern. “What happened to you, Kate? The Kate I remembered used to believe in fairy tales and miracles.”

When she’d been little, Kate had believed in the impossible. In Santa and the Tooth Fairy and parents who would someday come back to stay, and create the perfect little family. Then one heartbreak piled on top of another, and she learned the only happy ending came in relying on yourself and no one else. “She grew up and faced a lot of reality. There’s no such thing.”

“Ah, but there is.” He pointed to the sky, where flakes of snow tumbled in soft white pillows from the sky. “Look, Kate, it’s snowing.”

She raised her gaze. And there, as promised, was the snow she had doubted. Silent, delicate confetti, floating down, down, down, and sprinkling cold whispers against her skin. “Oh! It is snowing. Look, Sam, it’s snowing!”

He chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. “I know, Kate. I know.”

A dark, tempestuous storm brewed in his blue eyes. Her heart skipped a beat, her lungs held a breath, and something dark and hot roared to life inside her. The snow began to fall harder, faster, dusting Sam and Kate with a soft white blanket.

Then he leaned in, closed the distance between them, and kissed her. Winter’s storm whipped up around them, but Kate was too wrapped in the storm of Sam Turner to notice for a long, long time.

When she did, she realized she’d just made a colossal mistake—and let Sam back into her heart.

CHAPTER FOUR—January

Ah, January. The month of new beginnings, resolutions and promises that would be broken before Valentine’s Day, Sam thought as he finished up after his last patient of the day left. Already, he’d talked to three patients about weight loss resolutions, a couple with plans for exercise, and a very determined six-year-old who wanted an A in math this year. Just as he was finishing the chart details, there was a double knock at the door. “That sounds like trouble,” Sam said.

His brother Matt poked his head inside the room. He had the same dark brown hair and blue eyes as Sam, but a leaner, taller build, and a hell of a pitching arm. “Hey, that was your middle name, not mine.”

Joy rose in Sam’s chest at the sight of his brother, who’d been gone for months on end with the Navy. The town just didn’t feel the same when Matt wasn’t here. “I beg to differ. I was the good one. Mom said so.”

Matt chuckled. “Want to settle it over a beer and a game of darts?”

“Sounds good. I’m about done here.” Sam finished up the last of his paperwork, said goodbye to his nurse and assistant, then headed out the door with his brother. December’s gentle cold had given way to January’s biting anger, and a strong, bitter wind battered them as they walked the block from Sam’s office to Flanagan’s Bar. They grabbed a couple beers, then headed for a table.

“Brr. I forgot how cold it gets here.” Matt rubbed his hands together and blew on them.

“You’ve been spending too much time on a ship, cruising the Mediterranean.” Sam grinned. “So how long you home for this time?”

“For good. My enlistment’s up, and I figured I’d seen the world, I might as well settle down. Or do something close to it.” Matt grinned. “Really, I just wanted to come back here and make your life miserable.”

Sam chuckled. “Finally, something you’re good at.”

The two brothers laughed a while, then caught up on Matt’s naval adventures and Sam’s medical practice. They were on their second beer when the door opened, ushering in a burst of cold, a whoosh of fallen snow, and Kate Weaver.

Sam’s heart stuttered, just as it always did when he saw Kate. The cold had reddened her cheeks and lips, making her seem like a porcelain doll. Though Kate was nowhere near as fragile as that. Kate didn’t need anyone, he reminded himself, not even him.

After that kiss at Christmas, he’d thought things might change. But it was as if the kiss had flipped a switch inside her, and every time he went to visit Mimi, Kate found a reason to be gone. She’d avoided him like a cat at a dog pound.

“Hey, isn’t that—“

“Yeah,” Sam finished. He dropped his gaze to his beer.

“And you’re not talking to her...why?”

“It’s complicated.”

Matt sat back, crossed his arms over his chest and gave his brother a grin. “I’m currently unemployed. I have all the time in the world to hear how complicated it is. Considering how hard you were staring at her a second ago, I’d guess you’re still in love with her and she’s giving you the cold shoulder.”

Sam scowled. "I'm not talking about Kate."

But he was thinking about her. All the time. He'd catch himself wondering what she was doing during the day, if he'd run into her when he went to the store or to Mimi's. And late at night, when darkness fell over Brightview, his thoughts would wander—

Well, they'd wander down some seriously X-rated paths. He had never forgotten the sweet amazing nights he'd spent with Kate when they'd dated, the way her body seemed made for his, the smoldering heat they'd generated. But given the way she avoided him now, he doubted she remembered any of that.

"Well, you better talk to her, because she's headed this way," Matt said.

Kate paused by the table, and gave Matt a smile. A surge of jealousy rose in Sam that she didn't give him a smile, too. "Hey, Trouble, when'd you get back in town?"

"See, I told you that was your name," Sam said.

Matt laughed, slid out of the chair and gave Kate a hug. "Just today. I was hoping to see you had hogtied my brother and made a respectable man out of him."

She blanched a little at that, but recovered. "I think that's too big a job for any woman."

"I don't know," Matt said, then sent Sam a wink. "I think he's still smitten. You might be able to bend him to your will with nothing more than a smile."

Sam was going to kill Matt the second Kate left. He shot his younger brother a glare, which Matt ignored with a grin.

Then Kate turned her attention to Sam and a smile spread across her face, warming his gut like hot honey. "I don't know that you've ever bent to my will, Sam."

"There was that one time we got caught painting the principal's car red for Spirit Week."

She put a hand to her mouth, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “I almost forgot about that. We got in a lot of trouble.”

“We did indeed.” She’d been the wild side of him in high school, the one who encouraged him to buck the rules, take a chance. It had been part of what he’d loved about her—and a big part of what had led to her breaking his heart. “It was fun, even if I spent half that semester in in-school suspension.”

She propped a fist on her hip. “Are you saying I was a bad influence?”

“Not out loud.”

She laughed, then thumbed toward the bar. “I was going to—“

“Sit right here,” Matt said, vacating his seat and waving Kate into it. “I’ll go get you whatever you want from the bar.”

“You’re paying? Well then get me something girlie and expensive.”

Matt laughed, then left, taking his sweet time crossing the room. Sam had no doubt his brother would spend a good twenty minutes ordering the drink. Matt couldn’t be more obvious if he hung a MATCHMAKING IN PROGRESS sign on his chest.

“Haven’t seen you much lately,” Sam said to Kate.

“I’ve been...busy.”

“Busy avoiding me.” He took a sip of the beer, then slid the bottle to the side. “You want to tell me why? Why you flirt with me, then stop? Why you kiss me, then act like I have the bubonic plague? Why you ran out on me all those years ago and never even said sorry?”

There. The words were out. He’d waited all this time to say them. He’d told himself it was because he was being a nice guy, trying not to rock the boat, but truth was, he didn’t want to hear the answer.

She let out a long breath, then sat back against the chair. “I was scared, Sam. It was like we went from zero to sixty in a few months. The last thing I wanted to do was stay in this town and settle down. And that was all you talked about. Getting your medical degree, coming back here, starting a practice. Getting a house with a white picket fence and a dog and a yard.”

“I thought you wanted that, too.” How many times had she laid on a blanket with him while the stars twinkled above them and said she wanted nothing more than to stay in his arms forever?

“I wanted...” She bit her lip, “a change. I thought marriage would be it, but then when it became a reality, it scared the pants off of me. Still does, to be honest. So I left.”

“And now you’re back. But you still have one foot out the door, don’t you?”

Tears shimmered in her eyes and she looked away. “Sam, I can’t do this.”

He got to his feet and tossed a couple of bills onto the table. “If you’d stop running long enough, Kate, maybe you’d find that staying in one place isn’t as bad as it seems.”

CHAPTER FIVE—February

Five unseasonably warm days in a row had been enough time for Kate to take down the Christmas lights and get in three good heart-pounding runs. But it hadn't been enough time to get Sam out of her system.

His words back at the bar still nagged in the back of her mind. *If you'd stop running long enough, Kate, maybe you'd find that staying in one place isn't as bad as it seems.*

Stay still. Settle down. Become the picture of domesticity. It was the same thing he'd asked of her all those years ago, with a ring and a date. She'd run then, and as winter began to ease its grip and Mimi returned to health, Kate wanted to run now, too, far from Brightview and all the questions she'd managed to avoid for years.

Instead she pounded the pavement, logging a solid three miles. True to its small town form, the neighbors waved and greeted her as she jogged past. It was like being at a class reunion.

She rounded the corner of Maple Street, turning east onto Oak, when she spied a familiar form heading in her direction. Sam, running at an easy pace. Above a pair of thick jersey shorts, he had on a long-sleeved shirt that molded to his body and outlined every inch of his chest, his arms. She slowed her pace as he neared, but her pulse sped up at the sight of him, fit, healthy, sexy. Her hands flexed at her side, imagining what his chest and shoulders would feel like beneath her palm, how his body would feel against hers.

It would feel amazing. That was one thing she'd never forgotten. And despite everything, she wanted him still. Wanted him in a way that went bone-deep.

He grinned. “You run?”

She parked her fists on her hips and took a few deep breaths. “I started a couple years ago. It’s a great stress reliever.”

“I started during residency for the same reason.” He thumbed toward the park across the street. “Want to put in a mile together?”

“That’ll get people talking.”

He chuckled. “Since when has the girl who got caught skinny dipping in Mavis Bertram’s pool ever cared what people say?”

“Hey, you were the one who dared me to do it.”

“Back in my younger, wilder days. Now I’m an upstanding citizen.” He slid a glance in her direction. “What about you?”

“I’m a little more responsible. Not much.” She grinned.

“The tiger still has her stripes?”

“Definitely.” Though she hadn’t been able to find that side of herself lately, and hadn’t been trying too hard, either. She’d become domesticated, with her days following one another in a dependable pattern, three square meals, a regular bedtime, no wild parties or regrettable decisions. Well, except for the kissing Sam decisions. Those, she regretted.

Didn’t she?

Her phone dinged, and she tugged it out of her pocket to look at the text. Her steps slowed. Beside her, Sam slowed, too, until the two of them were standing on the park path. She read the message, and tried to work up some enthusiasm. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? “My editor has an assignment for me. It starts on Monday.”

“You going to take it?”

“A girl’s gotta pay for her impractical sports car somehow.” She added a grin, but it seemed to hurt her face. What was wrong with her? Normally, she would have hopped on the first plane out of here. Now, she looked at the text and felt...sad. Because she knew once she jumped on that work train, she’d be gone for weeks, months. One assignment would feed into another, a crazy schedule she used to love.

“Your grandma’s doing much better now. So if you need to go, you should go, Kate. Everyone here will be fine.” Meaning not just Mimi, but him. He’d be fine without her, just as he had been before.

When she’d broken his heart, and told herself it was all for the best.

She raised her gaze to his. “It’s my job, Sam.”

“And mine is to stay here.” He drew in a deep breath, then gestured toward the path. “I’m going to finish my run. I’m sure you have packing to do. Or something.”

She could hear the hurt in Sam’s voice, and as much as she wanted to take it away, she didn’t. Because doing so would mean making promises she couldn’t make. She’d made that mistake once before and ended up letting him down. So she watched him go, her heart heavy, then she headed back to her grandmother’s house.

“Well, aren’t you up bright and early? And out running, too?” Mimi said as Kate came into the kitchen. “I remember when I used to have to drag you out of bed to go to school.”

Kate laughed. “That’s because I didn’t like school much. Too many rules.”

“Oh, there were days when you couldn’t wait to get to school.” Mimi grinned and handed Kate a cup of fresh-brewed coffee. “Days when you fussed over your hair and makeup for hours before you left. Because Sam was waiting on the other side of those doors.”

“Yeah, well, that was then,” Kate said, keeping her gaze on her coffee.

Except, things hadn't really changed much, had they? Hadn't she done her hair and put on a little makeup before her run? Opted for a new pair of shorts and a pretty blue long-sleeved top instead of her usual cut-off sweats? Because a part of her had hoped she'd run into Sam.

She was a mess. She used to know what she wanted. Now, she was just confused.

Mimi took a seat at the small round maple table, and gestured to Kate to take the opposite chair. She cupped her hands around her mug, and leveled a steady gaze on her granddaughter. "You've been here so long, I'm getting used to having you around."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that, Mimi." Kate drew in a breath. "My editor texted me this morning. He has a great opportunity for me. There's this new tour group taking scuba tours of the submerged section of the Great Wall of China. It's a great opportunity for me to get a cover story."

"Sounds perfect. Right up your alley."

"It is. It's a really great opportunity." Kate held her mug, but didn't drink.

"You said that. Three times." Mimi's hand covered Kate's, a soft palm that acted like a balm to Kate's scattered nerves. "If you want to go, then go. But if you don't..."

"Of course I want to go. It's my job. My career." Yet she hadn't replied to her editor. Hadn't booked a flight. Hadn't done a thing that would get her back to the job and career she used to love. Four months ago, Kate would have jumped on this chance.

"Seems to me there are a few ties binding you to this place," Mimi said. "Ties you're reluctant to break."

Kate smiled at her grandmother. "You know I hate saying goodbye to you. You're pretty much my whole family."

“And you’re mine.” Mimi sighed. “Your parents are the ones who missed out on an incredible daughter, you know.”

“I know. And I’m glad that Dad is back in my life, but Mom...” Kate shrugged. Ten years ago, her father had made a concerted effort to see his daughter more often, to check in with weekly phone calls and regular emails. He lived in northern Florida, and every time Kate was home, she stopped by to see him. But her mother still lived everywhere and nowhere, a nomad who pursued whatever dream tickled her fancy. “She’s never been dependable.”

“And so you turned into someone who runs before you get too connected.” Mimi put up a finger to ward off Kate’s protest. “You’ve worn that armor for years, Katie-girl. You were always such a brave little girl, refusing to cry, refusing to let your mother see how much it hurt when she’d bring you here and take off again.”

Kate bit her lip, and cursed the tears that sprang to her eyes. “I...I didn’t want to count on her.”

“And is that why you don’t want anyone counting on you? Because you’re afraid of turning into her and letting someone else down?”

Kate toyed with the white ceramic mug. The table’s surface blurred in her vision. “I’m just not good at the whole stay around thing.”

“You’ve been here for me all winter. And for Sam.”

Kate let out a gust. “Sam doesn’t need me. He’s only here to check on you.”

“Something he could do during office appointments. Instead, he’s been paying housecalls for months.” Mimi leaned over the table. “Because he wants to see you. Why do you think that is?”

“What we had before is done,” Kate said. Lied, really. Because she’d kissed him. That didn’t spell done, not in any language. Nor did the way her body and heart reacted every time she saw him. There were unresolved feelings between them, she knew it, he knew it, heck, half the town knew it. The question was what to do about it. A part of her wanted to try again, to dip a toe in the deep relationship waters, but the other part still worried she’d panic and drown.

Mimi reached for the creamer and poured some low-fat half and half into her coffee. “He had a tough time after you left, you know. He was a mess for a long time. Then he went off to medical school, and married the first woman he dated. It was a disaster from the start. He never got over you, Katie-girl. And I suspect you never got over him either.”

The damage Kate had left in her wake was too great, she knew. She’d hurt him, the way she’d run out of here with no explanation except for her engagement ring on a table. How could he forgive that? How could she even ask him to? *That* was what had kept her from getting close to him. She’d danced around those questions for months.

Because she truly believed they were all wrong for each other? Or because she was terrified?

“Even if we did work that out,” Kate said, “we’re still two very different people.”

“I don’t know. I think you’re more the same than you think.” Mimi got to her feet and put a hand on Kate’s shoulder. “The only way to find out is to jump off that bridge, Katie.”

Kate lingered in the kitchen for a long time, until her coffee grew cold and the sun’s rays began to tip from morning to afternoon. Then she got to her feet, and did what she’d always done. Booked a flight and got out of town.

CHAPTER SIX—March

“You are one miserable man to be around,” Matt said to his brother. They’d been outside in Sam’s driveway, shooting hoops for the last few minutes. The air still held winter’s bite, despite a forecast for warmer days ahead. “But, that makes you easy to beat.” He laughed, then charged past Sam and dunked the ball into the weather-beaten hoop.

“Sorry. Just a lot on my mind.” He bent over, put his hands up, a defensive position against Matt’s dribble.

“Like Kate?” Ball to the right, left, back, a fancy between the legs transfer, then dribble, dribble.

Sam scoffed. “Am I that transparent?”

“You always have been when it comes to her. The question is,” a pause, a shoot, a miss, “what are you going to do about it?”

Sam recovered the ball, bouncing it with his right hand, circling to the half-court line created by a natural crack in the concrete. “Me? Nothing. She’s the one that left town. Again.”

“For her job, dude. Not to elope in Vegas or anything. And I hear she’s back, as of this morning. You know,” Matt scooped in, stole the ball, then started the fancy dribbling again, “for someone who’s so good at telling other people what to do, you stink at giving yourself advice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Physician, heal thyself. Quit blaming that breakup on Kate. It takes two to tango, you know.”

“What are you, the cliché master?”

Matt grinned, then charged past Sam again and did an easy layup. “Nope. The one-on-one master. Beat you. Again.” He gave Sam a high five, then headed for his car. “Rematch tomorrow?”

Sam nodded, then waved and watched Matt leave. He stayed in his driveway a good long time, while clouds moved in and the wind kicked up, replaying the conversation with his brother.

Kate was back. The question was, did he go and see her and try again, or give up on the foolish idea of being with her once and for all?

###

Kate had been at Mimi’s house for all of an hour—just long enough to shower, change and unpack from the long drive from Miami—before she was back in her car again. She headed south, her destination as familiar as the back of her hand.

She pulled into the lot, shut off the car and got out. The low, squat building still stood the same as before, a little more battered, a little more beaten, white paint peeling, red roof faded to pink. The giant wooden ice cream cone that said Cozy Cone in hand-painted letters leaned a little too far to the right. A trio of picnic tables sat to one side, under a tattered red and white awning, looking sad and lonely and desperate for summer.

Kate bundled up her coat against the chill in the air, then sat down on the hard wooden bench. Her palm slid over the pressure treated surface of the table, then stopped when her fingers skated across four familiar letters and a well-worn shape.

“It’s still there?”

She jumped and turned at the sound of Sam’s voice. A bubble of joy burst inside her, but she tamped it down. It had been a month since she’d last seen him, but he seemed to look even sexier than before, wearing jeans and work boots and his dark green parka, the hood back, as always. “Yup. Seems some things around here never change.”

He took a seat on the opposite side of the table. “That’s the good thing about small towns. You can depend on them.”

“Unlike scared fiancés who run out of town before the I do?”

He arched a brow. Didn’t say anything.

What did she expect him to say, really? She averted her gaze and traced the heart shape carved into the wood, then let her finger slide over the letters made nearly a decade ago by Sam’s pocket knife. They’d been sharing a single ice cream cone, giddy and foolish and in love, when he’d told her he wanted something permanent that told the world how he felt. And there, inside the heart in choppy block letters:

K.W. + S.T.

“Do you remember when you drew this?” she asked.

“It was the night I asked you to the prom. We’d been dating three months—“

“Four.”

He grinned. “You’re right. Four. Four wild months, if I remember right.”

She laughed. “We got into a lot of trouble. But we had a lot of fun.”

“We did indeed.” His voice had a sad edge to it. For a moment, neither of them said anything. A brisk breeze started up, whipping against their skin, as if winter wanted to prove the

forecasters wrong and show it still held a tight grip on Brightview. Sam let out a breath, then got to his feet. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re back, Kate.”

“Don’t go, Sam. Stay. Please.” She’d never said those words to another person in her life. He hesitated, and the old familiar fears rushed back, crowding her, tightening in her chest. She fought the urge to run. If she did that now, she knew she always would. And Kate Weaver was tired, dog tired, of running.

He lowered back onto the bench. “Why are you here, Kate?”

She took a moment to find the words. She’d been a writer for nearly a decade, yet when it came to face-to-face conversation, the words she wanted got clogged in her throat. “I went to Egypt. Then on to Morocco. Spent a few days in Belgium, and a week in Spain. I’ve been all over the world, Sam. And I haven’t found what I was looking for.” She let out a deep breath, then crossed her hands on the table, palms resting on that heart. A long time ago, Sam had carved those letters and told her he’d always love her. She wasn’t sure if that was still true, but she knew she couldn’t leave without finding out for sure. “I have spent the better part of my life going from place to place, because I thought it was easier than staying put. And you know what? It’s harder. Emptier. I spent five months here, and it was the best five months of my life.”

Tentative hope shone in his eyes, then he blinked and it was gone. “There’s nothing like small town life. It has its own charm.”

She nodded. “It’s nice to be in a place where everyone knows you. Where you know what’s around the corner and what’s down the street. Where you can count on the Cozy Cone having the same picnic tables year after year, the same ones where you once told the man you loved that you would never leave.”

His jaw hardened. “And yet, you did.”

“I’m sorry I ran out on you. All I could see was...” She started to say walls, then realized that wasn’t it at all. She’d spent her life saying she was afraid of being boxed in when that was far from the truth. “All I could see was you...leaving. I couldn’t take a chance on that happening.”

And there it was. The truth. Kate Weaver had never been afraid of rules or expectations. What truly terrified her was being alone. Ironic, for a woman who had run from a marriage proposal, run from her family, and chosen a solitary career. She’d chosen everything she could to perpetuate the very thing she hated.

Sam reached across the table and took her hands in his own. “I was never going to leave you, Kate. I loved you.”

He’d said loved, not love. Tears rushed to the back of her eyes and burned. Maybe she was too late. Maybe she’d hurt him too much. Maybe—

Maybe she should take a chance anyway. Because she’d lived with the what-ifs long enough.

“You’re not the only one who ran, Kate,” he said. “I could have gone after you. I even went to Mimi to find out where you were. But I never got in my car, I never hopped on a plane. I let you leave. Because I was as scared as you. And jealous as hell that you had the courage to leave.”

“I thought you loved it here.”

“I do. But when I proposed to you all those years ago, I wanted nothing more than to stay in my comfort zone. You were the one who was always making me step outside it. It wasn’t until after you left that I headed for Chicago, went to med school, got married, divorced, learned a lot

of lessons. When I came back to town, it was because I *wanted* to, not because I was looking for that comfort zone anymore.”

“And now?”

“Now I want it all.” He cocked a grin at her. “The little bit of wild and the comfort of home.”

She hoped that meant her, but she hesitated from asking. What if he said no? What if she’d read him wrong? “You were right about me, Sam. The whole time I was here taking care of my grandmother, I had one foot out the door. I thought the minute I got back on the road, I’d be fine. Happy again. Instead, I was miserable, because I realized I’d done it again. Put up a wall when really, I wanted a fence.”

His brows knitted in confusion. “A fence?”

“Well, I have to keep it challenging somehow.” She grinned, then parted her hands to reveal the carved heart again. It had stood the test of time, the harsh treatment of Mother Nature. And for the first time in her life, Kate believed she and Sam could, too. “I packed up my apartment in Miami and moved back here. For good.”

“You did? Why?”

“Because three days ago, I was standing in an open-air market in Spain, watching a man serenade his girlfriend, and instead of writing about the experience like I was supposed to, like I had a hundred times before, I was thinking how much I missed the man I loved, and how much I wanted to share that moment with him. Share *all* those moments with him.”

“The man you...love?”

Back in Spain, Kate had finally admitted the truth to herself about what kind of life she wanted. Not the one she’d carved out, but the one she’d left behind. Then she’d done the next

brave thing and made the changes that would open the door to that life, all without knowing if Sam would want her back or if any of it would work out. She was done running away, and done keeping her feelings locked up.

She took in a deep breath, then took the biggest risk of all. “I love you, Sam. I always have. I always will.” Tears spilled over, out of her heart, her soul, and for the first time in forever, Kate Weaver cried. “There’s no place in the world I’d rather be than wherever you are.”

A grin stuttered, then spread across his face, lighting in his blue eyes. “Oh, Kate, I love you, too.” In an instant, he was on the other side of the table, gathering her into his arms. She fit against him perfectly, as if she’d been made for that space. His breath was warm against her cheek, his embrace tight on her frame. He drew back, and cupped her jaw. “You’re really here to stay?”

“Yup. I was hoping that offer still stood.”

“What offer?”

“The one to marry me.” The words hung in the brisk March air for a long moment.

Then Sam fished in his pocket and pulled out a familiar ring. The round-cut diamond caught a glint of sunlight and sparkled between them. “It was never off the table.”

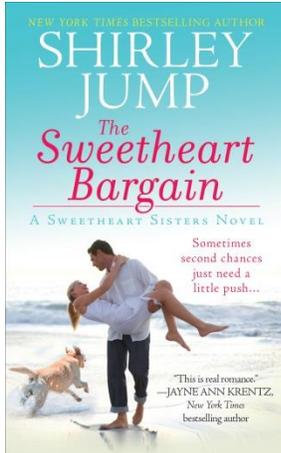
Hope and joy exploded inside her chest. She put out her hand, and Sam slid the gold band onto her finger. This time, the ring felt solid, comfortable. Not terrifying at all. She closed her hand around his. “You kept it? All these years?”

“I told you, Kate. I still believe in miracles.”

The clouds above them began to move across the sky, making room for the sun to cast a warm glow onto the world below. Winter’s cold melted away, and for the first time in months, Kate caught the scent of spring in the air. Clean, fresh, hopeful.

“I do too, Sam. I do, too,” she whispered, then leaned into Sam and kissed him.

A New Series from Shirley Jump! The Sweetheart Sisters



Excerpt from *The Sweetheart Bargain*

Olivia Linscott made the most insane decision of her life in less time than it took to microwave a burrito. Before she could think twice, or worse, hesitate, she'd packed what remained of her belongings into her car, loaded up on gas and 5-Hour Energy drinks, then ditched her life in Massachusetts and headed south.

All because a lawyer had shown up on her doorstep with a mysterious will, a crinkled photograph, and a butterfly necklace. Olivia's heritage, reduced to a nine-by-twelve manila envelope.

Now, forty-eight hours later, she was in sunshine instead of snow, catching the scent of ocean instead of exhaust. Outside the Toyota's window, the Florida coastline curved like a lazy snake, an undulating ribbon of blue-green punctuated by soaring seagulls and cresting whitecaps. It was a million miles away—and a good burst of salty, fresh air—from the choked, congested streets of Boston, where cars played Frogger with each other and dodged potholes the size of small elephants.

Down here, Olivia could breathe, really breathe, in more ways than one.

She pressed the speed-dial button on her cell and waited for the call to connect. When her mother answered with her familiar chirpy hello, a wave of homesickness crashed over Olivia, and for a second she had the urge to turn around, to head back to everything familiar.

“Olivia! I've been waiting for you to call,” her mother said. “How far are you now?”

“Only another mile or so to go.” Olivia nestled the cell against her ear. “I've been ready

to crawl out of my skin for the last five miles, just dying to get there already. Maybe I should pull a Boston and put the pedal to the metal the rest of the way.”

“Olivia Jean, if you do, I’ll fly down there and take away your car keys,” her mother said, with the same tone she’d used when Olivia had been little and trying to raid the cookie jar before dinner. “Even if you are over thirty.”

Olivia laughed. “Okay, okay. I’ll keep it to twenty miles over the speed limit, like any respectable Massachusetts driver.” On her left, a half-dozen bright, happy shops lined a wide boardwalk, across the street from the beach. A white-and-pink awning fronted the Rescue Bay Ice Cream Stand, a quaint little place with umbrella-covered tables and a giant plastic cow sporting a bright pink bow. An elderly couple enjoying swirled cones—one chocolate, one vanilla—raised a hand in greeting as Olivia drove past. She returned an awkward wave, just as a man walking his dog raised his hand in greeting and a shopkeeper sweeping the walk did the same. The instant welcoming atmosphere gave Olivia pause. It wasn’t that Bostonians were frigid, exactly, but rather less overt in being neighborly.

There was something . . . warm about this town, something Olivia had liked the second she arrived. “Ma, you should see this place. It’s like another planet.”

“Well, we’re still stuck on planet Arctic here. It’s too darn cold to even look out the window, never mind go anywhere.” Anna Linscott was no doubt bundled up by the fireplace in her Back Bay townhome. Olivia could see her now, sitting in the threadbare rose-patterned armchair Anna had owned since the day she got married, the blue-and-green afghan Nana Linscott had crocheted draped across her lap. “There was a ring around the moon last night. A storm is coming. I’m thinking three inches, maybe four.”

“It’s January and you’re in New England. There’s always a snowstorm coming.”

Anna laughed. “True. But if I see a ladybug—”

“And she lands on your hand, spring is on its way.” Olivia grinned at her mother’s superstitious weather predicting. Half the time, Anna was more accurate than the guys at Channel 7, so maybe there was something to her folklore. Olivia glanced out the window again, drawing in another deep breath of balmy air. “This is bliss. Palm trees and beaches and—”

“Alligators and geckos.”

“They won’t bother you if you don’t bother them.” Olivia fingered the picture taped to her dash. A perfect Florida bungalow, painted in sherbet colors of pale yellow and soft salmon, trimmed in white, nestled in the middle of a neat yard, flanked by rows of blooming annuals and fruit-laden citrus trees. “Mom, do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“I think you have to do this.” Anna sighed, a mixture of support and worry. “Then maybe you’ll finally have the answers you need, and deserve.”

Olivia’s finger danced across the picture again. Would she? All her life, Olivia had felt like a lock without the right key, a puzzle missing a piece. Now, maybe here, she’d find what she was searching for.

Herself.

And if not, she’d at least get one hell of a tan.

“Darn,” her mother said. “Your dad’s beeping in. I sent him to the grocery store. By himself.”

Olivia laughed. “Say no more. I’ll hold.” She glanced again at the photo on the dash, then up at the GPS. Distance remaining: 0.9 miles. Butterflies danced in her stomach.

When the lawyer had rung her doorbell last week, Olivia insisted he must have had the wrong address, the wrong Olivia Linscott, and the wrong will in his hands. Did she have any

relatives in Florida, he'd asked, and she'd said no. Everyone in her little family lived in Boston, and always had. They'd practically come over on the Mayflower, as Aunt Bessie said. No one moved away, except crazy cousin George, who went to

Alaska to marry an Inuit woman he'd met at a Trekkie convention. Olivia had seen the pictures of their Enterprise-themed wedding. Quite inventive, considering they'd held it outdoors. In February.

Then the lawyer had asked if she knew the identity of her biological mother, and Olivia's world flipped upside down. Her mother. The woman who had given birth, then walked out of Brigham and Women's Hospital, leaving her newborn daughter behind.

Her birth mother.

A woman she'd never met.

A woman who'd never contacted her, never done so much as send a Christmas card.

A woman who had left her property in Florida, a porcelain necklace, and not much else. There'd been no letter, no explanations. No idea of who Bridget Tuttle had been.

Or why she'd abandoned her baby.

All her life, Olivia had wanted to know why. She'd toyed with searching for her biological mother on the Internet, then drawn back at the last minute, afraid the answers might not be ones she wanted to hear. And now, that door to a personal connection, a face-to-face, was closed.

Forever.

She swallowed hard and pressed a finger to the photo again. Her only link to Bridget Tuttle remained in this piece of property and the town of Rescue Bay. Someone here had to have known her mother and would be able to fill in the blanks that now gaped like black holes.

Maybe this desperate need to know stemmed from all the changes over the last year. Maybe it was finally having a tangible reminder of someone who had been, up till now, a mythical figure. A ghost, really.

Olivia had prodded the lawyer for more information, but he'd said he was merely the messenger, a Boston attorney hired by the Florida probate, and knew less than she did. He handed her the deed, along with the picture of the house and an envelope with the necklace, then wished her good luck.

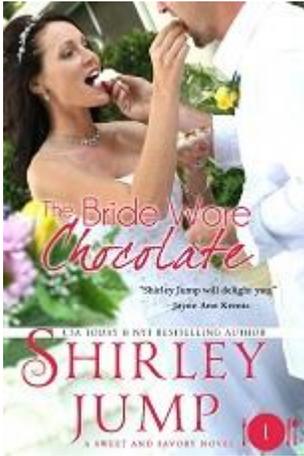
She'd stood there for a long time, staring at that picture, before making the most impulsive decision of her life. Just . . . go.

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**Free Excerpt from
Shirley Jump's Sweet and Savory Series**

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Excerpt from *The Bride Wore Chocolate*



Maria's Favorite Hangover Remedy

1 banana, chopped

1/2 container chocolate syrup

3 ounces milk

3 ounces rum

2 Tylenol, crushed

Dim the lights and for god's sake, don't open the blinds. Muffle the blender motor with a towel, then blend all ingredients until as frothy as a virgin's prom gown. Don't bother with a glass; drink straight from the damned pitcher.

Repeat as necessary. Then get to a mall and a Krispy Kreme store for further remedial help.

CHAPTER TWO

The gnomes inside Candace's head were having a fiesta worthy of Cinco de Mayo, complete with the flashing red jalapeno lights and a band of hammers pounding out the rhythm to "Celebration" in double-time. The sound waved and rolled with her stomach, increasing in volume every time she moved a fraction of an inch in the bed.

A snippet of advice from Grandma Woodrow floated through her mind. Candace latched onto it with every bit of consciousness she could muster. Put one foot on the floor and you'll get off the hangover Tilt-A-Whirl.

Candace wasn't sure she could feel her foot, never mind move it.

She pressed her palms against her throbbing temples. Willing the headache away didn't work. Shutting her eyes tighter only made the pounding intensify. She moaned and rolled over, clutching the pillow beside her.

The sheet came loose when she moved and cool air tickled against her skin. Down her spine. Along her belly. Past her legs.

Not against pajamas of any kind.

Candace froze and did a mental inventory. Exquisitely soft bed linens. No gurgle of the fish tank she had in her bedroom. No Trifecta snoring at the end of the bed. No traffic sounds outside the window.

Without opening her eyes, she ran a tentative hand down her body. She felt a bra. Panties.

Nothing else.

She bolted from the bed, tripping over some shoes and landing in a heap on the floor. Scrambling to a sitting position, she glanced wildly around the room. A room she didn't recognize. Her heart thudded in her throat, threatening to suffocate her.

The gnomes kept up their steady hammering. Maybe they were building a condominium in there. Candace closed her eyes again, but that only intensified her vertigo. She hoped, no prayed, that she was at a friend's apartment. Yes, that was it. She was at Maria's. Who had...

Candace scrambled for an explanation...

...gone on a major redecorating spree in the last twelve hours.

Yeah. That works. Doesn't it?

A pair of Levi 505s lay in a crumpled heap beside her. Jeans she'd never seen before. Jeans that definitely didn't belong to her. Or a woman, for that matter.

Okay. Take a breath. Try to remember.

Maria. Rebecca. The can't-find-a-dress pity party at the restaurant. A few drinks. Okay, a lot of drinks. And a man.

Oh God, a man. She was pretty damned sure his name wasn't Barry, either.

Candace bit her lip to keep from screaming. Nothing else existed in her memory-no name, no conclusion to the night and especially no memory of how she'd ended up in someone else's bed wearing nothing more than her underwear.

She clung to the sheet, the one sane thing she had in Wonderland. She cradled her head with her other hand, praying for the throbbing to stop so the fog could clear. "Oh Lord, why can't I remember?"

"Because you had too much to drink," a deep voice called from nearby.

Unless Maria had gotten a sex-change operation last night, that was definitely not her best friend's voice.

Candace ducked down beside the bed like a SEAL commando and peered over the edge for a glimpse of who had spoken.

The blinds were still drawn, but a tiny sliver of sunlight peeked through the slits. Most of the bedroom remained in shadow. Beside the massive four-poster sat a polished mahogany nightstand holding an empty bottle of German beer and a half-dozen books. Plenty of expensive furniture, but no body to match the voice.

She'd imagined this. A total tequila hallucination.

Behind her, a door creaked open. Candace spun around. Light spilled into the room from a bathroom ten feet away.

A man stood in front of a pedestal sink, shaving.

That was so not Maria.

Candace patted the hardwood floor. No luck. No magic rabbit hole to swallow her up so she wouldn't have to deal with this man and anything that might have happened between them last night.

Oh God anything that might have happened?

An ocean of nausea rolled through her stomach, threatening to deposit whatever was left in her stomach on the Oriental rug.

Who was he? And why was she in his bedroom, doing a private Victoria's Secret runway event? The obvious answer was too horrifying for Candace to consider.

He was definitely not the man she had promised to marry in twenty-one days. No, if today was Sunday, twenty days.

Her mouth went dry as she considered the possibilities of who he might be. Serial rapist. Psychotic killer. Deranged kidnapper. Right-wing Republican.

Using the bed as a crutch, she pulled herself to a standing position, ignoring the sudden blast of pain in her head and fighting with the sheet that had tangled around her feet. With a solid yank, she tugged it out from under her and promptly lost her balance. She tumbled to the floor again, losing her grip on the cloth.

She staggered to her feet and prayed the light-colored sheet covered her. It didn't. A quick glance down confirmed the outline of black lace and a Wonder Bra.

She didn't even want to think about how-or with whose hands-she had gotten undressed.

Her navy sundress was only a few feet away, draped over the arm of a wingback chair. Candace bent to grab it. But she didn't move fast enough.

"Nice view," said a voice from behind her.

She spun around, at the same time wrapping the sheet tighter.

He held nearly a foot's height advantage over her. His hair, still wet from the shower, was slicked back in a dark wave. Deep blue eyes that appeared almost black in the half-light of the room studied her with clear amusement.

Her gaze traveled down, past his bare muscular chest, following the V of dark hairs to the waistband of a pair of checkered silk boxer shorts. The satiny material stopped mid-thigh along his lean, defined and-okay, she had to admit it-inordinately interesting legs. She jerked her attention back to his face.

He's gorgeous.

He grinned.

And he knows it.

In her experience, which admittedly could fit on the head of a pin and still have room left over, men with that self-satisfied grin used their looks like shark hunters used chum. Bait, hook, use up the good parts, then toss the useless carcass to the seagulls.

"I take it you don't remember anything that happened last night?" He wiped his chin with a hand towel, then sent it sailing into a corner hamper.

She shook her head, wishing she were anywhere but here, standing in front of a short-haired Adrian Paul doppelganger wearing little more than 200 count cotton.

He took a step closer, fingering the tip of the sheet. Even his eyes were rich, flecked with tiny bits of gold among the sapphire. He grinned again, either as a tease or a suggestion, Candace didn't know. Didn't want to know. "You had a wonderful time, I can assure you."

The room swayed. Her stomach lurched. Candace smacked his hand away. "That's a matter of opinion."

“Perhaps.” He sat on the bed and began to pull on the jeans. “In my opinion, we enjoyed ourselves fully.”

She ignored the implications, hoping that’s all they were. “But...where...I mean, how...”

“How did you get here?” he finished for her.

She nodded, her cheeks warming.

“In my car, of course.”

“And who are you?”

He grinned. “Think of me as your knight in shining armor.”

Candace let out a few curses even Grandma had never heard. “I mean, what is your name?”

“Last night, you were content to call me Romeo.” A smirk played at his lips, displaying a crescent indent on the right side of his smile. He had a dimple. That caused a whole ‘nother kind of lurch in her stomach. “I kind of liked it.”

“I’m not kidding. Who are you?”

He rubbed his chin, ignoring her question. “Of course, you also called me Loverboy. Oh, and-”

Candace held up her hand. “Stop! Just stop. I get the idea. Forget I even asked.” She drew in a deep breath and knew she had to ask the question, even if she didn’t want to know the answer. “Did I, I mean, did we...” Her gaze dropped to the floor. Amidst the plush fibers of the carpet, she saw her shiny red toenails. The pedicure she’d gotten because Barry had this thing with her toes. She gulped. “Did anything happen?”

“Well, that depends on how you define the word ‘anything’.”

“Since I’m not packing a dictionary in my back pocket, I’d say anything beyond a handshake.”

He got to his feet, placing him closer, within touching distance. “I was a gentleman, more or less. Your reputation, if you had a good one,” he added with a grin, “is still intact.”

She didn’t rise to the bait. “Who undressed me?”

His gaze swept the room. “There are only two people in this apartment and one of them was a little too drunk last night to do, I mean undo, anything.”

Heat flooded her face when his gaze settled on the sheet. She clutched it tighter. “I’d like to get dressed now, please.”

“Go right ahead.” He zipped his fly. The vrrpp sound seemed as loud as a bullhorn in the heavy quiet.

“Would you mind leaving the room?”

“It’s my room,” he pointed out. “I don’t have to leave.”

He obviously wasn’t going to make this easy for her. With a frustrated huff, she reached for her dress. He reached out at the same time, his hands closing over the garment, and over her fingers, before she could get away.

Electricity jolted through her. She stumbled back, trying not to stare at his bare chest, trying desperately not to think about what it would feel like against hers. Had he held her last night? Had he curled himself around her, draped a leg over her hips and pressed his-

She shook her head. The gnomes drummed those traitorous thoughts right out of her head. She was engaged. Three weeks from married. She’d leave thoughts like that for the nights when Barry was snoring like a chainsaw and the only sex she could get came with batteries included.

“I’m sure you’re enjoying this little game of cat and mouse-” Her hand darted out for the dress. He whisked it behind his back. All she got for her efforts was a smug grin from him and a handful of air. “-but I need to leave. My fiancé expected me hours ago.”

A lie, but not a bad one. The only people waiting for her had four paws-well, some had three-and whiskers. Barry was away this weekend.

“Do you always do what people expect you to do?”

“Of course.” She held out a hand. “My clothes?”

He leaned closer. “You’ve never once done something spontaneous, wild and unexpected?” He glanced down at her white-knuckled grip on the sheet. “Except for last night, of course,” he added with a mischievous smile.

“If you had so much as a shred of decency, you’d give me my dress and leave me alone.”

“If I were any less of a gentleman, you wouldn’t be wearing anything at all right now.”

He rubbed the back of his head. “And I wouldn’t have a stiff neck from sleeping on my couch.”

Relief surged through her. Nothing happened. Thank God and Jose Cuervo. But then, a teeny, tiny part of her felt disappointed. Must be the hangover. It was ridiculous to think she’d actually want to do anything so stupid as a one-night stand. Besides the twenty percent chance of ending up pregnant or with an STD, there was the Barry element to consider.

Oh God, Barry. She needed to leave.

Candace put out her hand again. “My dress?”

But he didn’t hand it over. Instead, he placed it beside him on the bed, out of her immediate reach. “Not so fast. We didn’t get to know each other very well last night.”

“I don’t want to get to know you. I’m getting married in three weeks and it’s a little late for me to invite any new ‘friends.’ So, let’s just write last night off as a mistake and go our separate ways.”

“You keep telling me you’re engaged and yet, here you are with me. Is going home with men you don’t know something you do regularly?”

She glared at him. How could Maria and Rebecca have left her in the clutches of this maniac? “No, it’s not. I have no idea how I ended up here. Besides, you’re not my type.”

“Oh, really. Just what is your type?”

“A man who’s responsible, mature and practical.” The words rattled out of her mouth before she could stop them.

He mocked a yawn. “In other words, boring.” He stood and moved closer. “What about sexy, romantic, humorous?” He took another step. Only a few inches and a Waverly separated them. She could smell the faint scent of his cologne, a mixture of woods and man that sent shivers down her spine.

He reached out and drew the back of his hand slowly down her cheek, tracing the line of her jaw. Her body temperature leapt twenty degrees. For a minute, the room went fuzzy.

“Trouble can be so much fun sometimes. Don’t you agree?”

“I-I-I wouldn’t know,” she stammered. A few Tylenol, an ice pack and a hot bath would set her straight. This hangover had to be a king-size Whopper. Otherwise, Candace knew a man like him would never make her react like a kangaroo in heat.

And yet, at the same time, she got the distinct feeling she was lying to herself.

His hand stayed along her jaw, one finger beneath her chin. Candace didn’t pull away; didn’t want to pull away. Searing electricity hummed within her, a feeling so foreign it seemed to

overtake all five of her senses—a self-made mutiny. She stood there, unable to move, to think, to do anything but stare up into the stranger’s sapphire eyes.

“Last night, you told me you were tired of being bored,” he said, his voice dropping into the lower quadrants.

She swallowed. “I did?”

He nodded, slow, deliberate. “You said you wanted a man who could show you what you’d been missing.” His finger tugged her chin closer, inches from his. He leaned down and his breath tickled along her lips.

The room disappeared. Her heart stopped beating; her breath stopped coming. A tingling, twisting yearning brewed within her, making her feel she’d collapse in a heap at his feet if he stopped touching her.

Don’t. Don’t stop. Don’t do this. Don’t stop. Don’t...

“Do you still want to know?”

She opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. Instead, she felt her head, which seemed disconnected from her body and her brain, give a short, quick nod. A hot gush of anticipation rushed through her veins.

Don’t. Oh, yes. Do.

He closed the gap between them, his lips a breath away from hers. “Good,” he murmured, the word sounding sexier than anything she’d ever heard. And then, the wait was over, his mouth was on hers, hot and insistent, tugging at her to respond, her resistance evaporating in an instant.

He didn’t just kiss her—he orchestrated a concert against her lips, his mouth at first tender, seeking, then hot and demanding. She leaned closer, gripping at him, the sheet forgotten, her life

outside this room a distant memory. His body was hard-harder in some places than others-and that only fueled what she felt, adding kerosene to the flame.

His tongue slipped into her mouth and she responded the same, grasping and seeking, and not even knowing why. All she wanted was more. More of whatever magic he seemed to possess in his touch.

And then, just as quickly, he ended the kiss, pulling back and inserting distance between them. Candace stood there, stunned and mute. Her entire body pulsed like one giant hormone.

“Does he ever kiss you that way?”

She blinked. “Who?”

“Bob Boring.” She stood there, drawing a blank. “Your fiancé.”

“Oh.” Candace swallowed and forced herself back to Planet Earth. Engaged women did not kiss other men. They also didn’t go home with strange men and wake up in their underwear, but for now, she was just going to deal with the kissing part. Bad idea, bad thing to do-

But oh-so-good for those few seconds.

No, she wasn’t going to think about that. This had been an exceedingly bad choice. She would forget about it, move on, and marry Bob B-

Barry. His name was Barry.

“Sure, he’s kissed me like that before.”

“Uh huh. Of course he has.” The man grinned. His hand dropped away and his demeanor changed back into the teasing one she’d seen earlier.

Teasing she could deal with. Kisses that imprinted themselves on her lips like permanent tattoos, well-

“Have you ever read ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?’”

What? Had he just said what she thought? After what happened a moment ago? The man was crazy. Clearly a flag-waving conservative. “I’m standing here in my underwear and you want to discuss poetry?”

He reached over and withdrew the third book from the pile on the nightstand. “Read it sometime,” he told her, tossing her the thin volume. “You might realize what you’ll be missing if you marry Mr. Boring.”

Instinctively, she put out her hands to catch the book. The sheet dropped to the floor, landing in a puddle of cream.

To her surprise, Romeo/Loverboy averted his eyes, glancing up at the ceiling instead of at her underwear. She clutched the book in front of her with one hand and bent to grab the sheet off the floor with the other. “For your information,” she continued as if nothing happened, as if that kiss wasn’t still burned into her brain, as if she still had her wits about her and hadn’t lost them somewhere between the Oriental carpet and the Casablanca fan, “I’m not missing anything. Barry happens to be a wonderful man.”

“If he’s so wonderful, why are you here with me?”

Candace wasn’t about to answer that question. Not for him and certainly not for herself. She wasn’t going to ask herself why she’d kissed him back, why her instincts were screaming at her to drag him back to the bed and see what happened when they went beyond mouths.

Instead, she yanked her dress off the bed. When she turned on her heel, the sheet tangled around her ankles and she lost her balance. Again.

Before she could topple to the floor, a strong arm looped around her waist. He released her an instant later, but not before a blazing heat shot through her midsection, undoing a good portion of

her resolve. Her gaze traveled back down to his legs. Damn. Those were an unfair advantage over her hormones.

She blamed it on too many Highlander episodes and Jose's morning-after effect.

"Bathroom's over there, in case you forgot." He pointed to the room on her left, giving her a knowing smirk.

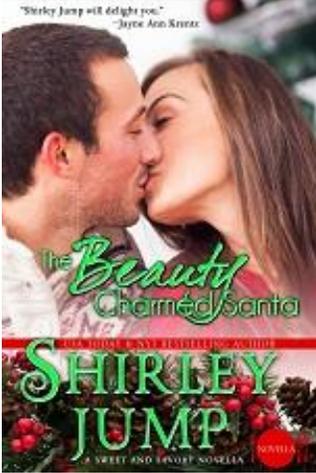
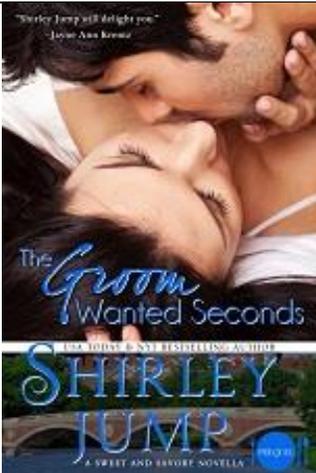
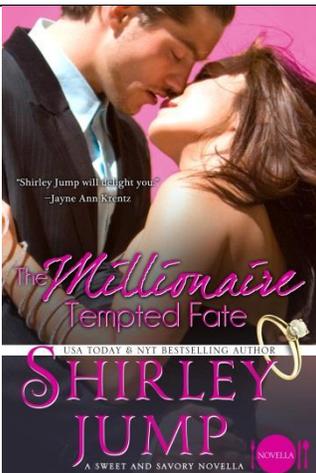
Oh God, he'd caught her looking. Red heat crept up her neck. "Oh, I noticed everything in the room," she said. "I just didn't pay attention to the things that didn't interest me." She passed a quick, dismissing glance over his torso.

There. That should set him straight.

Then she tossed her hair over her shoulder and walked across the room with as much aplomb as was possible for a woman wearing bed linens.

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