

## Chapter One

The most important part of marriage: always respect the unspoken rules.

Unfortunately, sometimes those rules are so unspoken that they're just. . .forgotten.

Sitting across from Jake at our weekly Friday night date night spot, I feel like I've definitely forgotten something. He's staring at the tabletop, his hands splayed on it like he's studying them. My husband is rarely this quiet. Not unless he has a double bacon burger in his mouth, and our order hasn't arrived yet.

"What's wrong?" I finally ask, dreading the answer. I adjust myself in the slightly-cracked plastic seating in our usual booth.

Jake looks up to meet my eyes, and his are clouded. Conflicted, it looks like.

I give a little laugh, or at least try to, but it comes out more like a sickly cough. "You're scaring me," I tell him.

He reaches his hands across the table and clasps mine. If he isn't dying of cancer, I might just kill him for all the suspense. "Jake. . ."

My stomach lurches as his chest rises and falls with a heavy sigh. "I have something to say, and you're not going to like it."

Well, that's ominous and not at all reassuring. Our date nights are usually not this tense. More like the opposite after twenty years together. We enjoy our routines, and this has been one of them for as long as we've been an *us*. It's always been peaceful. A nice night out to catch up on the business of the week, what with work for both of us, school for the teenagers, and all the other minutia of life.

I squeeze his hand in mine. He might be torturing me with the suspense of it all, but I'll still support him. It's how we've always done things. "Hurry up and tell me so I can forgive you quicker."

I expect him to crack a smile but he doesn't. Instead, he lets out another long sigh. "Work laid me off. Effective today."

"Oh, honey, I—

He stops me with a long stare. "That's not the worst of it."

Jake drags a hand through his hair and blows air from his lips. "I was upset. I was, you know," he glances at me, his eyes begging for some kind of understanding. "You know how I shut down when bad things happen. I left the office and went to that pizza shop I like. The one you hate because it's too—

"Too greasy," I finish. Shock renders my brain useless. I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's not like Jake to run off and do something. Not like him to not tell me as soon as something serious like getting fired happens either.

"Right." Jake's throat moves as he swallows. "Anyway, I went there and got a slice. Sat alone for an hour or so because I was the only one there. And then when I went to get a drink refill, the usual guy wasn't there. It was a woman."

I suck in a breath, feeling like my throat is restricted suddenly.

"Not, not like that," he rushes to say. "She was old, looked kind of like my Granny Kay in that one Halloween picture, remember?"

I don't say anything. My heart is too busy regulating to speak. I just nod.

"Well, I went to get my soda and the lady had a little sack thing. She said it was a good luck charm and asked if I wanted to buy it."

I blink back at my husband. “And did you?”

“She opened the sack and inside was this round ball. Like a crystal but shinier. Kind of glittery.” His face goes red around the edges. “It sounds stupid, but at the time, I thought it was cool. I almost believed it would be good luck.”

“Okay, so you bought it.”

Jake leans back in the booth and covers his face with both hands. “I bought it,” he answers, slightly muffled. “For two thousand dollars.”

“That’s the money for our kitchen renovation.” I gasp.

Our waiter drops a basket of fries between us and slides each of us our burger orders. We thank her and stay silent until she’s turned away from our booth.

“I’m sorry.”

Grabbing a handful of hot, salty fries, I choose to chew first, talk later.

“Talk to me. I know it was stupid.”

I lean my elbows on the table. We used to save our pennies for trips around the country. Quick road trips staying in

“Do I at least get to see the world’s most expensive lucky charm? Does it have stainless steel appliances like my kitchen was supposed to?”

He knows better than to laugh, but Jake’s grim-lined mouth falters a little. He fishes around in the pocket of his work slacks. He comes back with a small leather drawstring pouch. It clunks as he sets it on the table in front of me.

Carefully, I slip my hand into the pouch, grasping a cool, smooth object. I pull the ball out to inspect closer. Jake makes a grunting noise. “It’s nice, right?”

Ignoring that, I balance the ball in my palm, torn between the urge to toss it at my husband's head and let him have his overly expensive consolation prize. Sounds like it's been a day.

I close my fingers around it and sigh, reach over to drop it back in its pouch. But the second my fist covers the ball, it sparks.

Jake's mouth falls open and mine probably does too. I'm too focused on the little lightning ball to notice. My skin prickles, warm to the touch, and that's enough for me.

"Hurry," I say, gesturing to the pouch.

Jake opens it wide and holds it out over the table, and I drop the ball inside. It's no longer sparking, but Jake and I stare at each other anyway.