

## Chapter 10

Bradley continued to stare at me, as though trying to read my mind. His next words startled me. "I'm sorry I scared you, Anna. I didn't mean to." His voice contained a hint of sadness.

"Scared me? What do you mean?" What was he talking about? He didn't scare me. Or did he?

"Yes, I scared you. I can see it in your eyes. I scared you by showing you too soon, just how attracted I am to you. And I am extremely attracted to you. I scared you by kissing you too soon for you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted you to know that I nd you irresistible. That I want to pursue you. I can't stand the thought of you being engaged to someone else. It has set off every jealous bone in my body."

I returned his gaze, stunned to silence by his softly spoken words.

"Red, I should have known you were not ready for a new relationship. You're still coming to grips with what you saw and heard yesterday. But I wanted you to know that no matter what that scum Adam Rivers says and thinks, you are a beautiful, smart, amazing, desirable woman. It's taking all my willpower to keep my hands and mouth off of you. So please, don't shut me out. Let me be here for you. Let me help you."

His earnest pleas penetrated the protective walls I was building around my heart. Every word of his removed one of the bricks and tossed it to the side. He was right. I was afraid. I still am. Knowing Adam didn't really care for me wasn't what hurt. That's ne, because I had realized I didn't really care for him, either. Losing him was no great loss. A relief to be honest.

No, what hurt was knowing that my father and half-sister were cruel enough to want me dead. That blood meant nothing to them in the face of their greed. My ability to trust was sorely bruised and battered. He is right, I am afraid, and I have every reason to be. I now have no family, at least none I want to claim.

I could feel his gaze, and his attention laser focused on me. Could I risk trusting a man I had met less than a week ago? I mean, yes, I knew him long ago, but I didn't really know him then. Just trusted him instinctively. Could I, should I even grant him the same instinctive trust now we are adults?

"Anna, before you make up your mind, I have to tell you this: you may see me do things which make you question my motives. You may want to run away. Or punch me in the face." He smirked momentarily before getting serious again. "I won't tell you why I will do some of those things. In fact I can't tell you why due to certain circumstances. What I can tell you is that everything that I do going forward is to protect you. Help you and shield you. I know it's a lot to ask, but I do ask that you trust me."

"Wow. That's a huge ask." I responded. "You have to understand that from my perspective, it sounds like you're asking me to give you a free pass to treat me like crap. I'm just getting out of a relationship that I now know was toxic to the core. And now it sounds like you're asking me to put myself into a similar situation. Can you see how messed up that is?"

"I can see that, Red. I understand fully that you have every reason to tell me to go to hell. But let me put it this way. I had known your grandparents for years. They liked and trusted me completely. They believed in me enough to put me through university, to fund my start-up company, to help me build everything I have today. They trusted me and my father to look after their greatest treasures. To protect their greatest treasures. And we are doing just that."

"Their greatest treasures? I'm not sure what you are referring to with that statement. As far as I know, the things they treasured are currently stored in the vaults at the Graystone International building in Toronto." This conversation just kept getting stranger the longer it went on.

"Red, I can't tell you anything more, other than I am asking you to consider how much your grandparents trusted me. I am asking for you to extend that same level of trust to me. I can tell you that by the end of this year, four months, you will know the reason why. Just, please, for now, trust that I mean you no harm. Quite the opposite."

Needing some time on my own to think, I excused myself to the bathroom. After relieving myself and freshening up a bit, I stood, leaning against the door. Like I have always done when a hard decision had to be made, I closed my eyes, and breathed deeply to center myself. I brought the image of them to the forefront of my mind. The two of them in the oce of their home in Toronto, sitting beside each other on the loveseat offering me words of comfort at the loss of my mother.

That was three weeks after I had met with the lawyers in Halifax, and endured a horrid meeting with my father, my half-sister and my father's wife, to which all of whom I took an instant dislike. I had recounted the events of that meeting with my grandparents, and asked for their advice on how to handle those people and the situation.

They didn't give me long speeches, nor did they bash my father, much as he deserved it. No, they said something that is now woven into my very soul. 'Trust your gut instinct. Don't think, don't reason, don't try to talk yourself into, or out of something. Trust your gut. It will never steer you wrong.'

So now, in this moment, I cleared my mind of all doubts, questions, and preconceived ideas, emptying out every emotion I could. And I allowed my instinctive, survival part of my being speak. Two words that would affect my future came to mind. Trust him.

I opened my eyes and looked at my reection in the mirror. Good or bad, the decision was made. I would trust him. I would allow him to run his game his way. If what he said is true, then in four months on New Year's Eve, I would know what he couldn't now tell me. I made my way back to my seat which was facing his.

"Bradley, I will trust you. But with a priviso of my own. We will maintain a business relationship, and work on building a friendship. As you mentioned yesterday, I need to completely end things with Adam. That won't happen for at least two months based on our current plans." A look of relief, and hope chased across his face.

But it turned to dissapointment when I continued. "On top of that, there are other things in play that you are aware of, but can't tell me about. Until that is resolved, I will not allow myself to pursue a romantic relationship with you, or anyone else. What you choose to do is up to you, I have no right to ask you to restrict yourself in any way."

He nodded, acknowledging he heard and understood what I was saying, before he replied. "And after the end of the year? What then? Will you allow me to date you?"

"I want to say yes, but realistically, it's going to depend on the next four months. I mean, what if I discover you're an axe murderer? What if I nd out you're already married with kids? Or even worse, what if you're a Momma's boy?" I gave a wry grin at that last one, even though it would be a deal breaker for me. Nothing worse than a non-supportive spouse that allows their mother to control their lives.

"Much as I want to speed up that timeline, I understand your hesitation. I can assure you, I have not ever murdered an axe, nor anything else for that matter." That elicited a chuckle from me. "I can assure you I am not married, nor do I have any children. And my mother is a lovely woman, who is far to busy keeping my father in line to have time to interfere in my life."

"Okay then. When we step off this plane, we have a business partnership, and will work on a friendship." I reached out my hand to shake his in a businessman's agreement.

He took my hand, suddenly pulled me forward and onto his lap, then proceeded to kiss me silly. I was so taken off guard that my natural response was to kiss him back. Passionately. And in spite of what I had just said, I couldn't hold back. I couldn't get enough of his kisses. And it seemed he couldn't get enough of mine.

Reluctantly, he gently placed me back in my seat. "That has to do me for four months. I had to make it memorable."