



CHAPTER I

THE DOG CAME WITH THE HOUSE. OR MAYBE THE HOUSE came with the dog. Either way, no matter how the sentence was constructed, the house and the dog came together.

Brydie Benson looked down at the fat wad of fur on the floor in front of her. Its tongue hung out of its mouth, fixed in what seemed to be a permanent pant. Bits of drool dripped from the protruding tongue and pooled onto the hardwood floor between them.

Brydie took a step back. "Are you sure it can't go live with a relative or something?" she asked. "I'm not really a dog person." Although she wasn't really certain that what she was looking at was in fact a dog.

"There are no relatives," Elliott Jones, Brydie's best friend, said. She bent down and gave the drooling mess a pat on the head. "There is no one to take care of Teddy Roosevelt here."

"His name is Teddy Roosevelt?"

"It is."

Brydie stifled a giggle. Elliott couldn't be serious. "Are you kidding?"

"I'm not," Elliott replied, putting on her best Realtor voice. "Are you interested or not? I mean it's not that I don't *love* having you live with me and Leo and Mia, but it's been six months."

It was true. She did need a place to live, and although Elliott loved her, she was busy with her husband, Leo; her four-year-old daughter, Mia; and her ever-expanding belly, a boy, due in January. It had been fun at first, reliving their early days back in their hometown of Jonesboro, Arkansas, before Elliott moved down to Memphis to be with Leo, who was a successful personal injury lawyer in Tennessee.

But it was October, and Brydie knew she couldn't live in her friend's basement forever. She couldn't keep allowing Elliott to take care of her. It was time she lived on her own again.

Brydie said she'd take a place anywhere, as long as she could afford it, and she couldn't afford much. She glanced around the house. It was a beautiful and immaculately kept two-story brownstone in Memphis's well-to-do Germantown, and she'd been giddy when Elliott told her that she could live there rent-free if only she'd agree to a couple of "minor details." The elderly woman, she'd been told, was friends with Elliott's boss at the real estate company where Elliott worked. She hadn't wanted to sell the house when she moved to the home, so Elliott's boss told the woman that she would find a caretaker until it was time to sell.

"What kind of a dog is he?" Brydie asked.

Elliott shrugged. "I think he's a pug, and an old one, too. He's been boarded since his owner went to live in the nursing home two months ago. He seems glad to be home."

"How can you tell?" Brydie wasn't sure what kind of emotion her friend could see between the bug eyes and the wrinkles.

"I don't think he'll be much trouble," Elliott replied, resting her hands on her stomach. "But if you don't think it's going to work out, I need to know now. I had to beg for this. My boss wanted to let her deadbeat son into the place."

"Okay," Brydie said with a heaving sigh. "I'm in."

Elliott pulled a stack of papers out of a leather briefcase and said, "Read over the agreement. It's month to month, renewable after Mrs. Neumann's approval."

"Who is Mrs. Neumann?"

"The owner of the house."

Brydie knitted her eyebrows together. "But I thought the owner of the house was in a nursing home."

"She is," Elliott replied, circling a portion of the contract laid out in front of them. "You'll meet her when you take Teddy Roosevelt to see her in the nursing home every Sunday for a visit."

"Wait," Brydie said. "You mean not only do I have to look after that thing you're calling a dog, but I have to take it to visit an old lady in a nursing home, too?"

"You know what they say," Elliott said. "Beggars can't be choosers."

Brydie didn't consider herself a beggar, not really. Although at thirty-four, this was certainly not the position in which she'd ever imagined herself. She was in a tight spot, and she knew she ought to be grateful. She was trying to be grateful, but it was difficult to feel that way when everything in her life had gone so far to the other side of awful that she didn't even know where she was anymore. *I'm here*, she thought. *In this house, and I'm* 

going to make the best of it. She glanced back down at the dog. It had fallen asleep sitting up, eyes half-closed, tongue still lolling to the right side of its mouth.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. "Where do I sign?"

Elliott licked her finger and leafed through the pages. "Here," she said, "and initial here."

Brydie did as she was told. "Think I can get moved in today?"

"I'd planned on it," Elliott said. "That's why I picked the dog up from boarding."

"We can get my clothes and things from your place," Brydie replied. "Shouldn't take more than a couple of trips."

"I'm going to call Mrs. Neumann," Elliott said, and she disappeared out the door, leaving Brydie alone in the big house, with the exception of the sleeping pug.

She'd been surprised when she'd first entered the house to find that it was completely furnished, all the way down to the four-poster beds in each of the four bedrooms and the plush bathmats in each of the three bathrooms. Since she had nothing left to speak of, with the exception of her clothes and a few other things she could fit into Elliott's basement, it came as a relief to know that she wouldn't be sleeping on the lovely wooden floors.

Had it really been just six months ago that she'd had her own business, her own home, her own husband? How could it be gone? Just like that? These thoughts made Brydie's head hurt, and she wanted nothing more than to sink down onto the plush, peach couch in the living room and fall asleep. Instead, she looked around the house, absently twirling the house keys around her fingernails, bits of burgundy nail polish flaking off onto the metal.

Everything was pristine, a perfectly kept house. Brydie was sure that the old woman had housekeepers, a luxury she herself wouldn't be able to afford. She realized that she was now responsible for the upkeep of the whole house. She traced her steps back over to the hallway, stepping over the dog. She'd merely glanced at the house as Elliott showed it to her, her mind coiled like a snake around the life she no longer had.

She walked down the hallway, flipping the light switch. She expected to see pictures lining the walls, but there were none. The master bedroom was the same way, as were all of the other rooms. No pictures, no real decorations of any kind that might tell Brydie who the owner was or what she looked like. However, much to Brydie's relief, all of the kitchen supplies were there, and a little thrill ran through her when she realized she had the kitchen and all of its stainless-steel appliances to herself. In one of the pantries she found a bag of dog food as well as a food and water bowl. A leash and a harness hung next to them.

Brydie took down the bowls and filled one with water. The other she filled with the food from the pantry. She sat both bowls in front of Teddy Roosevelt. "Here," she said. "Eat up."

The dog opened up one eye, sniffing at the bowls. Then he sneezed into them before promptly going back to sleep.

"Suit yourself," Brydie replied with a shrug. She'd never owned a dog before, not even as a kid, and she didn't quite know what to expect. When she'd wanted a baby the year before she and her husband had divorced, he'd suggested a dog instead, to "break them in," he said, before having a child. She'd explained that having a dog wasn't at all the same thing as having a child. He'd said she'd never had a dog *or* a child

and wouldn't know. They'd fought about it, the first of many fights about that particular subject. Wouldn't Allan be stunned to see her now, crouching in front of this odd-looking little dog. Brydie reached out and gave Teddy Roosevelt a hesitant pat. Maybe this wasn't how she'd imagined her life, but for now, at least, it was her life.



CHAPTER 2

In Brydie's previous life, she'd been a baker. She and her husband had owned a bakery in Jonesboro, Arkansas, called Bake Me A Cake. The day they opened their doors had been the happiest day of Brydie's life. In truth, owning a bakery had been her husband Allen's dream, but Brydie couldn't have imagined anything better than the day they opened their doors.

She'd met Allan in culinary school. She'd been a nineteen-year-old student and he'd been her twenty-nine-year-old pastry instructor. Despite the reservations of her family and friends, as he was famed around town as something of a playboy bachelor, Brydie married Allan the next year. Five years later, they opened their bakery, and she thought the rest would be all creampuffs and buttercream frosting. Then, only eight years after they opened the doors of their shop, Brydie walked in one morning to find her husband *baking* with someone else.

That had been almost a year ago, and after months of living with her mother while going through painful divorce proceedings,

Brydie packed up everything she could fit into her Honda Civic and drove the forty-five minutes to Memphis and Elliott. She'd thought she could leave her pain behind and start fresh, but it had followed her, and although her best friend was trying to help her by finding her a new place to live, she couldn't help but feel a bit rejected as Elliott and Leo unloaded the boxes from their car and placed them in the living room. She couldn't help but feel a little jealous as Elliott drove away with her husband and child and pregnant belly—a painful reminder that Brydie didn't have any of those things, and she was beginning to feel like she probably never would.

She sat down among the boxes. When her phone began to ring from the kitchen table, she looked up at it, knowing she should answer. Her mother had already called three times that day, and she knew it would be her now. Brydie couldn't muster the energy to talk to her. Every time they spoke, her mother spent her time trying to convince Brydie that she needed to start dating again, or needed to find a new career, or needed a haircut. In Ruth Benson's eyes, there was very little a good haircut couldn't fix, and there were *many* things about Brydie that she thought needed to be fixed.

Brydie let out the breath she'd been holding when the phone stopped ringing. What she really wanted was to talk to her father. He wouldn't have tried to fix anything, but he would have listened. She would have felt better after talking to him, calmer and more confident somehow. But wishing she could talk to her father was even more useless than wishing she had a family like Elliott's. Gerald Benson had been dead nearly three years.

And so, since it was too late for a haircut, Brydie instead busied herself opening the first box in her new home.



CHAPTER 3

Teddy Roosevelt wouldn't poop. In fact, he wouldn't do anything. He wouldn't eat. He wouldn't drink. He wouldn't even move. Brydie didn't know much about dogs, but she knew enough to know that the pug should be doing... something. She'd left him on the kitchen floor the night before, and when she woke up the next morning, he was still there. Brydie couldn't even tell that he'd woken up.

Bending down, she slipped the harness over his head and around his middle, attaching it to the leash. "Come on," Brydie said. "Let's go outside."

The dog's ears perked up at the word *outside*, but he made no attempt to stand.

"Don't you want to go outside?"

Teddy ignored her.

"Fine," Brydie said, reaching down to pick him up. "I'll carry you."

He was heavier than he looked, and Brydie struggled to hold

him and open the door to the backyard at the same time. She sat him down in the yard and, realizing that the yard was fenced, unhooked the leash from the harness. "Go on," she said to him. "Go potty."

Teddy lay down in the grass and began to snore.

Brydie threw up her hands. "Fine! Do whatever you want!" She stalked back up onto the porch and threw herself down on one of the wrought-iron chairs. "You're making me look like a crazy person, you know. Talking to a damn dog like it's a person."

She stared at him for a few seconds as if waiting for the dog to respond, before surveying the yard. It was neatly kept, like the house. Brydie found herself wishing for summertime so that she could plant a garden. But now it was October, not the best time to be doing much of anything except preparing for the holidays, which was Brydie's favorite time of year. A thrill went through her when she thought about decorating the house for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. She thought about baking witch-and ghost-shaped cookies and her special ingredient eggnog, which was so popular with her friends. *My old friends*, Brydie thought. *Allan's friends*.

Brydie loved the holidays. Despite being reserved much of the time, the holidays brought out the best, or worst, depending upon whom you talked to, in her. She especially loved Christmastime. She started counting down the days in October, recording all of her favorite Lifetime Christmas movies, and drinking eggnog way ahead of season when she could find it. Allan rolled his eyes at her excitement, since the only thing he really loved about the holidays was the money to be made at the bakery. But Brydie didn't care. She set up that countdown

and reminded him every single day that it was one day closer to Christmas morning.

And that was when Brydie had an idea. She'd have a count-down to Christmas this year, just like she did every year—but that countdown would have a twist. Instead of simply counting down to Christmas morning, she'd use this countdown as a way to get over Allan. She'd get over the entire sordid affair, pun intended, by Christmastime, even if it absolutely killed her. Yes, she decided, by Christmas morning she'd be over Allan entirely, and what a Merry Christmas it would be.

She stood up, feeling the strength of her new resolve in her legs, and went back down the steps to retrieve Teddy, who of course hadn't moved. "Maybe I should start baking again," she said out loud, reaching down to pick him up. "Maybe I should start baking for you!"

Brydie sat Teddy down in the kitchen and headed toward the bathroom to get ready for the day. Elliott was coming over later to help her unpack, in between showing houses. There were many for sale on this street, and as Elliott explained it, that was because so many residents were like Mrs. Neumann—elderly. They were moving off to nursing homes or being buried in the Germantown cemetery.

It had been the same way in her Jonesboro neighborhood when she and Allan bought their first house. Her mother found it, and she'd gotten them a good deal, but it was the kitchen that sold them. It needed work—new cabinets and new flooring. The oven would need to be replaced, but the room was large and inviting, a complete change from the tiny apartment kitchen Brydie and Allan had been using for years.

After the divorce, they'd sold the house at a loss, and Brydie

had to leave her gorgeous convection oven behind because she had nowhere to keep it. In fact, she'd sold or let Allan keep almost everything, an action for which her mother and Elliott chastised her. But she hadn't wanted anything. The life she'd lived with Allan was over, and all of those things represented that life. It was the same reason she'd wanted to sell the house, even after Allan offered to let her have it. She knew he'd moved in with his new girlfriend, and if she stayed in that house, she'd be stuck in her old life, their old life, while he moved on with someone else.

Now Brydie heard a commotion in her new kitchen. She hurried out of the bathroom and found herself staring down at a tipped-over trash can and trash strewn all over the kitchen and living room. "Did you do this?" Brydie demanded. She glared at Teddy Roosevelt.

The dog stared up at her for a moment before lifting his leg as a stream of urine shot out all over the trash can and the floor.

"No!" Brydie screamed. She ran over to him, her bare feet losing grip, and began sliding along the slick tile, before landing on her bottom in a puddle of urine.

"Gross!" Brydie scrambled up. "You are the worst dog, ever!"

She pulled off her jeans and kicked them over to the corner of the kitchen and began searching the cabinets for something to clean up the mess with. She was on her hands and knees, in her underwear, scrubbing the floor, her earlier resolve melting away underneath her, when Elliott walked in.

"What in the hell happened in here?"

Brydie pointed over at Teddy. "He happened."

Elliott glanced from the clothes wadded up on the floor to Brydie. After a moment of confusion, she burst out laughing. "Oh my God!"

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"He's a menace."

"Well, I was wondering how things were going, but I guess now I know," Elliott said.

"I don't understand this dog," Brydie said. "I have to *carry* him outside. All he does is sleep . . . and snore . . . and fart."

Elliott wrinkled her nose. "Maybe he misses his Mrs. Neumann," she said. "I've met her a few times. She's a really sweet old lady."

"I can't imagine a sweet old lady owning a dog like this."

"I guess you'll find out in a couple of days when you meet her." Brydie rolled her eyes. "Great."

"Why don't you take him to the dog park down the street?" Elliott offered. "I bet you could both use some fresh air."

"He won't go anywhere in that harness," Brydie replied. "We went outside earlier. He just lay in the grass."

Elliott bit at the corners of her lip to keep from laughing. She had a large, wide smile that hid two perfect rows of white teeth. People were all the time comparing her to a younger, tanner version of Julia Roberts. It was a feature of which Brydie was insanely jealous, as her own bow-shaped mouth made her look as if she were in a constant pout. "He won't have to wear his harness at the dog park. And it's a gorgeous day outside."

It was a pretty day. It was the beginning of October, and still quite warm, even for Memphis. "I guess it's worth a shot," Brydie said. She tucked a piece of brown hair behind her ear. The short haircut she'd had a year ago was still in that awkward stage and wouldn't quite go into a ponytail. She looked down at herself. Her five-foot-six frame had always been voluptuous, her "baker's body," as she called it. Now her clothes hung on her. Months of stress created an effect that she'd never been able to

achieve when she was married. "But everything I own makes me look like a homeless person."

"Hush," Elliott replied. "You look great."

"I just don't want to go anywhere."

Elliott narrowed her eyes at her friend. "You can't trade one couch for another," she said. "You *have got* to get out. You've got to find a job."

"I will."

"Will you?" Elliott asked. "Because you've been saying that for the last six months. I love you, Brydie, but it's time to stop feeling sorry for yourself and do something with your life."

"I know, I know." Brydie waved her off, blinking back tears.

"The dog park would be a good start," Elliott said, her voice softening. "I know it's hard. But you can't ignore the rest of the world forever."

"Fine," Brydie said, putting her emotions in check and heading to the bedroom to find a new pair of pants. "But you're carrying Teddy Roosevelt to the car for me."

The Germantown Dog Park was just two blocks from Brydie's house. She'd never been to a dog park before, but Elliott told her that it was a place where people could let their dogs run around leash-free. This didn't sound like such a good idea to Brydie—all those dogs running around with nobody controlling them—but Elliott assured her it was perfectly fine. She parked and turned around to look at Teddy Roosevelt in the backseat. He was standing up on his back legs and panting hard, looking out the window. "Do you want to go outside?" she asked.

Teddy Roosevelt pawed at the window, making little whining noises in his throat.

"Let's go, then." Brydie opened the back passenger door and picked him up, carrying him to the gate of the park. There were about ten other people there, and none of them seemed to notice Brydie and Teddy Roosevelt. They continued playing fetch with their dogs, chatting with each other, or drinking coffee on one of the park benches. The sun was shining and the grass had been freshly cut, filling Brydie's nose with a sweet, soft scent. She loved it there.

She sat Teddy Roosevelt down on the ground and watched him lumber off, hiking his leg at the first tree he encountered. His change in demeanor surprised her. *Maybe this was a good idea*, she thought. Everyone else around her seemed to be having a good time. There was a woman to Brydie's right, a squat woman with blunt bangs and a cardigan, feeding treats to a huge harlequin Great Dane. When the Dane jumped up to grab the treat, he stood taller than his owner. After the dog gobbled up the treat, the woman said as if she were talking to an infant, "Good boy, Thor. You're such a good boy!"Then the dog licked her entire face with a tongue that was at least half the length of his body.

One man was throwing a ball while an elderly beagle chased it. Actually, the man and the beagle looked about the same age—ancient. Both were completely gray, and both had a slight limp in their gait.

Brydie was so entranced watching the Great Dane and the beagle that she didn't notice that Teddy Roosevelt had wandered off until she looked down and realized he was no longer near the tree. Feeling panic rising in her throat, she scanned the park. She didn't see him anywhere.

"Teddy!" she yelled, while other people in the park stared at her. "Teddy Roosevelt! Where are you?"

Then she saw him—at the other end of the park, sniffing at a dog, a huge, furry dog three times his size. There was a man leaning down and petting the heads of both dogs. Brydie trotted up to them, breathless.

"Is this your dog?" the man said, looking up at Brydie. He had a thick mass of curly black hair and eyes almost the same color. Stubble lined his jaws.

"I, uh . . ." Brydie couldn't think of what to say. Teddy Roosevelt wasn't really her dog. Not exactly.

The man straightened up, tucking an errant curl behind his ear. He looked at her expectantly.

"Yes," Brydie said quickly. "He's my dog."

"He seems to have taken a fancy to Sasha here."

"I'm sorry." Brydie reached down and pulled on Teddy Roosevelt's collar. "It's our first time here."

"Oh, it's fine," he replied. "She loves other dogs." He reached out his hand to Brydie. "I'm Nathan."

"Brydie."

"It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too." She smiled at him. He looked about her age—maybe a little younger—closer to thirty, and nice looking in a friendly sort of way. He was wearing dark wash jeans and an unbuttoned flannel shirt with a crisp, white T-shirt underneath. Brydie couldn't help but imagine that up close he probably smelled nice, too. "What kind of dog is Sasha? She's the size of a horse."

Nathan chuckled. "Maybe a pony, but you're right. She's a big dog. She's an Irish wolfhound, and still a bit of a puppy, and clumsy as hell."

Brydie giggled. "I don't think Teddy Roosevelt minds."

The two dogs were lying on the grass, Teddy giving Sasha's ears a good once-over.

"Your dog's name is Teddy Roosevelt?"

Brydie felt herself blush. "I didn't name him."

"Your husband, then?"

"No, no husband." Brydie's cheeks were burning. "It's just an, uh, old family name."

"I see."

The sun had begun to set and the wind had picked up. It was starting to feel chilly. Brydie hadn't been prepared for someone to ask her . . . well, anything about her life. My life, she thought. Oh, you know, I'm a broke divorcée who's been forced into playing butler to a surly, trash-eating, old pug because my best friend can't stand to see me mope around her house anymore?

She looked down at Teddy. He'd moved from investigating Sasha's ears to investigating Nathan's shoes. And then her borrowed dog began to make a hacking noise that sounded an awful lot like sneezing—backward sneezing. Before Brydie could do anything, and to her abject horror, Teddy Roosevelt opened his mouth and vomited.

He vomited all over the grass, all over himself, and worst of all—all over Nathan's shoes. Brydie couldn't do anything but watch, frozen, until the whole, disgusting performance was over.

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh. My. God. I'm so sorry!" She reached down to grab the dog. "He got into the garbage today. He must've . . . He must've eaten something . . ." she trailed off, unable to tear her eyes away from the man's shoes. Without another word, she turned and raced out of the park with Teddy Roosevelt tucked under her arm like a wiggly, barfing bowling ball, cursing Elliott the whole way home.