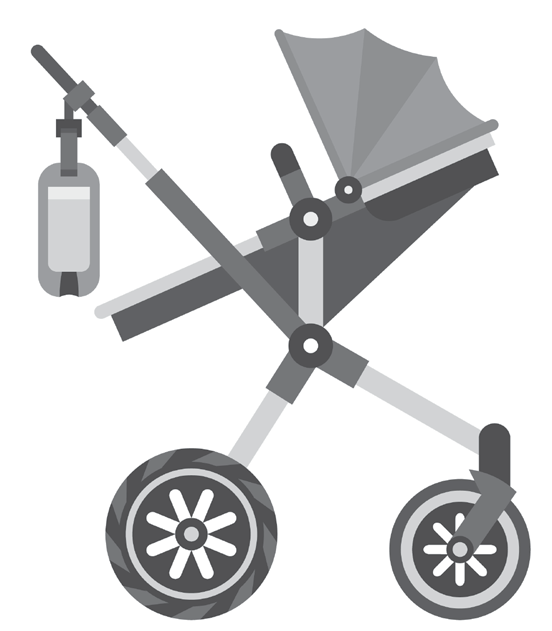
Chapter 1

 It was the mashed potatoes that did it.

The damned holiday mashed potatoes, made with nearly a pound of butter and cream cheese and onions and pepper and salt—and the occasional potato—that ruined Nathalie Kneller’s announcement, three years in the making.

And worse, she had been the one to make the potatoes. So really it was her own fault.

Usually, the family didn’t get together for Thanksgiving. Christmas was their big holiday. Ever since her dad retired and traded the house they grew up in for a condo with a parking space big enough for an RV, he’d spent more time exploring the great American roadways than not. But he would always be back in Santa Barbara for Christmas, and Nathalie and her sister would joyfully make the drive up from Los Angeles to gleefully welcome him home, and duti- fully receive the gifts he’d picked up in his travels.

Never mind that Nathalie was not in need of any more tur- quoise jewelry, or tumbled rocks taken straight out of Carls- bad Caverns. Her dad had given her a rock tumbler when she

was nine, and she’d loved it. But sometimes it seemed like she was stuck at that age, as that person, in his mind.

But this year Nathalie *begged* her father to be back by Thanksgiving. He had to be. Timing was everything.

“I don’t know, kiddo,” her father had hemmed on the phone. She could hear the radio playing in the background. *“.* . . *Listening to 104.3 KBEQ Kansas City! Stay tuned for Blake Shelton, Faith Hill, and Dierks Bentley!”*

*“*Kathy really wanted to go to Branson this trip, see the sights . . .”

Nathalie had to bite her tongue to keep her annoyance at her stepmother’s love of anything country in check.

“Please?” she’d said on the phone. “I’ll even host!” Consid- ering the postage-stamp size of the two-bedroom house she and David had just spent their life savings on, this was a card she’d hoped she wouldn’t have to play. But she had to pull out all the stops against Branson and Kathy.

“Well . . .”

“Dad, it’s . . . it’s important.”

“Important, how?” her father had asked, suspicious. “Is everything okay?”

It took everything in her to not blurt it out over the phone. But again, timing was crucial. So instead, she just said, “Everything’s great, Dad. I just . . . I’d just really love to see you. And show off the house.”

She’d heard him sigh on the other end of the line. “Okay.

I’ll talk to Kath about it, but . . . count us in.”

Nathalie had smiled and mentally fist-pumped as she said her goodbyes to her dad.

Then, cold realization settled over her: she was going to have to host Thanksgiving dinner.

At the age of thirty-three, she’d never hosted a holiday

meal. Their place had always been too small, they always had friends or family to go to . . . one way or another, it was some- thing they’d always managed to avoid. Now, she had invited it on herself.

But there was nothing to be done about it. She needed to have her family there on Thanksgiving.

Because on Thanksgiving, she would be thirteen weeks and one day pregnant.

Thirteen weeks was the cutoff point, ending the queasi- ness and worry of the first trimester, and the beginning of the (supposedly) smooth-sailing second. But more impor- tantly, it was the point at which it was universally agreed that it was safe to tell people. The chances of something going catastrophically wrong plummet, and you can tentatively share your good news—either quietly, in hushed tones over brunch with girlfriends, or by the trumpet blast of posting a sonogram pic on your Facebook wall.

Or, if you were like Nathalie, you could announce it in the Thanksgiving toast you’d had composed for three years, your family gathered around, your father sniffling away tears at the thought of his first grandchild.

So, for the next ten days, while her father took a mean- dering route back to California from the Midwest, and her husband David watched with silent bewilderment, Nathalie wrote lists, scoured Pinterest, and laid out a rational, de- tailed, and perfect plan for their very first Thanksgiving.

Number one on the list was they had to get an actual din- ing room table.

“What’s wrong with our current table?” David asked as Nathalie dragged him through IKEA.

“The bistro table can go on the deck,” *where it’s supposed to*, she finished mentally. The little metal table was whimsical in

their old tiny apartment, but they were well into adulthood now, in their thirties, with 401(k)s and homeowner’s insur- ance.

Time for the black STORNÄS extendable table that showed it.

After acquiring chairs (NORRNÄS in white, for contrast), she gave David a six-pack of his favorite IPA and set him to the task of assembly while she went and bought matching fall- themed linens, serving dishes, utensils, decorations, and all the other things that people who have never had cause to enter- tain before might not have around the house. The gold-edged china plates she’d inherited from her mother and dragged from apartment to apartment but never used finally came out of their boxes, ready for their moment in the spotlight.

The one thing she was not worried about was the food. She had made almost every single dish, minus the turkey, hav- ing brought various sides to potluck Thanksgivings and even once, when she was eleven, doing the whole dinner on her own. Plus, she had her mother’s recipe box, and knew ex- actly how to time the cooking to make everything in her small kitchen.

Although, she could use an extra pair of hands.

“Sorry, Nat, I can’t,” Lyndi said into the phone. Her little sister’s regret was apparent in the tone of her voice, but it did little to appease Nathalie.

“But you said you had it covered!” “I know, but . . .”

“It’s just one little pie!” Nathalie exclaimed. It wasn’t just one little pie. It was their father’s favorite triple berry pie, and normally she would have done it herself, but timing the pie with cooking the turkey was tricky and good leaders knew how to delegate.

“Yeah, but our oven’s totally crappy, and I don’t even have, like, a pie plate. Besides, Marcus doesn’t eat gluten so he doesn’t want any of that stuff in our apartment.”

Nathalie was glad Lyndi couldn’t see the look on her face at the mention of Marcus’s gluten sensitivity. It also didn’t help that she was in the middle of mashing the potatoes.

And oh God, the potatoes. Her morning sickness, which usually confined itself to the mornings, decided to voice a strong objection every time the masher smushed another boiled potato. She dreaded adding the butter and cream cheese and the thick dairy smells it would create.

She had just about breathed through the worst of it when Lyndi said, “You got gluten-free stuffing for him, right?”

“. . . I’m sorry?”

“For Marcus? Gluten-free stuffing?”

“You’re bringing Marcus?” Nathalie asked, incredulous. “Well, yeah. I mean, if that’s okay,” Lyndi said.

“I . . . I guess it is.” Thank God she had bought that sixth chair. “But, surely your roommate has other places to go— friends, or a party?”

In truth, Nathalie would have rather not had Marcus there. She had met him once, when she was helping Lyndi move into the third-floor apartment in the bohemian neighbor- hood of Echo Park. And he was nice enough, helping Lyndi carry her bike up the stairs. But his niceness and splitting the rent with her sister didn’t exactly warrant him being present at the moment of her big announcement.

“No, we’re going out to our friend’s pre-Thanksgiving bash tonight,” Lyndi said. “And, besides . . . you know that Marcus isn’t *just* my roommate, right?”

Nathalie blinked. “You’re dating?”

“I mean, I guess you could call it that,” she said, awkwardly.

This was news to her. And not just because she’d thought Marcus was gay.

Lyndi was twenty-four, and sometimes the years between them stood out—like when one tried to define “dating.” Often Nathalie felt like a second mother, rather than a big sister. And obviously Lyndi felt the same way, because when she finally spoke her voice was small, like a little girl caught after misbehaving.

“Are you mad?”

“No, sweetie,” Nathalie heard herself saying with a sigh. “But you could have told me earlier. Thanksgiving is to- morrow, and now I have to make the pie, *and* gluten-free stuffing!”

“So he can come? Yay!” Lyndi cheered through the phone. “And I’m sorry about the pie but hey, I’ll bring the flowers, okay? Don’t worry about that!”

Lyndi was off the phone before Nathalie could protest that she’d already got a centerpiece (a brass cornucopia she filled with tiny squashes), but as usual with her little sister, Nathalie let her get her way.

Having Lyndi there for the announcement was more im- portant than fretting over the random guy she had with her.

Of course, what she didn’t expect was Lyndi showing up the next day at noon, completely hungover.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” Nathalie said, seeing Lyndi’s gray face. She tried to hide how she was feeling with a wan smile, but it didn’t work when she was the same color as her flowy pale blue minidress.

“Happy Thanksgiving to you, too,” Lyndi said breezily, giv- ing her sister a quick hug and then slipping past her.

“Hey, Nathalie!” said the massive arrangement of flowers behind Lyndi. “Good to see you again!”

“Good to, er, see you, too,” she replied, taking the flowers (oh God, the smell) and finally being able to actually see Lyndi’s if-you-could-call-him-that boyfriend.

Marcus had a sweet smile, that was the first thing she real- ized. He was lean—likely from a lack of gluten—and ach- ingly hipster, with the skinniest of skinny jeans, a narrow strip of a tie and a full sleeve of tattoos peeking out from his button-down shirt. He was also surprisingly nervous. As one hand extended to shake hers, the other went to his short dreads, twisting the dark hair tightly.

Nathalie decided to take pity on him. “Good to see you, too, Marcus,” she said in the voice that she used with her shyest students. “Come on in, it’s wonderful to have you.”

“Hey, Marcus!” David came in from the living room, ex- tending his hand and pulling Marcus into a bear hug. Mar- cus seemed only slightly surprised, considering he’d never met David before. “I’ve got the game on. Wanna beer?”

“Um . . . do you have any wine?” Marcus replied. “White?” David only gave the slightest hesitation before he slapped Marcus on the back, and pulled him toward the TV. “Sure

thing. Hon, can you open the wine?”

“You got it,” Nathalie singsonged back. Luckily they had a bottle of white in the back of the fridge. She hadn’t had a drink in three years, and she knew Lyndi was a red girl. The white was meant for Kathy, who, when confronted by a lack of Bartles & Jaymes (which Nat didn’t know existed outside of, oh, the 1980s), would settle for a pinot grigio.

She put the flowers on the table. “These are gorgeous,” she said to Lyndi. And they were. They put her brass cornucopia to shame. Fat seasonal blooms in earthy reds and oranges, with a trail of yellow orchids flowing out, still on the vine.

“Thanks. I designed them.”

“Designed them?”

“The arrangement. It’s what I’m doing at the flower co-op now.”

“I thought you were a delivery girl at the shop.”

“I still do some deliveries, we all do . . . but I sort of got pro- moted.” Lyndi shrugged, then scowled. “And it’s not a shop, come on. You know that.”

“Of course,” Nathalie replied, wanting to keep the peace. “And congrats! On the promotion.” In truth, she didn’t really understand what Lyndi did at her current job. It was a place that sold flowers—so that was a flower shop, right? Even if it was only online? Whatever it was, Lyndi had stuck with it for six months, so it was better than any other job she’d tried. Nathalie could only hope one of these days she’d focus on a career.

A timer dinged in the kitchen. Nathalie heeded its call like Pavlov’s dog.

“Oh what is that smell?” Lyndi said, following her.

“The holiday mashed potatoes,” Nathalie answered, taking them carefully out of the oven. “Can you help me with this?” To accommodate the triple berry pie, she’d had to rear- range the timing on baking the potatoes . . . which meant she’d had to hit the pause button on cooking the turkey for an hour. But, she thought, as she and Lyndi shoved the bird back in and cranked up the heat, it would be fine in the end.

Totally fine.

“Want a glass?” Nathalie asked, as she moved to the fridge to fish out the white wine from the back.

“No, thanks,” Lyndi said, looking green.

“A little hair of the dog might make you feel better.” “What?” Her sister wrinkled her nose. “I’m not hungover.

I don’t get hungover.”

“Did you go out last night?” “Yes.”

“Do you feel like crap now?” “Yeah, but—”

“Then you’re hungover.” Nathalie gave her sister a sym- pathetic pat. “There’s a reason beer bongs are relegated to college, you know. Welcome to your midtwenties.”

Lyndi gave her a dirty look. Then she glanced at the pota- toes, and quickly changed the subject.

“When’s Dad getting here?”

“Any minute now,” she said. “He called when they hit Palm Springs, so—”

As if on cue, the sound of Dolly Parton’s “Islands in the Stream” as played on an air horn wafted through the air.

“Oh thank God,” Lyndi muttered, as she trotted toward the front door. Marcus and David were already on the front lawn by the time Nathalie got there, David helping to hand Kathy down from the steps of the massive beige RV that took up the whole driveway, and Marcus shaking awkward hands with their dad. She could tell Dad was eyeing the tattoos peeking out of his sleeve, bewildered by what the kids did to themselves these days.

“There they are!” Dad called out in his booming baritone when he saw both girls standing in the doorway. He came over immediately and wrapped them both in a bear hug. “How you doin’ squirt?”

“Great, Daddy,” Lyndi answered, giving back as good as she got.

“And you, kiddo?” he said, throwing an arm over Nathalie’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine, Dad. Glad you guys made it.” She nuzzled against his side, his dad-warmth.

“Yoo-hoo! Babe, can you help with this?” Kathy called out. Nathalie was released, as he trotted to his wife’s side to take a four-pack of Bartles & Jaymes from Kathy’s hand.

“Sweetie, you look so pale!” Kathy said, as she came up to Nathalie, air-kissing her cheek. “Do you need any help in the kitchen?”

“Nope, I’ve got it all covered!”

“Oh, good! I was worried, I made your father drive so fast to get here. But he said that you always have everything un- der control, and of course, you do!” Kathy trilled. “I’ll just go see what needs doing.”

“Nothing needs doing—”

But Kathy was already inside. Nathalie sighed. Maybe she could pawn Kathy off on setting the table.

“So, David,” she heard her dad say as they all came inside. “Who’s winning the game?”

And so the afternoon went. As Kathy kept trying to get into the kitchen to see if she could help, Nathalie would ef- fectively redirect her to something else she could do, be it refreshing the men’s drinks or finding a new place for the brass cornucopia (“What a funny thing! Why did you buy it when you have these flowers?”). Lyndi kept looking gray and wan, opting to avoid the wine and instead sipping on a gin- ger ale. Marcus, to his credit, was happy to play the hungover Lyndi’s nursemaid, leaping up to get her some ice, or put a pillow behind her, or take her on a walk to get some air. It was, Nathalie had to admit, awfully sweet.

David was ensconced on the couch, keeping her dad company, their long-established in-law relationship comfort- able and quietly spent watching sports. Although, Nathalie couldn’t help but wish David would take a page out of Mar- cus’s book—even though she told him she had everything

covered, and yep, was feeling totally great and didn’t need any help, she wouldn’t have minded a shoulder rub, a quick walk to get some air, or, for someone thirteen weeks and one day pregnant, a chance to sit down.

Finally—*finally*—the timer dinged on the turkey.

“Don’t worry, Kathy, I got it!” Nathalie said automatically, knowing that the clip of kitten heels was headed toward the kitchen. “Time to get around the table everyone!”

She heaved the turkey out of the oven, and inserted the thermometer.

The dial did not rise nearly as high as it should.

“That’s not how it’s supposed to be,” she muttered to her- self. She’d done everything right—she thought. She checked and double-checked the timing, and was sure she’d calcu- lated correctly to allow for the potatoes, and . . .

“Hold on . . . who turned down the oven?”

“I did, sweetie,” Kathy said, all shock and innocence. “You can’t cook a bird that high, it’ll dry out!”

Nathalie closed her eyes. “I know that, Kathy,” she ground out, “it wasn’t that high the whole time, I had to take the tur- key out for an hour. I looked it up—it would have been fine.”

“Well, I didn’t know *that*,” Kathy huffed.

“Now it has to go in for another . . . I don’t know how long!” And that meant that the potatoes, the beans, the stuffing,

everything else was going to go cold.

“I’m sure it’s *fine*,” Kathy tried. “We’ll cut around any pink parts.”

“I’m not serving undercooked poultry for Thanksgiving!” Nathalie nearly screeched.

“I’m just trying to help!”

“Hey, Mom,” came Lyndi’s weak voice from the kitchen doorway. “Did you know Marcus is from near Branson?”

Kathy turned to her daughter with a watery smile. “Is he? Oh, Marcus, I must know everything. Who’s your favorite art- ist? I just love the greats—Hank, and Cash, and Dolly.”

“. . . Yeah, Dolly’s the best,” Marcus said agreeably. Nathalie caught her sister’s eyes, giving a silent *thank-you*. “I’m getting pretty hungry, kiddo,” her dad then said.

“Maybe we start in on the sides while the bird finishes.” “But . . .”

“Yeah,” came David’s voice. “There’s only so many chips and guac a guy can eat. Let’s sit down.”

Nathalie looked from the underdone turkey to the ready- to-go everything else. She shoved the turkey back in, upped the heat, and set the timer. Maybe it wouldn’t take too long.

Besides, she had a toast to give.

Her heart started fluttering as they all gathered around the table. As they put the potatoes, stuffing, beans, and cran- berries on their turkey- and pumpkin-shaped trivets, she looked to David. He gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. They all took their seats, and Nathalie realized the empty space at the center where the turkey should go didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, except that everyone was here, and she got to tell them her wonderful—

*CRASH!*

“Oh my God!” Lyndi cried. “Marcus, are you okay?” “Yeah,” Marcus replied from the floor. “My chair just . . .

I think I broke it.”

The NORRNÄS chair had come apart beneath him, its Allen bolts unscrewed, its legs lying in broken bits.

“I’m so sorry,” the skinniest person there said. “It’s my fault.” “I think that one’s my fault,” David said, pulling Marcus to his feet. “Interpreting IKEA instructions is not my strongest

suit.”

Suddenly everyone was looking at their chairs with appre- hension.

“Let’s just . . . stand, for the toast,” David said, giving his wife a look. “And then we’ll . . . break out the folding chairs from the garage. Honey . . . ?”

“Yes. Yes,” she said, forcing a smile. Then, she launched into her speech. “I’m so glad that everyone could come to this family occasion . . . And you, too, Marcus. Friends are wonderful and welcome. But, like I was saying, Thanksgiv- ing is all about family. And my family is so important to me. Especially now as . . .”

“I’m sorry!” Lyndi’s voice broke through the toast, thin and reedy. She was no longer gray, she was pea-green. And she wasn’t looking at Nathalie. She was looking at the big casserole dish of holiday mashed potatoes, which was sitting directly in front of her. “Nat, I’m so sorry . . .”

She pivoted as quickly as a ballerina, grabbing the first container she saw: the brass cornucopia, which had been placed haphazardly on the buffet table behind them.

The sound of her hurling up bile and ginger ale echoed metallically through the room.

“Oh my God!” Kathy cried, once the retching was through. “Sweetie—”

“Are you okay, squirt?”

“I’m fine! I’m fine,” Lyndi said, as Marcus placed a sooth- ing hand on her back. “I’m just . . .”

The timer dinged. The turkey was ready.

Lyndi wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and gave a sheepish smile. “I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell everyone I’m pregnant.”