



MAGA HAT ROMANCE BOOK 2

# ALMOST A FAMILY



LIBERTY ADAMS

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**Almost A Family**

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## DEDICATION

This series is dedicated to MAGA Patriots everywhere.



## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

For friends, family, fellow writers,  
critics and coaches who helped me.  
Thank you. And for President Trump,  
whose MAGA movement inspired this series.



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## CHAPTER ONE

The patriotic vibe of the singles dance aboard the Royal Pacific MAGA Express cruise ship rivaled any Fourth of July celebration. Red, white and blue buntings and rope lights hung from the rafters, interspersed with American flags. In one corner, partygoers lined up for selfies with life-sized, cardboard cutouts of Uncle Sam, the president, and the first lady. All the scene lacked was a fife and drum corps.

Tucked in a lounge chair beneath a huge American flag and wearing her own version of Americana—a festive sheath splashed with red, white and blue sequins—Allie Parker Morgan sipped a Diet Coke and surveyed the goings on. Lee Greenwood’s ‘Proud to be an American’ played over the sound system. There was less of a meat-market atmosphere than she’d expected. After her second Diet Coke and no seasickness, Allie decided she’d taken herself too seriously. She must be sure to thank her mom and dad when she returned to the stateroom. They’d pushed her out the door, literally, to attend tonight’s gathering.

“Don’t dance, then, just watch,” they said. “And oh, Allie, it’s okay to take off your wedding rings.” Reluctantly, Allie left them

behind for the first time since she and Patrick were married six years ago.

On the dance floor, people gathered behind the instructors giving lessons in line dancing to the song ‘Achy Breaky Heart.’ Intrigued, Allie watched closely, longing to join in. Line dances were a good way to be part of the action without getting close. So, when a tall guy with California, tanned good looks introduced himself as Brad Keegan and asked her for a dance, she accepted. It was perfect to break the ice after six years away from the dating scene. But Brad kept his hand on her the whole time, pressing too close for Allie’s comfort. When he asked her to stay on the dance floor after the song, she declined and went back to her seat and ordered another diet Coke.

Several songs later, she saw Brad approach for a second ask. The song was Kenny Chesney’s ‘You Had me at Hello.’ No way would she slow dance with this guy. It was time to leave. She looked Brad in the eye, ready to turn him down. But just then a second man crossed Brad’s path, heading straight for Allie. Neither one saw the other—they were both intent on her.

The other man held out his hand to her. His smile and his twinkly eyes put her at ease. He seemed to be sharing a joke with her, as though he did not take this singles scene seriously, and neither should she. His friendly and open manner was appealing. The dance floor lay in the direction of the exit anyway, so why not dance her way out? Humor won. Allie smiled big and deliberately looked past Brad, right at the new guy. She rose from her seat and extended her hand in greeting. At that moment, Brad Keegan threw an elbow and knocked the second guy off balance. The new guy crashed into Allie. Allie went down.

As a glittering heap of red, white and blue, her first thought was to tug down her dress to reclaim her modesty. Her second thought was that public humiliation replaced her once-confident poise, as a group of partiers gathered to watch Allie’s ankle swell. The pain quickly overwhelmed any worry of modesty or embarrassment. There was simply no way to exit this scene gracefully. She grabbed

her ankle and clenched her teeth. The man she had decided to dance with moved swiftly to her side.

“Can I check your injury?” he said. “I’m Matt Wilson, one of the onboard physicians.”

Allie didn’t care what his name was, but the word physician immediately calmed her. She nodded her head and watched her ankle. It had started to throb against the leather straps.

Reluctantly, she drew away her hands so he could examine her foot. She didn’t want to be touched. Anywhere, but especially there.

“Do you have feeling in your foot?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Can you move your toes?”

“A little.” It hurt, but she was able to move them back and forth.

“What’s your pain level now from one to ten?” he said.

She looked at him. “Seven.”

He began to examine her lower leg with his hands, softly probing. “Any pain up here?” He palpated gently just below her knee. He was looking into her face now. Cool professionalism had replaced the friendly twinkle.

Allie shook her head. “None.”

The doctor who called himself Matt next placed his hand at the ball of her foot.

“Can you push against me?”

She pushed carefully. “Ouch.” It hurt to push down.

Next, he placed his hand on top of her foot. “Can you pull back?”

She tried. She could barely move the foot backwards. The straps of her shoe were biting into the swollen flesh. But it seemed to satisfy him.

He looked around the room as though he were making a decision. The whole disco was silent, the music had stopped, and the lights were turned up to a glaring level. The crowd was still gaping.

“I can’t treat you here,” he said. “But the clinic is less than a minute away. I can get us there quick if I carry you. Okay?”

Allie didn't care how it happened, she just wanted out of there, now. Matt's assessment had taken all of one minute. Those steady eyes again. Clinical, but assured.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go."

He squatted down low and placed her arm around his neck. "Hang on," he said. Allie felt herself hoisted off the dance floor. Several feet away stood Brad, a wounded expression on his face. One arm was outstretched in a lame gesture of failed rescue.

"I'll take it from here." The doctor whose arms now cradled her cut into Allie's thoughts. He directed the command at Brad Keegan.

Reproachful. Not friendly at all.

Supreme confidence, without a doubt.

A take-charge guy.

She took a cautious peek at her rescuer. His actions were as purposeful as his voice as he carried her through the dance floor, past the Keno and blackjack machines and out the disco entrance. The pulsating music resumed, fading as they headed toward the elevators. He stopped at the doors and cocked his head at the buttons.

"Down, please." He rotated his body so Allie could reach the buttons.

The doors opened. He carried her into the elevator. "Second floor, please." Praying this guy really was a physician and not some serial killer in a floating murder scene, Allie pushed the button.

He said nothing more. When they reached the clinic door, he keyed in a code on the touchpad. The table where he set her down was hard and cold. Her ankle hurt. A lot. Holding it still for images didn't help. He gave her a cold pack for the swelling while he looked at the pictures of her foot on the computer screen.

## CHAPTER TWO

“No breaks.” Dr. Matt Wilson turned back from the shadowed image. He carefully lifted the ice pack to study the bruised mass that was once her ankle. “But it’s a bad sprain.”

His lips twitched into a half smile. The friendliness returned. “So, what’d he look like?”

What kind of question was that? Allie was in no mood for laughs. She, and her ankle, were silently begging for pain relief. Now.

“What’d *who* look like?”

“The guy who did this to you.” Dr. Wilson tipped his head toward her foot. “I may have to defend your honor.”

“I fell off my shoes,” she said. He hadn’t asked, but it was all her fuzzy, pain-laced brain could think to say.

Matt Wilson laughed good-naturedly before reaching down.

“Sorry,” he said. “You mean these?” Her sandals dangled at the ends of his fingertips.

Allie took them in silence. How, and when, had they come off her feet? These were her wedding shoes, worn only once, before tonight. Strappy, silver platforms, covered in glitter. Once

beautiful and stylish. She hadn't taken a single misstep in them at her wedding. And the only reason she brought them on this trip was because her parents insisted she bring something dressy. These shoes, and this dress, also out of style, were the only items of apparel she owned that qualified as dressy. Plus, the festive red, white and blue print fit the cruise's patriotic theme.

Now, the shoes just reminded her of Patrick, who was gone forever. A tear rolled from one eye, followed by another, and another. And she couldn't stop. After four years of widowhood, she should be past tears.

He handed her a tissue and grabbed a bandage from the supply cabinet. "I can give you a shot of pain killer right now, if you want," he said. "That's got to hurt."

She dabbed the wet from her cheeks. "No," she said, "Nothing stronger than ibuprofen. My daughter might wake up. She's only four."

"Your choice." He shrugged as he wound the bandage around the ball of her foot.

Allie gritted her teeth as he wrapped, irritated by this guy's bedside manner. There was pain, and lots of it, but that wasn't the reason for the tears. It was the memories triggered by the wedding shoes.

Her short-term recall kicked in—Matt Wilson colliding with her, her landing on the disco floor with an excruciating ankle; an elevator ride down several decks to the ship's clinic below, clinging to a stranger who was carrying her in his arms. Oh, dear. She needed a do-over of the past thirty minutes of her life.

He paused in his wrapping to smile again into her face, now certain to be smeared with mascara. He had the same look of 'don't take this too seriously' on his face as in the disco, when he almost asked her to dance.

"Don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"What he looked like?" He was still chuckling. The joke was on her, apparently.

The last thing Allie felt like right now was engaging in small talk. She wanted to tell him to shut up. But how could she be rude? He was clearly trying to cheer her up. His care of her had been immediate and assured. Allie decided to play along.

Matt looked squarely at her, not moving, not changing expression. That gaze was too steady for Allie's comfort. As though he'd wait all night for his answer. Maybe all ER docs were taught to probe for information. At least, the docs aboard cruise ships. MAGA-themed cruise ships. At the very least, his intense gaze distracted her from the pain.

"Let's see." She sighed and eyeballed him. "Six feet, a little more..." Pause. "Medium brown hair, thick, a little wave, yeah. Green eyes?" She tried to keep from smiling. His handsomeness made her falter, along with the memory of hanging her arms around this guy's neck. Shamelessly. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure." Matt Wilson paused in his work and shifted his focus from Allie's foot back to her face.

"If you're treating me down here, why were you up there?"

"Asking you to dance?" He smiled to himself and renewed his work. "We have two physicians and four nurses on board. When I'm not working, I get to play passenger. As long as I behave myself, of course." He finished the wrap then grabbed a walking boot. "I always behave myself."

"Of course," she said. If she had known up there what she knew down here about this smiling physician with the dry humor, she wouldn't have accepted his offer to dance in the first place. Still, the absurd convenience of it amazed her.

He fit the boot to her lower leg and fastened the Velcro straps. His movements were smooth and confident. She had the feeling this guy could perform these tasks in his sleep.

"I'd glue you to a wheelchair," he said, "to keep your foot elevated. But chasing a four-year-old requires mobility."

He dropped the comic doctor mask. Sympathy with a smile shone out from his eyes. "Do you have any help while you're on board?"

“My mother and father.” She tossed the tissue into a nearby wastebasket.

Matt Wilson nodded approvingly. “Who better than Mom and Dad at a time like this?”

## CHAPTER THREE

The rise and fall of the bump in Catherine's bed assured Allie that all was well with her daughter. Dwayne and Donna scurried over in silence. The alarm on their faces as they looked at Dr. Matt pushing Allie in the wheelchair took the place of their voices. Dwayne ushered them through the door that adjoined their stateroom with the one shared by Allie and Catherine.

"What's going on?" Donna looked from Allie to Matt Wilson.

Allie held up her hand. "I'm fine," she whispered. She wished she could cry. Allie pointed vaguely upward in Doc's direction without looking.

"Matt Wilson, meet my mother and father, Dwayne and Donna Parker. Mom, Dad, meet Matt Wilson. Dance partner, ship's doctor, rescuer...of damsels...in distress."

Matt Wilson wheeled Allie inside her parents' stateroom, then leaned over to shake hands.

"Matt Wilson," he said. "Guilty as charged, but I'll let Allie tell you the story Her version is way better than mine. I'm just the orderly."

Allie saw nothing funny in any of this. Maybe it was the pain, but Matt Wilson's entire person was getting on her nerves. His cheerfulness throughout this embarrassing ordeal was lost on her, but then he wasn't the one with a four-year-old and a freshly sprained ankle. He locked the brake on the wheelchair and helped Allie to her crutches. She hobbled to the nearest armchair, then sank into it.

"I'm supposed to make sure all is well with the patient." He turned clinical, at last. "At least, as well as can be. She's to keep off her leg as much as possible," he said. "Difficult, I know, with a four-year-old?"

Dwayne and Donna stood there, nodding at Doc.

"She doesn't want any pain meds, but I've prescribed 800 mg. strength Ibuprofen. She will need it." He placed a child-proof bottle of pills on a nearby table, then pulled over a low stool and carefully arranged Allie's injured leg on top.

"Remember to keep it elevated. Gravity is not our friend. Ice, of course." He turned to Dwayne and Donna, still stupefied. "Here's my card, Mr. and Mrs. Parker." He gave them one, then leaned down to Allie. The cheerfulness had left the doctor's face. He looked genuinely sympathetic.

"Here, Allie. Call me if you need anything." The grin again. "I'm not going anywhere."

When the door shut, Donna pointed to Allie's foot. "What happened?"

"I fell off my shoes."

She glared at her dad, doubled over and laughing in silence. Dr. Matt Wilson had laughed at her, as well. He did treat her quickly, even tenderly, but Allie was simply in no mood. No mood.

"I'll be fine in a few days. After this cruise is over." She hoped. And her parents would have to give up free time to take care of her. And Catherine. Some vacation. Well, Allie would do her parental duty with her daughter no matter what. She would not allow this accident to spoil Dwayne and Donna's fun.

It occurred to her that she had left her shoes at the clinic. They were one of her few physical reminders of Patrick and happier days. Allie really did start to cry. Now she would have to return to the clinic to retrieve them. That meant facing Matt Wilson again. Matt Wilson, the guy who seemed to think everything she did and said was so amusing. She hoped a nurse would be there instead.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Donna handed Allie a Kleenex and followed it with a glass of chilled water. She sipped. It revived her. Allie stopped crying. She pushed herself up, but her father's firm hand anchored her in the chair.

"What else can we get for you? You're to keep off that leg. Remember what doc said? We're going to see to it that you follow his advice."

Pain, fatigue, and disappointment made her sit down again. What had she done? It was so important to be independent, even though she really wasn't. Allie's life hadn't turned out the way she planned, which affected her parents' lives. The day she received the news of Patrick's death they had taken her in, no questions asked. Their sacrifice for Catherine's sake was never in question.

For a moment she was aware of the movement of the ship. A touch of nausea came, then subsided. She took a breath and smiled up at her father's familiar blue eyes and silver hair.

"Jammies?" She was a kid again. "Robe?"

Dwayne smiled and patted her hand. "Sure, sweetie. I'll do ya one better."

He came back holding her pjs, robe and her favorite fuzzy slippers. “You can wear one, anyway. The other will have to wait.”

“Dear, I think Allie should take our room, at least for tonight.” It was Donna. “And we can skip the late-night bingo tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Mother, please.”

“Wait.” Dwayne shook his head. “Mom’s right. You need rest. Your foot needs rest. We’ll sleep in your room. Catherine will be fine. If she needs anything, we can get it for her. Honey, who better than your mom and dad at a time like this?”

*Hmmm.* Doctor Wilson had said almost the same thing not 30 minutes ago. It annoyed her to hear it again. Why were her thoughts about him so strong? And why did it even make her think of him, anyway?

## CHAPTER FIVE

“**H**old still, baby, I’m almost finished.” True to her obedient nature, Catherine froze in place while Allie brushed the fine silk of Catherine’s very dark curls away from her eyes, then clipped them with a delicate barrette. The curls framed her face and showed off her deep blue eyes.

Catherine smiled out from the deck chair as she snuggled next to her mother, clutching her blanket and a worn Raggedy Ann. The doll was Allie’s—she had kept it even though it wasn’t one of her favorites. When she gave it to Catherine, it was still almost new. Catherine loved it as much as her favorite pink plaid woven blankie, both of which she clutched, snuggled together in the deck chair, with a sunny sky overhead and a brisk breeze off the water.

Allie held a Mother Goose ABC book between them and read the simple rhymes while Catherine traced the oversized ABCs with her finger. As she had so often in the past four years, Allie tried to picture Patrick and Catherine together. Would he sit still with her and read? Or would he pick her up and swing her high into the air to watch her laugh? It was getting harder to remember what he looked like, much less imagine how he would have aged

as Catherine grew older. She forced away the thought and finished reciting *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*.

Catherine turned to her as she always did and placed her thumbs and fingertips together. Allie did the same, and began to sing. Together they did the finger play, making the ‘climbed up the waterspout’ motions, the ‘washed the spider out’ motions, then back to the ‘climbed up the spout again’ to finish.

“Again,” Catherine said.

Allie laughed and the two of them set their hands in place, as always. But this time, Allie caught sight of Brad Keegan, the man she most wanted to avoid. His eye was trained on her, and the gleam in it told her he meant business. He was making a beeline for the empty deck chair next to the one she now occupied. Briefly, she wished for a copy of *In Style*, even *Guns ‘n Ammo*, to slap down, splayed out as a warning. ‘Taken,’ it would announce. No words required. She turned away to attend to Catherine, even though it was futile. Brad held out his hand to her. She did not offer hers back. He barely glanced at Catherine.

“Allie.” He looked down at her leg. “I’m awfully sorry about this. I guess I had a little too much alcohol.”

Brad paused, waiting expectantly for Allie’s reaction. Allie found Brad’s explanation distasteful. She was sorry she had ever danced with him in the first place.

“Thanks, Brad.” Allie shrugged. She didn’t know what else to say, except better to be shoved by Matt Wilson than dance with you? What she was thinking at the moment, though, was that Dwayne and Donna would be taking Catherine out trick or treating this year, while Allie stayed home to pass out the candy. And this was the first year Catherine was anticipating the holiday. Allie was even more excited about Halloween than Catherine.

“It’s a sprain. Could’ve been worse, right?” She forced herself to smile, to look him in the eye.

He looked over at Catherine, at last. “Who’s the little lady?” He said it as though Catherine were the last thing he wanted to see.

“Meet my daughter, Brad. This is Catherine.” She didn’t hold back the pride in her voice as she draped an arm around her daughter. A breeze blew up. Allie shivered.

Brad leaned over and held out his hand. “Hello, Catherine, I’m Brad.”

Catherine buried herself deeper into her blanket and peered with suspicion at this stranger who had spoiled her fun with her mom.

Brad sat down in the empty deck chair. “Listen, Allie, I’d like to make this up to you. How about dinner sometime? I’ll call you when your foot heals.”

Allie looked over at Catherine, whose eyes were starting to droop. “I’m afraid not, Brad. I don’t go on dates. I’ve got Catherine, work, school. I don’t even like to ask my parents to take care of her.”

She shook her head at Brad’s grim expression. She didn’t care if Brad Keegan, or any man for that matter, understood. She surveyed his surfer boy looks—bronzed skin, bleached hair. She wondered how he could spend so much time outside. She refrained from asking him what he did for a living.

He drew a card from his wallet. “Well, anytime you’d like, give me a call.”

Allie held up her hand and shook her head no. She would never want or need to talk to Brad Keegan again.

“I don’t think so, Brad.”

His face flushed as he put the card back into his wallet. “Okay, Allie. See you around.”

I hope not, she thought as he turned and walked away.

Allie had a daughter to raise. Romance must wait. When Catherine went away to college she’d think about marriage. For now, not one single minute could be sacrificed for Catherine’s sake. Any time Allie spent on the dating scene was time sacrificed to her daughter and Allie would never allow that to happen.

Next to her, Catherine’s breathing grew steady. Her little body went slack. Allie eased back into the chair and closed her eyes, soothed and revived by the fresh, sea air. For the first time since

she fell, the pain in her leg eased. Ahhhhh. She could get used to this. Just as she decided the cold sea air would drive her inside, she felt the drape of a blanket across her knees and thighs. She opened her eyes. It was Matt Wilson, dressed in running gear. His finger was held to his lips as he pointed to Catherine. Carefully, he arranged the blanket atop the sleeping child. He leaned in close to whisper.

“How’s the leg?”

“Better. Really.” She nodded, and couldn’t help but smile, even with Brad Keegan’s unwelcome visit. For some reason, this man didn’t carry the same threat level. In fact, she could detect not a bit of threat in Matt Wilson. Plus, he’d brought her a blanket just as she needed it. And, oh yes, fixed her leg good and proper last night.

But he hadn’t finished. She watched him take another blanket from the nearby chest and thought he might be joining her on the next chair, but no. He rolled it up instead, then carefully placed it under her calf. Better. Elevating her foot like that eased up the pressure.

“Fairy princess?” He looked at Catherine.

Allie shook her head and smiled. “Only for Halloween,” she said. She did not want to raise a spoiled girl. Patrick might have spoiled her, but with no Patrick around...

Matt Wilson sat sideways on the deck chair and leaned in. Catherine hadn’t stirred. “Princess costume, then?”

“That’s the only time.” In fact, she would dress Catherine as a princess this year. She looked at her leg. “But I’ll miss out on the fun this year.”

“Daddy takes her, then?”

“Daddy’s not around,” said Allie.

“Oh?” Matt Wilson raised his eyebrows, in question.

“He died,” said Allie. She gave no details of Patrick’s death. “My mother and father will take her. I get to pass out the candy.”

Allie sighed. “She’s really excited for this year, too. Just last week she was walking around the house, saying ‘trick or treat’ at every door.”

Matt Wilson laughed. “Ah, practicing for the big day. Smart girl. So, tell me, Miss Allie, mother of non-princess, Catherine, why a MAGA patriot cruise? Why not Disney?”

“The characters,” she said. “They scare her.”

“Yeah,” said Matt Wilson. “They must look like giant monsters to kids like her. So, instead, you settled for patriotic MAGA.”

“Exactly,” said Allie. “Plus, it fit everybody’s schedule, and Mom and Dad love this president. I’m really too busy for vacation but I couldn’t disappoint them. They do so much for me.”

“So,” said Dr. Matt Wilson, “what does Allie do that makes her so busy?” He rested his chin on his hands and waited for her to answer.

Allie wasn’t sure how to answer him. She did not particularly want to. Maybe the red flags from Brad Keegan were still waving. Matt Wilson had an engaging air about him, but she felt a strong inner resistance. There was no point in getting personal.

“Nursing school. Online.” She threw a quick glance at Catherine, glad to have a reason to cut this conversation short. “I’ll finish in May.”

“No dating, in other words.”

Allie shook her head. Brad Keegan was a cinch to turn down, but she almost felt regretful about seeing Matt Wilson slip away.

“No, Matt” she said. “I’m afraid it’s not possible. It’s too much time and emotional energy away from Catherine. It wouldn’t be right.” Then, Allie betrayed her resolve never to apologize for her complete commitment to parenting her daughter. “Thanks, but I’m sorry.”

Matt Wilson smiled. “Oh, I wasn’t talking about us.” He motioned his head in the direction Brad Keegan had taken. Allie looked, too. Brad was still moving down the deck, pausing to talk and look out over the water. He turned back to see Allie and Matt watching him, then ducked into a doorway and disappeared. “I meant him. The one who shoved me into you. I saw him talking to you just now but then he walked away. Didn’t look so happy.”

Allie flushed clear past her shoulders, embarrassed she'd made an assumption about Matt's intentions. Why had she even thought he was trying to ask her out? Her vow not to get involved in a relationship was a wall of sorts. It made her immune to male charms. And it was doubly embarrassing she wasn't the object of his attentions. Attraction. Desire. Whatever the word was, this conversation needed to end.

She drew the blanket away and slipped Mother Goose into her large tote. "I have to go inside. Thanks for taking care of my leg. I appreciate it. Really."

She shook Catherine awake and gently eased her onto her lap before covering them both back up with the blanket from the box on deck. Catherine clutched her pink blanket, the one Allie and Patrick had chosen together, and drew the Raggedy Ann up to her cheek. Blinking, she peeked out at Matt Wilson. He covered his face with his hands, then opened them, smiling. She smiled back then turned shyly into her mother's arms.

He fiddled with his watch. "I go on duty soon." He looked at her. "I'll be on call the rest of the trip. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

Allie slid Catherine from her lap. Matt helped her up, then handed her the crutches.

"So, I guess we'll be meeting again?"

"What?" Was that a question or a statement? How could she and Matt Wilson possibly have occasion to cross paths again?

"Thanksgiving," he said, then shrugged. "Sorry, I thought you would have heard. Your Dad and I bowled together today. We trounced the other guys." He laughed softly.

"Afterward, we got to talking. I mentioned I live in San Pedro. He invited me over when he heard I wasn't married. Actually, he invited me over first, then when he heard I wasn't married, he still wanted me to come."

He looked a little red-faced. It was almost appealing, except Allie had no desire to be appealed to. She had a feeling of being squeezed. She wanted to leave. Now.

“What can I say,” he said, and shrugged. “I never turn down free food.” He did not act as last night’s confident, smooth professional. Instead, he looked as though she might think ill of him for saying yes. “I guess I’ll get ready for work now. Enjoy the rest of your trip.”

He crouched down and gave Catherine a small wave. She waved back in return.

Allie slung the tote bag over her shoulder. Catherine walked alongside while she crutched.

So, her father had invited Matt Wilson over for Thanksgiving dinner! A complete stranger! What did it matter that he lived in San Pedro and made his living as an ER doc on a cruise ship? Dwayne hadn’t even consulted with her first. Allie didn’t know what her parents were up to, but whatever it was, she didn’t like it. They knew she was opposed to dating. And, she’d just told Matt Wilson the same thing. Plus, how could she face him with any dignity after he’d told her, practically point blank, she wasn’t his type?

Her parents must rescind the invitation. She did not care how eligible Dr. Wonderful happened to be. And Matt Wilson certainly fit the profile of wonderful. She recalled the scene at last night’s gathering. A ripple of energy had hung in the area where he’d been standing, a gaggle of female admirers nearby. He hadn’t noticed her, or so she thought. In fact, she’d been sipping her diet Coke, congratulating herself on not being seasick, when she saw him approach her. And then had come the fiasco with Brad Keegan. She owed Matt Wilson a debt of gratitude. He’d saved her from the attentions of Mr. Wrong.

And there could be just one reason a single guy would want to work on a cruise ship, right? Doctors were not immune to character flaws, and this guy made his living on a cruise ship—his life was one carefree, perennial vacation, complete with a rotating supply of women. He was simply not an acceptable guest to bring into the household.

In the stateroom, she made up nap space on the bed for Catherine and turned on a kid’s program. Then she keyed in her sister’s phone number.

“Sue, it’s me. Listen I want you to do me a favor.”

“Sure, Allie, what is it? Are you guys having fun?”

Allie didn’t want to get into the foot story just now. Her parents might come back any minute.

“Yeah, this is great. Listen, Sue, I want you to go online and check out this guy for me, okay? See what you can find out about him. His name’s Matt Wilson. He’s an ER doc that works for Royal Pacific Cruise Line, and he lives in San Pedro.”

“Sure, Allie, I can do that. But what’s this all about?”

“He and Dad have become friendly and I don’t like it.”

“What? You don’t want Dad to have friends?” Sue sounded impatient. “Look, Allie, I think you’re—”

“He invited him for Thanksgiving! I want to make sure he’s on the up and up.” Allie heard the door to her parents’ room open. “I can’t talk anymore. Call me when you have something.”

## CHAPTER SIX

“It’s very simple, dear,” said Donna. She hung up her jacket in the closet and closed the door to Allie’s room. “Matt and your Dad have become friends.”

Dwayne walked in, carrying a bucket of ice. “Yeah, we really kicked butt on the other guys at the bowling alley today.” He laughed and took a bottle of sparkling water from the bar. It opened with a soft hiss. He poured its contents into three ice-filled rocks glasses and topped off each one with a lime wedge.

“Let’s go out on the balcony,” he said. “It’s a beautiful day.”

“I’ve made it clear,” Allie said. They’d settled outside on chairs and were sipping their drinks. She couldn’t understand how they could be so *casual* about the whole thing. “No dating. No romance. And now this.”

“Allie.” Donna looked at her disapprovingly. “Do you think we would stoop to something like that? How did you even find out about this?”

“I saw Matt Wilson out on the deck.”

“Oh, what a nice man he is, and all alone, too.”

“That’s all very well and good, but isn’t that a little...off?” She couldn’t help herself. Her doubts about Matt Wilson tumbled out.

“I don’t know. What do you mean by that?”

“Well, a young doctor, who’s a bachelor? Guys like Matt Wilson get snatched up before they’re out of med school. If he’s this far along in life and still single, there’s gotta be an angle. Did you ask him why he’s still single?”

“No. I didn’t want to get that personal.”

“Inviting him into our home isn’t personal?”

“Cool it, girl.” Her dad was teasing, but his default admonishment he’d used when Allie was a kid always worked. Even though it irritated her, she hung her head a bit. Her Dad was right.

“Yeah, okay.”

Dwayne continued. “I invited his whole family. That’s when he asked if he could come stag because he wasn’t married or engaged. What was I going to do, take back the invitation? I’m inviting a new acquaintance to Thanksgiving dinner, not trying to fix you up. And I don’t know about you, but we choose our friends based on character, not marital status.”

“All right. Maybe he’s divorced. Or gay. You’re right, what does it matter?”

“It doesn’t. What matters is character, not how much money he makes or who he’s married to, or if he’s married at all.”

“So, Mom, how was the yoga class?” She wanted to get away from the subject of Matt Wilson. His presence permeated their family and this entire trip. And would, for the next several weeks of this ridiculous walking boot, and these crutches.

“Crowded. I skipped it and did the Tai Chi instead.” Donna smiled. “Even wheelchair folks were doing the upper body stretching and movement. Allie, you could get a bit of a workout, if you wanted. I’ll watch Catherine.”

“Maybe.” She’d think about it. “Did you guys eat?”

“Oh, yes,” said Donna. “They had a wonderful brunch set up in the dining room.”

“That reminds me.” Dwayne patted his belly. “I’m stuffed. You two stay here and yack all you want. Nap time for me.”

Allie needed to study, but she decided to sit instead and talk to her mother. They had little time at home to enjoy each other's company.

"Mom, have you read the headlines since we've been on the trip? I don't think I've seen a single one."

She felt a bit isolated on the ship in the middle of the sea. She relied on her parents for the news of the day. Allie was simply too busy to keep up. But she enjoyed their dinner table banter, a Parker family tradition. One she'd reluctantly given up shortly after she and Patrick began dating.

"No, I haven't seen a thing." Donna shook her head. "I can't imagine much has changed, though."

"You mean, fighting between the factions? The press and the Democrats trying to stymie the president? Like that?"

Donna nodded. "That's exactly what I mean. We'll find out when we get back home."

Elections had been hard to bear during her marriage. Politics were one of the few things about which she and Patrick disagreed. Even fought over. Eventually, they dropped discussion of current events entirely. The issue settled into an unspeakable void between them. Allie forbade Dwayne and Donna from talking about it when Patrick was present. A shame, because they all enjoyed discussing the news when Allie and Susan were in high school. The headlines. The tweets. The fake news. It all fell away after she and Patrick started dating. Allie even stopped voting.

Still, the marriage was strong. And it was easy, and fun, to substitute other things. Less stress, less worry about things neither of them could control. What mattered was that they shared the same traditional values and created a strong marriage with those values. And she never doubted that Patrick would be a wonderful father.

Dwayne appeared. "It's Catherine. She wants you."

Allie squeezed her mother's hand and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, mom. I'll think about that class."

Catherine lay silently on the bed, staring out at Allie. Her face was flushed from sleeping and her mouth was turned down into a pout.

“Hey, baby,” she said, sweeping Catherine into her embrace. Catherine let herself be taken into her mother’s arms. Sometimes, she woke up grouchy from a nap, so Allie sat quietly with her in the armchair. She didn’t want a meltdown in the dining room tonight.

She tried to organize her thoughts about her studies—reading, outlining, papers coming due and midterms week after next, but her mind kept drifting to Matt Wilson. It bothered her to no end that her father had invited him over for Thanksgiving. She didn’t want to see Matt Wilson again, as grateful to him as she was for his skill and care in fixing her sprained ankle.

Four years she’d spent re-ordering her life. Trying to placate the turmoil of motherhood, widowhood, part-time breadwinner, full-time student, and once again a child of her parents. Had she even mourned properly? Pouring all her energies into Catherine’s upbringing to the exclusion of all else might have seemed extreme to some, but not to Allie. What else was Allie to do when faced with the death of her husband and all that widowhood and single parenthood entailed?

She’d tallied up her priorities, placing Catherine at the top, and everything else below—job, school, future career. Because nothing mattered more to Allie and her parents, as well as Patrick’s parents, than the well-being of one girl child.

And because of this trip, she’d had to cancel out their monthly, all-day Sunday visit with Patrick’s mom and dad. They’d been reasonable, though disappointed, and Allie felt guilty. It was important that Catherine know her entire family, not just Dwayne, Donna, and Sue’s family. After this cruise, Halloween, holidays and final exams were next on the calendar.

And now, her mom and dad expected her to buck up for their Thanksgiving guest. They wanted her to be happy and gracious about it. Gracious she could manage, but happy was not going to happen. She wondered what Sue had found out about Matt

Wilson. She wanted something serious enough that her parents would have to disavow Matt's friendship and rescind the invitation. She wished for May and graduation to hurry up.

At last, Catherine climbed down from Allie's lap. She took her blanket and Raggedy Ann and pulled out the building blocks from the container of toys next to the bed. Allie sat down at the desk and took out a textbook to finish outlining the chapter she was reading. She'd have time to read and outline the next chapter after dinner tonight.

Donna poked her head in the door. "Time to get ready. We're going up for dinner in about ten minutes."

Allie sighed, and marked her place in the book. On the floor, Catherine played contentedly. Allie dressed her daughter in a cute, one-piece playsuit with long sleeves and a kid-friendly MAGA graphic, and a clean shirt for herself. She added a sweater for both of them. Nighttime was chilly and Allie didn't want either of them to catch cold.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

**N**ot since her second date with Patrick had Allie longed to hear the voice of one particular man, only this time for an entirely different reason. She hated having to call Matt Wilson. But what choice did she have?

“Matt Wilson.” Cool, professional, competent.

Allie’s breath caught in her throat. The words came out raspy. “Matt, it’s Allie. Catherine is sick.”

“What’s wrong.”

“She’s running a fever.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Allie held the phone in her hand. Beneath her touch, Catherine’s cheek flushed with heat. She’d heard about cruise ships returning early to port with a severe outbreak of illness among passengers. Maybe Catherine was a victim of such an illness. Norovirus, even hantavirus crossed her mind. At least now she didn’t have to worry about chasing down her energetic four-year-old—an impossibility with this boot encasing her lower leg. Why had she ever agreed to this trip in the first place? Why had she ever thought she could parent her daughter alone?

A knock came at the door. She wanted to faint with relief. Someone trustworthy, she hoped of impeccable character, was here to assume command. She could take the pressure off herself. Not have to make all the decisions. Her own face flamed recalling the security of Matt's arms as he carried her into the clinic two nights ago. She felt the same security now, entrusting Catherine to his care, and skill. She opened the door, hoping her secret relief didn't show.

"At your service." He smiled and held up a teddy bear. A trace of concern showed in his eyes.

Allie led him over to the bed.

"Hello, Catherine."

Catherine's blue eyes looked out from her flushed face and gave a limp wave. Matt Wilson crouched down and pushed the teddy bear slowly over to her. The girl reached out and drew the plush animal into a hug, then put it and her Raggedy Ann together under the covers with her.

"She ate fine last night and seemed happy at dinner." Allie sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Catherine's hand. "She woke up droopy this morning and wouldn't eat her pancakes. Won't explore the ship; won't play, or anything except lay down. I thought maybe motion sickness, but then the fever. So I took her temp about an hour ago."

Matt turned around. "Why didn't you call me then?"

She'd agonized over calling him. "I didn't want to bother you."

Matt shook his head. "For this, no. It's what I do. And we have a precious package here. Besides, on a ship like this, crowded, you can't be too careful."

Allie felt foolish. "I'm sorry."

Matt crouched down to Catherine's level to assess her. He spoke directly to her while Allie looked on. "Catherine, I'm Dr. Matt. Your mom says you don't feel good."

Catherine nodded. Matt turned halfway to Allie, never taking his eyes from the little girl. "Mom, can you take her in your lap? I'll examine her while you hold her."

“Come over here, honey,” said Allie. “You can sit with me while Dr. Matt checks you.” Catherine settled in Allie’s lap. Matt brought out a thermometer from his bag and held it up.

“Catherine, I want to take your temperature, so we can find out why you don’t feel well.” He drew the thermometer over Catherine’s forehead then recorded the result.

“Okay,” he said. “Now I need to listen to your lungs.” He touched the stethoscope to the girl’s chest, then again on her back. Catherine, flushed and droopy, complied. Next, Matt held his fingers inside of Catherine’s wrist and checked her pulse. Finally, he showed her the blood pressure cuff.

“Catherine, I’m going to wrap this around your arm, like this, then let the cuff fill up with air. It’s going to squeeze and get tight.” He wrapped the cuff around the girl’s arm, then pushed the start button. Catherine sat very still, looking up at Allie, who smiled and kissed her on top of her head. When the cuff deflated, Matt removed it.

“She’s got a bug,” he said. “Keep her inside and quiet for the rest of the trip. Make sure she gets plenty to drink. We don’t need to add dehydration to the problem.”

“Should we helicopter out of here?”

“Why?”

“Well, all those cruise illnesses you hear about. Norovirus outbreaks, food poisoning. Legionnaires, hantavirus. What was I thinking bringing her on a cruise ship with so many people and so many germs?”

Matt placed his hands upon Allie’s shoulders. “Look, Mom. I need for you to calm down. This is a bug, nothing more. She’s more likely to get something in a day care or preschool setting on land than here at sea.

“I know, but we’re on this ship and it’s crowded.”

“Has she had other symptoms? Vomiting? Diarrhea?”

“Not so far.”

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think she’d never been sick before.” He straightened up. “And that just isn’t possible for a four-year-old.”

He reached out his hands to Catherine. The little girl, surprisingly, leaned over to be taken out of her mother’s lap. He put her back in bed. Catherine crawled into the pillows with her new teddy bear and let Matt arrange the covers over her.

“Wait here,” he said to Allie. “I’m going to the kitchen for chicken soup. They always keep some on hand. It’s good. I eat it a lot on board, mostly late at night when I’m working. I’ll be right back.”

After seeing Matt Wilson to the door, Allie caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the mini bar. Yikes. She looked awful, unkempt, about the same as she felt. She turned on cartoons for Catherine, then fed her a few sips of watered-down apple juice while the shower warmed up.

She let the water flow over her, thinking about the last time she saw Patrick. He’d come home on leave. She was six months along and wearing maternity clothes. They’d spent the time in preparation for parenthood. He’d been considerate and tender, made love to her with great care. They shopped for a crib, a stroller and a car seat. He’d grabbed her hand like a teenager and pulled her through the baby store aisles. Laughing at this, poking at that. They’d set it all up the same day - he was leaving that night. He wouldn’t let her do any of the man-work, so she sat with him in the baby’s room and watched. By then they knew she was a girl and they’d chosen her name.

First, Patrick kissed Allie, then he knelt down and kissed her swelling belly. “Catherine.” He murmured the name against the place where the growing child lay. The baby, she swore, had kicked in response. He’d be a great Dad, of that Allie was certain.

And then the unthinkable happened, and Allie was left to face that dreaded scenario of Patrick’s death. It required a massive shift in thinking. Even now, there were times Allie wasn’t certain she ever recovered. Catherine emerged less than three weeks after

the news reached her, crying to meet the Daddy whose voice she already knew.

Out of the shower, Allie threw on a clean shirt with blue jeans and loafers, then pinned up her hair. No makeup. Not even lipstick. She brushed her teeth. That was the limit to her grooming for now. Matt would be back soon.

Her phone rang. Sue. And the moment of truth about Dr. Dreamboat. She crossed her fingers as she answered. What would be the verdict? And what verdict did Allie hope for?

“Yeah, hi, Sue. Find anything?” Allie slipped into her parents’ room and braced herself.

“Allie, you won’t believe it.” Was her sister gushing? Sue could be a drama queen. Allie didn’t like suspense. Sue was drawing it out.

“Well?” Allie stepped onto the balcony and balanced her weight on her good leg.

“Should I give you the details or the big, fat, beautiful bottom line?”

Allie sighed. “Sue, just say it. Do we have a reason to disinvite?”

“Ha!” Sue was clearly enjoying this. “Not on your life. ER doc by training. UCLA med school, Stanford undergrad, magna. College Republicans, Students for Life. There’s lots more. Awards, community service. Want me to continue?”

With each achievement Sue listed, Matt’s face, his steady gaze, his All-American good looks came into clearer focus. And after all, he had asked her to dance. But he wasn’t Patrick, and a relationship was a luxury she could not afford.

“Sue,” Allie said, “couldn’t you find even one flaw?”

“Traffic tickets? Look, Allie, I hate to disappoint you, but you ought to trust Mom and Dad’s instincts. They’re not steering you wrong.”

“Steering me wrong? This is Thanksgiving dinner, and it’s all about making sure Dad hasn’t befriended some...grifter. He might be a great guy but I’m not looking. I’ve got too much now. There’s school, Catherine, work. Maybe when she’s older.”

“Allie, the choice is yours, but did you ever stop to think that maybe a man is exactly what’s needed here?”

“No. I haven’t, and I wish you wouldn’t put it that way.” No matter how right Matt Wilson was, Allie couldn’t imagine fitting a husband and father into the picture. “Another man couldn’t possibly love Catherine the way Patrick would have.”

“That’s in the past, Allie, and you’re never going to know for sure, are you, one way or the other. But there’s somebody else who will never know, either, and that’s Catherine. What about her? How does she respond to him?”

“She’s sweet to him in a way I wouldn’t expect. In fact, the whole family seems to be sweet on him. I’m the only who isn’t.”

“And you want to deprive her of a father’s love?”

“That’s another thing. How would I be able to share her?”

“With a new Daddy? Are you really worried about that? You think you can’t bring a kid on a honeymoon? I’ve seen it done. It’s a sign of a quality husband and a quality family.”

“Honeymoon? How about we settle for take-out chicken soup?” She told Sue about Catherine falling ill, Matt’s tender care of her, and how he was at the kitchen now, getting chicken soup for all of them.

“So, Catherine is with you now?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“And that’s how it should be.”

Talking with her sister had a way of making things very, very clear. Allie hated to admit it, but Sue’s clarity was exactly what worried her. In the span of twenty-four hours Allie had transformed from superwoman to woman without a plan. Her carefully planned life as widow and single mom could slip from her grasp. The threat of that was too great to contemplate. “Sue, Sue look, I’ve got until Thanksgiving before I see him again. In the meantime, I keep going as I always have. Thanksgiving comes, we have the dinner, then it’s over and I get on with my life, he gets on with his. Mr., I mean Dr. Wonderful can go chase the girl of his dreams.”

“Whatever you say, Allie, but if you think I’ll stand by while you reject Mr., I mean Dr. One-in-a-Million, you’re crazy. Listen, tell mom we’re coming, okay? I wouldn’t miss this for the world. You might think you can pass up this opportunity, but I intend to make sure you end up as the girl of his dreams. Sometimes, it takes a knock on the head for us to see what’s good for us, and Allie, right now you need a good knock on the head. I’ll bring the sweet potatoes.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Allie held the door as Matt slowly pushed a wheeled cart through it. Its array of shiny domes made Catherine, intrigued, rise to take a look. He drew the cover from a stout mug. The aroma of chicken and rich broth filled the room.

“I brought some for all of us,” he said. “We can have a picnic. I stuck an ice cube in hers to cool it off.” He pointed to each item. “I brought spoons. Napkins, too. We’ll feed her first.”

Another cover lifted. Saltine crackers. He shrugged. “What can I say, I’m a bit obsessive about these things.” He’d even brought a bed tray.

“Catherine, I need for you to sit up for a bit,” he said. Catherine slid up to a sitting position. Allie steadied her with a few pillows while Matt positioned the tray across her lap. “That’s good. I cooled down this soup so it won’t burn your mouth. It’s important for you to eat so you can get better. That’s why I brought chicken soup. It makes everything better.”

He carefully touched the soup to Catherine’s bottom lip. “Okay?”

She nodded.

“Good, now, open.”

Perched at the edge of the bed, Matt slipped the spoon into Catherine's mouth. Her eyes shifted between him and Allie as he did it again, and again. Catherine's face softened. She was comfortable and relaxed under Matt Wilson's care. As Allie's confidence in his bedside manner grew, her resistance gave way to gratitude.

He handed Catherine a saltine. "Now, crunch it up," he directed her. She smiled weakly and crumbled the cracker into the remaining soup. When she finished, he took away the tray and Allie tucked Catherine back in bed and turned cartoons on low volume.

They took their soup and sat across from each other at the dining nook in the corner of the stateroom. Matt helped Allie arrange her bad leg on one of the extra chairs. They smiled at each other. It almost felt like a date, except it wasn't. She wouldn't let herself go that far.

He took his first bite of soup and motioned the spoon at her. "What did I tell ya, this is good stuff."

Allie nodded, too busy swallowing to speak.

Matt eyed her with that same twinkle she'd seen at the disco. "In fact, I'd say this is dinner date quality soup." He stopped eating and looked at her in question.

"Oh, I don't think so," she said, embarrassed by her own thought. "That's a long way off."

"Sorry. It was a joke. Sort of." The tips of his ears turned pink. It made Allie smile. He dove back into the soup with his spoon. She took another spoonful, too. It felt good going down. The warmth soothed her stomach. Catherine was asleep. Allie began to relax a little.

"We'll feed you well at Thanksgiving. It's the least we can do for you."

"I think I'll be coming out ahead in the deal."

"It will certainly be more uplifting than this cruise."

"How's that?"

"It seems that whenever we've met, I've been at my worst." She was thinking of how awful she must have looked sprawled

out on the dance floor, how awful she looked just now, when he came to check Catherine.

Matt put his spoon in the cup and sat back in the chair with a slightly puzzled expression. "Oh? So, tell me more."

"First, I fall off my shoes and sprain my ankle and you carry me down to the clinic. Then you get to watch me cry, and you have to bring me back here in a wheelchair, and I'm hobbling around in this ugly boot, trying to keep up with a four-year-old; and now she's sick and I'm irrational." Allie hid her face as she dug back into her soup.

He looked away for a minute, his arms folded, gazing through the glass door over the water. He looked back at her, smiling.

"Is that what you think?"

She shrugged, feeling a bit chagrined. "Isn't that true?"

"Allie." He chuckled very gently. "You looked great the other night. You were a knock-out. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted to dance with you."

"No?" She'd never been called a knock-out before. Yesterday on the deck, he'd told her she wasn't his type. At least, that's what she thought he meant. But hadn't he asked her to dance in the first place?

"No. Your face, all of you, glows with a certain, I don't know, magic. I saw it right away. Not to mention that dress you wore. I'm as patriotic as the next guy but red, white and blue never affected me quite that way before. All I knew was I had to get to you before that loser. What was his name, anyway?"

"You mean Brad Keegan?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, whatever. Maybe that elbow he threw at me was a good thing. The way I saw it, I had a choice. Take him out—or take you out. No brainer." He leaned forward and slipped the spoon from her grasp. He placed it in the mug of soup, then took both her hands in his. "And you're not being irrational. If my kid were sick, I'd worry, too, even though mass infections rarely happen on cruise ships. It's just that you hear about it whenever it does. So, yeah, it's okay to worry."

Allie withdrew her hands and sat back in her chair. "I can't help it. It's just the two of us, Catherine and me. Patrick died three weeks before she was born."

"Ah, dad and husband I take it?"

Allie nodded. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"He was ambushed. Afghanistan." She said no more. It was as much as she was willing to reveal.

"How long ago was that?"

"Four years."

"That's tough. Beyond tough." He studied her pensively. "And a baby girl grows up without a father."

Allie nodded.

He softly touched the rings she wore. "And not ready to give these up. Yet."

"I don't think so."

"You weren't wearing them at the disco. I checked."

"Mom and Dad convinced me I to take them off. I did it for their sake." Her voice faltered. This was new territory, and emotionally dangerous. She hadn't talked this way with a man, with anyone, since she'd lost Patrick. She had to tread carefully, not sure how much was safe to say. "It's easier, right now, to stay like this."

His face, his eyes, were open and accepting. Maybe it was the way her daughter related to him, but Allie trusted this man. She kept talking. "Relationships complicate things."

His eyes and lips narrowed when she said that. He tapped his fingertips lightly on the tabletop. "Have you ever thought they might simplify things, too?"

His question reminded her of Sue's earlier statement that a man might be just what Allie needed. Only instead of the resistance she felt with Sue, Allie's true emotions emerged. Fear and guilt. Allie had spent the years since Patrick's death and Catherine's birth fearful about bringing another man into her family picture. She'd blanketed the fear with an enormous sense of guilt. Guilt over Patrick's death and the effect upon her daughter of an absent

father. Guilt that she could not manage a superwoman role that was thrust upon her. But Matt's question made her see it clearly. As if it were something brand new. It made Allie want to tell him all about it.

"I'm afraid." She could hardly breathe for getting it out. All this time fear had ruled so much of her life and until now she hadn't been aware of it. For a moment, the sound of water slapping against the ship's hull fell away.

"Afraid." Matt Wilson did not move. He did not laugh. He kept his attention directly on her. "What scares you?"

"I'm afraid." She spoke very slowly. "Any time I spend with a man means time away from my daughter so I'm afraid."

Allie hesitated before saying these words. "To fall in love."

Slowly, so slowly, Matt Wilson scooted to the chair next to her.

"Well," he said, "we're getting real, Allie. Where is Catherine right now?"

Allie tipped her head toward the bed. "On the bed, asleep."

"Right. She's with us."

"Yes."

"And yesterday, on the deck, I was with you then. Where was Catherine?"

"I know," she said, "but—"

No. Allie could not go there. She shook her head and tried to block out any feelings of closeness they were sharing.

But Matt stayed steady, undeterred.

"So," he said, "you're assuming that I, an honest, hardworking man, would court a single mother and not include her child? Tell me the truth, Allie."

Court? Allie didn't think she'd ever used the word in a sentence before, but she knew exactly the purpose of courtship, and that was marriage. Matt Wilson had encapsulated perfectly Allie's dilemma. An old-fashioned courtship that included Catherine was the only acceptable solution to bringing a father and husband into her life. It was a ritual so out of style that Allie had never considered it. Nobody engaged in courtship anymore. Nobody, it seemed to

Allie, put their child first when parenting without a partner. But with Matt's use of that dusty word, Allie took her first tentative steps toward opening her heart to him.

"I don't know," she said. "And that is the truth."

Matt leaned closer to her, speaking very softly. "Allie, all this time you've been afraid of a generic man who wants to take you away from your daughter. Fair enough. I know it happens."

He pointed at himself. "I can promise you that with me, this won't happen. I'm not that guy."

Matt Wilson was speaking to feelings Allie thought she'd buried long ago. But instead of feeling hurt or guilt at the reckoning, it seemed like part of a natural progression. One step, then the next. Getting her to acknowledge to herself her resistance, before continuing.

He spoke again, as gently as before. "Okay, you've told me your secret. Now I'll tell you mine."

Allie tried to collect her thoughts. He was leading them on a journey together, and the journey was a revelation of the soul. First hers. And now, his. He was making it impossible for her to remain emotionally detached.

"I was engaged to a woman, and then I found out she wasn't really who she made herself out to be. So, after investing my entire future with her, I broke the engagement. In the end I think she wanted to be Mrs. Dr. Matt Wilson. I wanted a new start, so I took this job. But that's not my fear."

"No?"

"I was fooled once but I won't be fooled again, Allie. I can't make that mistake. I need a real, down to earth woman. Real is what matters. Discos aren't real. You, spraining your ankle, that's real. And so is reading to your little girl who you're trying to raise alone. And feeding her soup when she's sick. Women anymore are these Ivy League feminist something-or-others who quiz me about my car, my bank account. Not real. As soon as I mention I want a stay-home wife and mother they bolt. But something tells

me, Allie Morgan, that wife and mom would suit you very well. Am I right about that?"

Without waiting for an answer, he looked at his watch and stood up. "I've got paperwork to catch up on."

He took an easy hold of the arms of her chair and leaned gently into her. It was a gesture full of intimacy, as physically close to a man as she'd come in four years. An invitation to her to close the distance. Gosh, but he was handsome. She imagined what it would be like to look into that face for the next forty years and feel him looking back at her like this. His gaze softened, and his voice dropped to a pitch just above a soothing whisper. "What kind of life do you want, Allie? Whatever you want can be yours. I'll see you at Thanksgiving."

His lips parted as he closed the space between them. She tipped back her head and let her face come forward to meet his. Gently, he brought down his mouth over hers. The kiss was full of the pledges he'd made, pledges she knew he would keep.

Reluctantly, they pulled back from each other. With a sigh that came from nowhere, he turned away, a breath on a spider's web.

And then he was gone.

On the bed, Catherine moved, then stilled again. Allie turned off the cartoons with the remote. She rested her head on the back of the armchair and used her good foot to adjust her boot on the chair. She felt alive in a way she had not before she met Matt Wilson. Somehow, he had slipped into an empty spot in her heart that she was not even aware of.

In the silence, she closed her eyes. The gentle sway of the ship helped slow the beating of her heart, calming her jumbled nerves. Dwayne and Donna were out, making the most of their last full day of the cruise. Allie was glad of it. Glad for a few moments of solitude.

The feel of her wedding rings on her finger caused her to open her eyes and look down at her left hand. Allie stared at the rings. Tears began to fall even before she twisted them off her finger. For a few moments, she beheld them with a gaze blurred by tears.

The image of Patrick and her at their wedding, exchanging rings and vows, sprang to mind. Except for the night she met Matt, when her parents insisted, the rings had never come off. But there they were now, the solitaire diamond sparkling up at her from the palm of her hand. Taking off the rings was Allie's next step in the continuum. If she wanted to accept Matt Wilson's offer of courtship, it meant leaving behind the life she had so carefully arranged after Patrick's death. The rings might come off, a marriage to Matt Wilson might follow, but Allie told herself she would still have Catherine. Catherine would always be Allie's precious link to Patrick and the life, though brief, they built together.

No matter how much she denied it, Allie knew by the way Matt talked to her today over chicken soup, by the way he treated Catherine, and by Catherine's reaction to him—she was running out of arguments against Matt Wilson. Everything was pointing in his favor. She hoisted herself from her chair and hobbled to the mini bar, then looked at herself in the mirror. Staring back at her, no matter how she wished otherwise, was the girl of Matt Wilson's dreams. She looked down at her wedding rings and felt like she was saying good-bye to Patrick forever, good-bye to her old self, her old life. She knew it would all turn out for the best, but right now Allie could not bear the feelings.

She grabbed two tissues. With one, she wiped her wet eyes. With the other, she wrapped the rings and placed them into a safe spot in her luggage. Then she lay on the bed next to her sleeping daughter. And wept some more.

## CHAPTER NINE

**M**att's Jeep pulled into the driveway. If Allie still wore her wedding rings, she'd be twisting them around her finger in nervous worry. The first step she'd taken upon her return from the cruise was to place the rings in their new permanent spot in the back of her jewelry box. There they would stay until Catherine's wedding.

Between the time Matt told her she could have the life she wanted and today, Allie had spent a lot of time re-imagining her and Catherine's future. By Thanksgiving, hope for a new life with Matt Wilson had crept into her heart. Now, seeing him for the first time in over a month, she was wondering what it would be like to kiss him again.

He approached the front door with his arms full.

"Mom, come help!" Allie shouted into the house as she opened the door. He stepped inside. They both laughed.

"How's the ankle?" he said.

"Nice to wear two shoes for a change," she said, looking down at them. It was the first time she'd been out of the boot.

Matt stopped when he saw her, barely acknowledging her reply. "Allie, you look wonderful." His expression went beyond

boyish and straight to genuine masculine appreciation. She felt herself go shy. The tiny knot in her stomach tightened just slightly.

She'd taken special care with her appearance. No splashy disco outfits tonight. This was her first chance to convey her own serious intentions. Circumstances would not permit her the luxury of a leisurely courtship.

She'd asked her parents to babysit during Catherine's nap one Saturday afternoon and shopped for something to wear. A navy, A-line skirt, tailored white blouse, new belt and heeled leather sandals, not too high, set her back just over a hundred bucks at the local fashion outlet. She'd be able to wear all of it to class, to work, to church, post office or grocery store—anywhere and everywhere—except for a fancy party or high-end restaurant, neither of which were likely destinations for quite some time. It was to show Matt Wilson what Allie looked like in real life, as he liked to say.

The whole family gathered around them. Dwayne followed Donna, who relieved Matt of a bouquet of flowers, which she passed to Allie. Donna gave murmurs of approval to the bottle of wine he'd brought, then handed it off to Dwayne, who was shaking hands with Matt. Matt squatted down to give Catherine a brand-new Raggedy Ann doll. She gave him a huge smile, hugged the doll, then led him by the hand to her toybox where she placed her new Raggedy Ann next to the old one. Sue and her husband, Josh, came over with the boys, Jonathan and Jason, and there were hugs and introductions all around.

Allie walked into the kitchen and chose a vase from the pantry. She was at the sink arranging the flowers when Matt came in and stood next to her. She smiled up at him. His green eyes held that same captivating twinkle as the night on the dance floor.

"I've got to apologize in advance," he said.

"What is it?"

"A buddy of mine called me last-minute and asked me to take call for him until he can get back from dinner at his in-laws, probably around 8 or 9. He was in a tight spot, so I said yes."

“I hope you came out ahead on the deal.”

“Tonight, no. But long term it means two 50-yard line seats to the USC-UCLA game next season.” He said it with that special twinkle in his eye.

She turned toward him, enjoying the closeness and his leather and clove scent. “You definitely came out ahead. I love that game.”

“Good because I was hoping you’d come with me.”

“It’s a date.” She loved college football and looked forward to that game every year.

Dwayne and Donna came in. “What’s the problem?”

Allie said, “It’s nothing, but Matt might need to leave early. He agreed to be on call for a while tonight. Helping out a friend.”

Matt grinned. “Since I’m a bachelor they figure I can swing holidays a little easier than docs with family obligations. So, yeah, I may have to leave early. I’m sorry. I’ll have to take a rain check on that wine, Donna.”

Donna had set a long table for six. Dwayne sat at its head, with Donna to his right; to his left sat Allie, with Matt next to her. At the table’s far end sat Sue and Josh, rounding out the group. Near the adult table, at a short distance, was a smaller table set for the three children.

Catherine had made a fuss that Allie would not allow her to have her new Raggedy Ann at the table. She settled, though, for both of her Raggedy Ann dolls together in a corner chair, where they could watch.

The family bowed their heads as Dwayne prayed. “Oh, Lord, we come to you today to give you thanks. We praise you for bringing us through the trials and keeping us together. We thank you for the wonderful memories we have as a family. We thank you for the food on the table. We thank you for blessing us with love that comes from you. Please watch over all of us and keep us safe from harm and evil. And help us to love each other as you want us to, Amen.”

Dwayne carved the turkey and arranged the slices on a platter. He passed it around. The turkey was followed by mashed potatoes,

gravy, stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, cranberry sauce, rolls and butter. Allie and Sue dished up the children's plates, then joined the talk.

"So, Matt," said Donna, "how long do you plan to stay with Royal Pacific?"

Matt set down his fork. "I leave Sunday for my last trip." He looked around the table. "I received an offer to join a practice in Orange County." He looked at Allie and grinned. "I start this summer." He casually picked up his fork and dug into his mashed potatoes.

Dwayne and Donna and Sue and Josh broke into hearty congratulations. The news thrilled Allie, but she stayed calm. There would be time later on to talk more. Another step Matt was taking on their journey of courtship. She still couldn't quite believe the changes in her life in such a short time. She glanced at him, his fork full of green beans, and then over at Catherine, who eyed Matt, then placed her own green bean onto her fork and popped it into her mouth. Allie almost laughed out loud.

As the family ate and talked, the discussion eventually turned to current events and politics. Each person at the table swapped stories about the moment when they became supporters of Donald Trump for president. Both Dwayne and Donna admired him early on as businessman and reality television celebrity. Sue and Josh started out as Ben Carson supporters, then switched to Trump the nominee. Allie stayed quiet and listened. That was the apolitical time in her life. The 2016 election results surprised her, but its impact was minimal. The news of Patrick's death came just on the heels of that election, and Catherine's arrival was imminent.

Matt's support for Trump had been immediate—at the 'escalator ride' speech. He'd followed candidate Trump and then President Trump closely ever since. As he spoke, Allie felt a current of energy rush through her. Matt's easy joining in of the conversation showed her yet another piece of what her life with him would include. A new beginning was truly underway.

The talk at the table was lighthearted and fun as they ate turkey, stuffing, potatoes and gravy, the green beans and cranberries. Sue's sweet potatoes slowly disappeared. When Matt's phone buzzed, he excused himself into the other room, speaking in low, clipped tones. When he returned, he was all business, almost.

"Donna, this was simply delicious. I can't thank you enough for having me," he said. "Now I get to go work it off."

"Oh, Matt, I'm so sorry you have to leave." Donna sounded truly dismayed.

"Duty calls," he said. "I shall return." He shook hands with Dwayne and Josh, and the two boys, and gave Catherine a kiss and hug. She began to cry. Allie picked her up

"It's okay, baby, Matt will come back." Together they walked him to the front door and waved good-bye.

"I'll be back when I finish," he said. "Look for me in a few hours." He touched her lightly at the waist.

Allie nodded. Her heart jumped that she'd see him again that evening. "I'll save you some pie."

Sue and Donna had cleared the table and put on a pot of coffee. Allie came into the kitchen and sliced the pies: one pumpkin, one pecan.

"Is he gone?" Sue's voice had an anxious note in it.

"Yes." Allie opened the refrigerator and brought out the chilled whipping cream, copper bowl and beaters. She whipped the cream while her mom and sister finished the dishes.

"Well?" Sue sounded impatient.

Allie stayed cool in the face of Sue's pushing, despite her emotions zipping between merry-go-round steadiness and roller coaster exhilaration. She willed away the roller coaster and slowed to merry-go-round, kiddie speed.

"He said he'd be back after his case." She forced herself to sound calm.

Sue put away the casserole dish she was drying. She turned to Allie and sighed. "So, I heard. What I mean, Allie, is what do you think of the guy?"

Allie inserted the beaters into the hand mixer. “I should probably ask you,” she said, “what *you* think of him.” Allie didn’t know exactly why she was stonewalling her sister. Maybe it was fear of the carousel becoming that out of control roller coaster. She couldn’t quite articulate what she was feeling. She needed a few minutes to gather her thoughts.

From the family room, Allie heard the sound of a football game. Dwayne and Josh would settle in to watch. She wished Matt could have settled in with them. She had a crazy desire to bring him his dessert as he sat with the men. Her dad would be in the recliner, where he always lounged. Josh would stretch out on the sofa. That would leave the well-worn and very comfortable leather armchair and ottoman for Matt. The vision gave her much contentment. She’d ask him if he preferred pumpkin to pecan pie, and would he care for whipped cream? In the backyard, she could hear the children running off their energy, stored up from sitting quietly at the dinner table. They’d be ready to eat pie by now.

“Let’s take dessert to the men and the kids,” she said. “We’ll stay in here and talk.”

Allie poked her head out the back door. “Time for dessert, guys, come on in!”

She set teacups and tea bags on the cozy table in the corner of the kitchen; then she and Sue took the dessert plates dished up with pie and headed to the family room. Once the rest of the family was settled in with pie, Allie, Donna and Sue sat together in the kitchen. Allie placed a tea bag in her cup then poured water over it. Donna and Sue took turns with the kettle, then they each helped themselves to pie.

“I’m not entirely sure about this,” she said. “I’m still a little afraid.”

“Afraid?” Sue sounded incredulous. “What are you afraid of, Allie? This guy is a treasure—he carried you in his arms into the clinic when you sprained your ankle! I’d say that’s a good way to start a courtship.

“Sue!”

“Sorry, I can’t help it. Yeah, it’s annoying, but Allie, think of the stories you can tell your kids. And grandkids.”

Allie held up her hand for Sue to stop. She let her irritation show. She wanted to speak, without interruption.

“But Allie.” Donna sounded disappointed. “Matt fits in so well with the family.”

“Well, I appreciate that, Mom, and you’re right. But what about me?”

Now Donna looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve had Catherine all to myself. Now I’m faced with having to share her - share her love with someone else. I’m not sure I like that. I hate to say this, but what if I get jealous? What if I feel left out?”

“It’s part of the give and take, Allie, the push-pull of parenting. Sometimes you get to be the star of the Catherine show, sometimes it’ll be Matt, I mean, Dad, but mostly it’s one, big unified family.” Sue paused as Allie took in her advice. “Trust me, I know. Mom can add to it.”

“It’s true,” said Donna. “It does happen that way sometimes, but when you have more kids it matters less. There is so much that commands your attention it’s almost impossible for it to be an issue.” Donna touched Allie’s hand gently. “You would like to have more children, I hope?”

Allie nodded her head. She could hardly speak. “Yes,” she said. Her voice came out a hoarse whisper.

With their assurances, Allie’s last shreds of resistance gave way. A seismic shift in plans had set themselves in place with the appearance of Matt on the scene, and her family’s and Catherine’s approval. Matt had led the two of them into an old-fashioned sort of courtship, a courtship that would soon create a new family.



## CHAPTER TEN

The headlights on Matt's Jeep swept the driveway, very late. Allie checked the time—10:20 pm. She saved her term paper and closed the file, happy for the break, happier to see Matt.

She opened the door. "You didn't have to," she said.

"Have to what?"

"Come back this late." His eyes shone in the dark of the entryway. Sue and Josh were long gone. Dwayne and Donna always retired early. Catherine was sound asleep snuggled in by her two Raggedy Ann dolls.

He stepped in and put his arms around her waist. "I couldn't wait to see you."

Allie's belly went soft all over again. And now they were alone. Precious time to get close.

"Any leftover pie?"

"Sure. I'll put on some coffee, too."

"Lead me to it."

The kitchen, warm and alive, felt charged with romance. Allie kept the lights low. They sat close at the table, their voices barely above whispers.

“I’m so happy you came for Thanksgiving.”

“When the father of a beautiful girl issues an invitation like that, a man doesn’t turn it down.”

Allie’s smile widened. “I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Whatever possessed him to invite you. I mean, look where we are right now.”

“I had nothing to do with it.” He sat back and held up his palms in protest. “You’ll have to ask him. Besides, he thought I was married. He asked me to bring my family.”

“Yes, but still, his instincts are pretty sound. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had something inside that told him differently.”

The dimness enveloped them like a shroud, intimate, enticing. She leaned closer. It was like the day he came to her on the ship when Catherine was sick. She and Matt together; Catherine safe and nearby.

“Tonight,” she said, “when we sat at the table, telling the Trump stories, it was so fun. I felt free, like I hadn’t in a long time.”

“Free? How so?”

“Patrick’s family never voted; didn’t pay attention to politics. They wouldn’t even discuss current events. Patrick would get mad if I brought it up, so I stopped, even though I grew up talking about it around the dinner table just like we did tonight. But it was okay. I learned gardening from his mother. I still help her prune her rose bushes. The men talked about sports and their cars. And church. They had their church. We shared the same values, so it was good.”

“And here was your family tonight, talking about a topic important to you, to them.”

“Yes, and to you, too.”

“I see it now. It’s something we can share, the two of us, whereas you couldn’t do that with Patrick.”

“That’s right. It made me happy to listen to you. I saw a whole new kind of happiness for Catherine and me. I’ll always love Patrick and what we had together, and Catherine will know who her father is, but—”

“A new Daddy for her, here on earth?”

“Exactly.”

“And a new husband for Allie?” Matt went quiet. He picked up Allie’s hand and softly kissed her fingers.

She laughed, afraid to even think of it. “I guess it would be part of the package, right?”

“That’s right. Part of a real-life package.”

A cry came from Catherine’s bedroom. Allie looked up quickly. “She probably wants water,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her close in as he stood up. He stroked her hair. “I’ll get the water,” he said softly into her ear. “You take care of her.”

“Ok,” she whispered. Allie pulled away slowly, wide-eyed at Matt, as she headed for Catherine. She loved the way he’d taken charge, directed her to her daughter while he did the small, peripheral tasks.

“Mama, I’m thirsty.” Catherine had slipped out of bed. Allie scooped her up and turned on a low lamp. “Matt’s bringing water.” Catherine nodded while she and Allie rocked slowly in the rocking chair.

Matt brought the water. Allie kissed the top of her daughter’s head while Catherine gulped in noisy swallows before climbing back in bed. Before she settled under the covers, she held her arms out to Matt. He bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek while she hugged him around the neck. He gave her both Raggedy Ann dolls, one in each arm. She fell back to sleep in a moment.

Together, slowly, they strolled into the living room, their arms entwined. Matt sat on the couch and pulled Allie into his lap. She curled against him, grateful for his help with Catherine. With Matt at her side, she realized, there was another mind, another heart. And love times infinity. Love, Allie decided, was eternal; it was limitless. Matt had a father’s love for Catherine and that was something she could get from no one else. Her fears about relationships had dissolved in the face of this extraordinary man who, she realized, would never let them fail.

“Is this what courtship means?” she said.

He nodded his head and turned his lips into her hair. “Mm-hmm. For us, it is.”

“It’s pretty good,” said Allie.

He took her in his arms and kissed her, deeply. She let herself be caught up into his embrace. When they drew apart, Matt’s eyes shone with something that to Allie looked like love. He gently cupped the back of her neck.

“How about you and Catherine go to church with me this Sunday? You can drop me off afterward at the pier.”

“And I suppose that means picking you up when you come back?” Allie couldn’t help but tease him.

“Who else?” he said. “After all, we’ve got some serious family time to put in together.”

“And after you come back,” Allie said, “I’ve got my graduation. And you’ll start your new practice.”

“And we’ve got some plans to make, too.” said Matt.

“Plans?”

“I’m not doing this to go steady, Allie, and I don’t believe in long engagements.”

“Neither do I, Matt,” said Allie. “We don’t have that luxury.”

He brought her face to his and kissed her again. They stayed together a long time, letting the flame of passion rise between them. They parted, reluctantly.

“Who shall we tell first?” His voice was husky, breathless.

They looked at each other and spoke in unison. “Catherine.”

**THE END**

## A U T H O R   B I O

Liberty Adams lives in the wide, open spaces west of the Rockies. She writes wholesome, lighthearted romance about patriots who love America, love our president, and, best of all, fall in love at the end of each story. Liberty is the pen name of an author who wears the hats of mom, wife, and community volunteer. She proudly owns and wears several assorted MAGA hats of her own.



## A N O T E T O R E A D E R S

The readers of these stories are the best of America. You live your values every day through faith, hard work, and raising and protecting your families. You have your own unique stories to tell about how you came to support this President. The MAGA Hat Romance series was written with you in mind.

If you enjoyed reading “Ladies First,” by Liberty Adams, please leave a review on Amazon. It’s a great way to spread the MAGA word!



Here is a preview of Book One of the MAGA Hat Romance series, *Ladies First*.

When patriot Mike rescues feminist Ricki from a post-Trump rally riot, the clash of opposites sets off sparks between them. But the gentleman giant refuses to leave the side of the spunky half-pint until he and his pickup truck deliver her home, safe and sound.

Ricki attends the rally to scoop the racism of the Trump crowd in a blog post. But she's forced to spin a false narrative when her mistaken assumptions fail to materialize. When Ricki's lies get Mike doxxed, and his construction worksite becomes the target of anti-fascist thugs, his righteous anger forces her to reckon with the truth.

Ricki wants to fix the damage and regain Mike's trust. But that means facing the wrath of the mobs. Will Ricki find the courage to leave behind her liberal beliefs for a lifetime of old-fashioned true love?

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