

Izzy's journey continues in the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. After tragedy strikes twice, Izzy returns to New York City to rebuild her life. Meeting a famous actor with a rogue reputation and stellar dance skills may open her heart again for love.

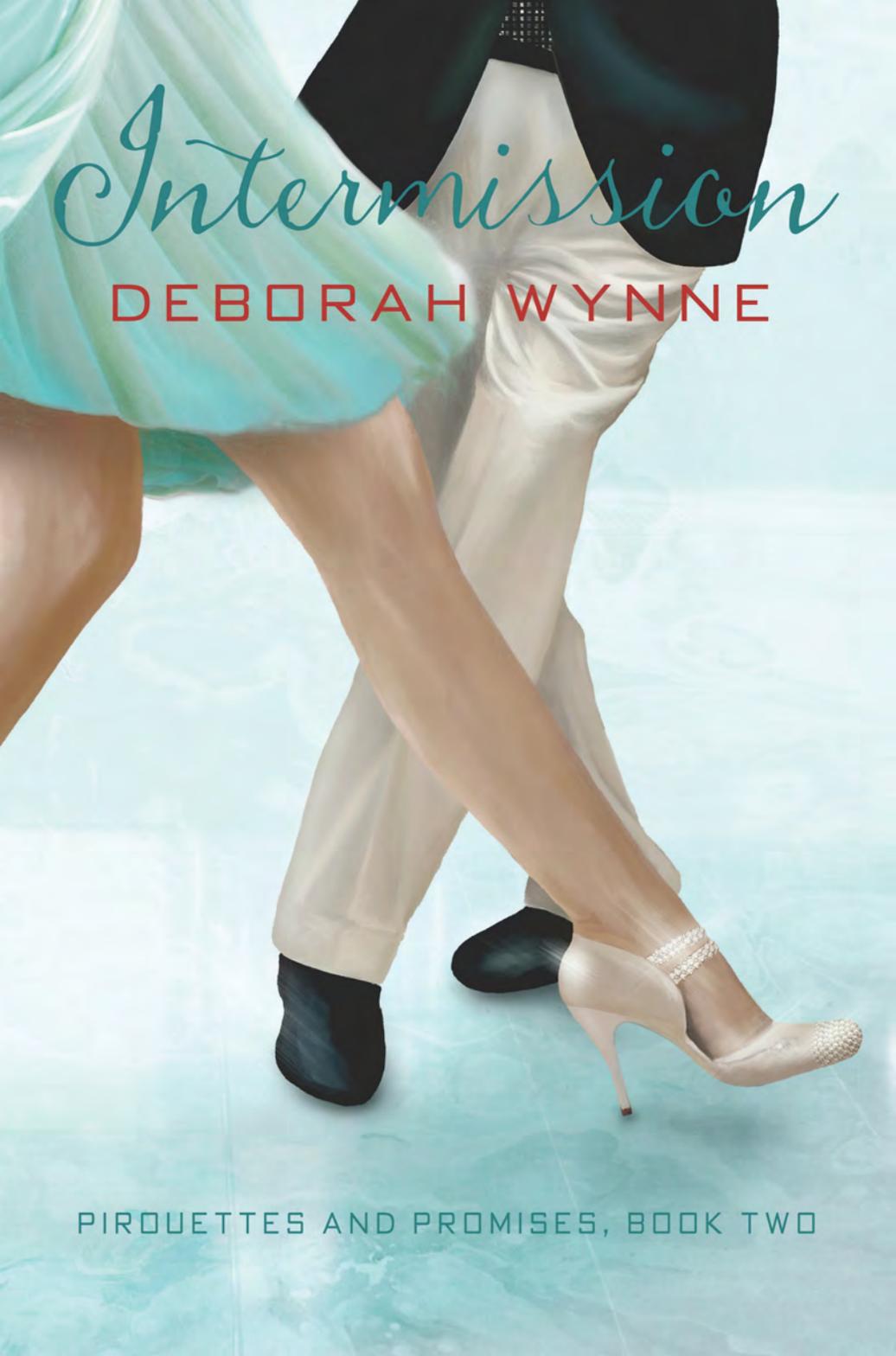
**INTERMISSION:
Pirouettes and Promises: Book Two**

By Deborah Wynne

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Intermission

DEBORAH WYNNE

PIROUETTES AND PROMISES, BOOK TWO

Praise for *Intermission*

Another home run for Wynne. Quite often the second book in a series is a letdown—that is definitely not the case with *Intermission*. This continuation to *Opening Act* has Izzy and Ashe relocating to Los Angeles. But all is not well, nor will it ever be in that city. LA is nothing like NYC and Izzy has challenges accepting that 24/7 security is now her way of life. Tragedy strikes not once, but twice, and that leads to some of the most heartrending chapters I've ever read. Wynne's ability to make you feel the emotions she's put on paper is remarkable. I was there each time Izzy cried, laughed, and just lived her life. While it is not all 'happy ever after' with this couple, someone new enters the picture and our expectations rise again. This is the second book of a series and I am already eager to read book three. Once again, I will be telling all my book-loving friends about *Intermission*.

—Linda Thompson, *Host of TheAuthorsShow.com*

Bravo once more! *Intermission* is the kind of book you cannot put down. It leaves you wanting more after every single chapter. The cliffhangers, visuals it gives, and the way Wynne makes you fall in love with all the characters is absolutely spectacular. This book deserves more than five stars. I'd read *Opening Act* and I couldn't put that one down either and couldn't wait to read the next book, *Intermission*. Now I will be on pins and needles anxiously awaiting for the third book to 'pirouette' into view as I cannot get enough of this story line and characters she has created. I highly recommend *Intermission* if you're looking for some adventure, romance, characters to fall in love with, and non-stop reading. There is never a dull moment in *Intermission*. Ms. Wynne has truly outdone herself with this next installment of Izzy's life.

—Samantha Dahl Cummings, *Banking/Lender Exchange Specialist*

Absolutely loved it. It was always going to be a hard task to follow *Opening Act* with the same level of gripping storyline that was achieved in a debut novel, but Ms. Wynne does not disappoint with *Intermission*. Continuing the journey of Izzy Roccine, *Intermission* is a story of love, loss, and hope that will have you crying and laughing in equal measure and rooting for its characters the whole way through. A real page turner that will be appreciated by book lovers everywhere.

—Jess Van der Hoech, *Counsellor (UK)* TheGapBedfordshire.co.uk

Intermission is the wonderful and perfect sequel to Opening Act.

This book continues right where Wynne left off with Izzy's exciting and emotional story in *Opening Act*. *Intermission* is both touching and sometimes unexpected, and you, the reader, will feel closer to her with every sentence. Izzy is a deep and complicated character, and you will relate to her actions and reactions as she lives her life of wealth and yet moments of emotional poverty. I couldn't put the book down once I started. This book is even better than *Opening Act* and I can't wait to see where the story continues!

—Brittany Jensen, City/County Parks Supervisor

Intermission does not disappoint. I didn't think it was possible, but I enjoyed *Intermission* even more than *Opening Act*. Wynne does a great job of taking readers through the roller coaster of emotions of Izzy's loves and losses. I laughed and cried with her. Wynne's words paint a visual picture as you read. *Intermission* left me wanting even more, so I'm hoping Wynne hurries and finishes the next installment of the *Pirouettes and Promises Series*.

—Amy Sorensen, Avid Reader

Intermission is riveting. A thought provoking look at life, love, and a woman following her heart. *Intermission* is an emotionally intense love story. The book moves along so smoothly with great flow—captivating the reader as if you are actually there. Each character had so many layers I couldn't put it down in anticipation of what was going to come next. Love, love, loved it and now I can't wait for the next installment of Izzy's life.

—Kathleen Sadler Allen, Retired Educator

I love these books! *Opening Act* was such a page turner that I read *Intermission* as soon as I could get my hands on it. Ms. Wynne seemed to introduce her characters to me personally, and by *Intermission* the writing was so close to the heart that I found myself thinking about them as if they were close friends. Both books are impeccably written, fun to cruise through and incredibly captivating. Wynne's style is light but sophisticated and her storylines are just complex enough and very juicy. I cannot wait for the rest of the *Pirouettes and Promises Series*.

—Sarah Turner, Realtor turnerlongmont.com

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CHAPTER 1

Turbulence. It just sucked. Isabella “Izzy” Roccine-Cramer was attempting to enjoy the flight from New York City to Los Angeles as the airplane pursued the sunrise. The trip had been smooth as glass until they neared the Rocky Mountains, but now every few minutes the plane jostled violently. She’d given up trying to sleep, drink her tea, or read. Instead, through distorted airline window glass, she was watching clusters of city lights below while trying to ignore the jolts. With each thump she took a sharp breath and hoped the plane wouldn’t crash. Not an experienced traveler, Izzy read the worst into every bump and roll. This was only her fourth time in a plane. Every one of her prior flights had been like a ride in an amusement park, and not in a fun way.

Her husband, Ashe Cramer, was sleeping next to her, oblivious to her discomfort. Their daughter Chloe was also asleep. Chloe’s little head was on his shoulder—her body splayed in an ‘X’ over his torso—blissfully unaware of anything other than toddler-girl dreams.

Izzy couldn’t help but giggle. Here she was a nervous wreck and the two of them were enjoying their slumber while snoring in tandem. Izzy loved watching Chloe sleep. She had so many facial expressions of Brandon, her birth father. Even while dreaming, her eyes crinkled the same way as Brandon’s when she was pondering a question and her lips naturally pouted like his when she was upset. There was an uncanny resemblance with the red hair, mossy eyes, and long torso. People always commented on how Chloe looked just like Izzy, but Izzy only saw Brandon in her daughter.

When Chloe was just a few months old, Brandon died saving a fellow fire-fighter and Izzy had been certain Chloe would grow up without a father. Ashe coming back into her life and falling in love

with him was something she would've never dreamed or predicted. They'd had a relationship years ago and at that time, even though she was fond of Ashe, she never felt the same connection she'd previously shared with Brandon. She'd painfully severed the relationship with Ashe in order to reconcile with Brandon.

She knew how badly she'd hurt Ashe, so if he hadn't ever wanted to speak to her again, she would've understood. But almost a year after Brandon's death, Ashe blazed back into her life, every bit as gallant as the proverbial knight on a white horse and swept her off her feet. Being married to Brandon had been amazing, so sometimes it was necessary to pinch herself that she'd found the same kind of happiness with Ashe.

Again the plane bounced hard and she sucked in her breath so loud it awakened Ashe. He took one look at her frightened face and laughed. He was attempting to be quiet in order to not disturb Chloe, but he couldn't restrain himself, as his chuckle rumbled through the quiet plane.

"Are you okay Isabella?" He was attempting to sound concerned, but his delighted humor in her discomfort was written all over his face. "It's just turbulence. It's quite common when you fly." He adjusted his features into a more serious face and she burst out laughing as he said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't make light of your fears."

"I don't know how you ever get used to it," Izzy whimpered half-crying, half-laughing. "Every time the plane bumps, I'm certain we're going to plunge straight to the earth."

"Were you able to sleep at all?" Ashe grabbed her hand and squeezed her fingers. His teasing was now replaced by sweet concern.

"Only about ten minutes. I'm glad we switched seats right after we took off. At least I could look out the window to keep myself occupied."

"To keep an eye out for where we were going to crash?" His teasing was back. "So where are we now? Are we going to slam into a mountain and be forced to hike out? Or perhaps in the middle of a cornfield? I'm getting great mental images of you wearing nothing but overalls, with maybe bits of straw in your hair," he raised his

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eyebrows and couldn't stop laughing. Struggling to sober his expression, he asked, "How long until we land? I'd look at my watch, but my arm is incapacitated right now." One of Chloe's legs was sprawled on top of it. Wisely, he was barely moving to keep her sleeping as long as possible.

"Not funny Ashe," Izzy retorted. "I actually don't know how close to LA we are. We've already passed over the mountains, so hopefully we're getting close. Maybe an hour or so?"

The break of dawn had finally caught up with the plane and streaky daylight was filtering into the cabin. Izzy took a moment to appreciate its beauty. The clouds had morphed cotton-candy pink and the sky was an incredible shade of robins-egg blue. Beaming, she turned to Ashe. "It's gorgeous out. Look at this sunrise."

Glancing at his shirt she noticed a huge spreading wet spot. "Wow. Chloe's a little blast furnace. You're really sweating."

He shook his head and grinned. "It's not sweat."

Izzy put her hand over her mouth and giggled. "Oh no."

"I felt her leaking a while ago. But in one of my first parenting classes from you," his voice broke into rhythmic sing-song mimicry of Izzy's instructions, "I was told that no matter how wet, or poopy, or even with waffles stuck in the hair, if a child is sleeping, the child must be left alone." He narrowed his smoky eyes and grinned. "I took all my lessons very seriously."

"You're a gold-star student. And you've become a marvelous father. I'm learning things from you now."

"Well, since I got my official daddy papers I had to rise to the occasion." His face was full of pride. Chloe's final adoption papers had arrived last week.

Izzy giggled. "I probably should've mentioned there are exceptions to every rule. There's no way in the world I would've let her pee all over me for hours."

He shook his head and comically waved his free hand at her. "So you were holding out on me, huh? Truth is, I was so tired I couldn't bear waking her up and possibly not getting a nap. This daddy was actually just being selfish. It's no biggie. I'll just clean up when we land."

“Do you have an extra shirt in one of your carry-ons?” Izzy knew he didn’t. She’d watched him pack important papers and camera gear instead of any clothing. Every stitch of clothing they’d brought had been packed by her for their checked luggage.

“Of course not,” he admitted. “I’ll just pick up something in one of the airport gift shops.”

Izzy grabbed his hand again as the plane took a big bounce. “I’ll be so glad to be on solid ground,” she sighed. Another bigger dip hit the plane and she rolled her eyes. “Oh. My. God,” she grunted under her breath.

The second harder bounce woke Chloe. Coincidentally, the pilot came over the intercom at the same time. “Sorry folks. We’re probably going to rock ‘n roll all the way into the City of Angels. We’re about twenty minutes from touch-down.”

Chloe, immediately perky after her long nap, smiled excitedly and clapped her little hands together. “Callyfonnee?”

“Pretty soon,” Izzy cooed. “Let’s get you cleaned up and let Daddy stretch.” Before lifting her from Ashe, she pulled out Chloe’s diaper bag and fished out a changing pad, wipes, and fresh clothes before stuffing the tote back under the seat.

Carefully she lifted Chloe and watched her drip all over the plastic pad. Ashe scooted over to give them more room and asked for paper towels from the flight attendants, scurrying down the aisles doing a final passenger trash sweep. Izzy quickly cleaned and dressed Chloe. Ashe dabbed at his shirt, trying to blot as much of the moisture as he could.

After Izzy passed Chloe back to Ashe, she squeezed her eyelids tight, death-gripped the arm rests, and tried to relax. Soon they’d be on solid ground. She’d have to resist the urge to get on her hands and knees and kiss the floor. It wasn’t befitting for a new Hollywood starlet.

To distract herself from the continuous raucous turbulence, she concentrated her thoughts on her future movie. The film would be based on the hit Broadway show she’d starred in, *Over the Violet Moon*. It had taken Broadway by surprise with its innovative dance-based story and incredible music. Nominated for numerous Tony

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awards, it had won three. Izzy had won Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical and the music score had been honored. Triumphantly it had also won Best New Musical. Making a movie version had seemed like natural progression. Izzy was excited that Ashe and his business partner Zak had scooped up the film rights and offered her the starring role.

Both Ashe and Zak had been in the movie business before, but this was their debut venture into mainstream films. For several years they'd dabbled with other Hollywood producers to get their feet wet in the industry and now felt confident doing a film on their own. Previously, they'd both made a fortune in the adult film business. Ashe had starred in porn films for Zak before he retired from acting and bought a partnership in the company. They sold the adult film production company to start A2Z. The new company was starting to gain momentum and notoriety; now they were flooded with scripts and projects to evaluate.

Ashe's past wasn't an issue for Izzy. In fact that's how she'd met him. When she was in the break-up phase with Brandon, Ashe claimed her virginity. He specialized in deflowering for adult films, but also booked private appointments that weren't filmed. It had been important for her to lose her virginity to a professional expert of sorts. She'd known nothing about sex back then and at that time, felt her virginity and naiveté was what caused the devastating breach with Brandon.

Ironically Ashe was also a rich socialite. His family's wealth and charitable endeavors are legendary. Anybody who's anybody knows the Cramer family. His parents, Ashe III and Gloria, have no clue as to what type of films comprised the first corporation. Ashe explained to his folks that he and Zak made documentaries. Izzy had nearly fallen off a chair laughing when he told her what his parents knew about his previous work. For years, because of his family's notoriety, he'd worn disguises in public. Fake glasses, hats, a shadowy beard. It was nice to see him boldly out in public now, without any duplicity.

Eyes still jammed shut, she was smiling at the necessary deception to his parents when she felt the plane land. Three rapid, smooth bumps. She was finally on the ground and felt tears of relief

dribble down her cheek. Hopefully she wouldn't have to fly again for a very long time. Although she'd promised Ashe that when she was finished filming *Over the Violet Moon*, they'd finally take a belated honeymoon. She wanted to see Paris. He claimed he didn't really care where they went (since he was already well-traveled), but admitted Paris was one of his favorite cities. She had no idea how she'd endure such a long flight without taking drugs of some sort. But she knew she couldn't let him down. Traveling the world had been one of his dreams and he'd selflessly given it up to support her career and create a solid home life for his new family.

Ashe clasped her fingers as they taxied to the gate. "We're here Isabella. Are you ready for our new beginning?"

She nodded. Her words poured out in staccato excitement, "I am so ready to start our new life. This is very exciting. I can't wait to see California. And of course, our new house. And Rodeo Drive. And the Hollywood sign on the side of the hill. I can't wait to see the ocean and the beach. I absolutely want to take Chloe to Disneyland." With every tick off her list, her voice became more enthusiastic and animated.

She noticed Ashe couldn't hide his amusement as they gathered their belongings to exit the plane. "I'm pumped for all those things too," he agreed, then patted the wet splotch on his shirt. "But first things first. I need to buy a shirt before we fetch our luggage and find Lawrence."

"I can't wait to see Lawrence again," Izzy mused. "I've missed him." Lawrence had been Ashe's driver for years. He was kind, friendly, dependable, and most importantly an excellent driver. He'd flown to California several weeks ago to acquire cars, hire drivers and security personnel, and overall ensure their move went smoothly. Izzy was certain he was probably weary of deliveries, since she and Ashe had made numerous on-line purchases to be delivered to their new home. Their other household possessions would arrive next week with the mover, but they'd already procured enough to be comfortable until the moving truck arrived.

Since they'd flown first class they were able to leave the plane quickly. Ashe was carrying Chloe as well as most of the carry-ons.

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As they traipsed down the concourse, he handed Chloe back to her so he could duck into the first gift shop they spotted.

Izzy found a bench to wait. Her stomach still felt queasy and her knees remained shaky after the flight. Chloe was attentive to everyone walking past them. Izzy loved the wonder little children showed in new situations. As an adult she only felt trepidation over any change in her life. Even when she was excited about something, like moving to California to make a movie in Hollywood, she always felt an overwhelming aura of foreboding. Like at any minute her happiness would be shattered again.

She turned away from the parade of passengers exiting flights and rummaged through her purse for a brush for Chloe's curls. Looking past Chloe's hair, she saw a redheaded woman from their flight. She'd spotted her when they'd boarded at La Guardia and thought the woman bore an uncanny resemblance to Jenna, Brandon's old girlfriend. Jenna had turned out to be a devious and manipulative woman who almost ruined her relationship with Brandon forever. A chill flashed down her spine as the woman got closer.

Truthfully, she'd only seen Jenna once up-close. It was the devastating morning Jenna had opened Brandon's door instead of him and had untruthfully told Izzy that Brandon didn't want to see her anymore. It was the heart-shattering incident that precipitated the misunderstanding and subsequent break-up with Brandon. But Izzy had seen plenty of photos of Jenna, so her face was burned in memory. This woman walking towards them certainly looked just like her. In the plane she'd ducked behind other passengers when Izzy caught her eye, so Izzy had convinced herself it was too coincidental that Jenna would be on the same middle-of-the-night flight.

Trying to avoid a direct look, Izzy peered from behind Chloe's head and tried to get a better glance. The woman locked eyes on Izzy, then bowed her head nonchalantly as she stepped into a restaurant. Izzy still didn't get a sharpened look at her, but there was something about the way the woman tossed her hair that Izzy knew it

was Jenna. On that horrible fateful morning Jenna had used the same mannerism.

What the hell was Jenna doing in California? Why was she on the same flight? It was all too weird and coincidental. Izzy felt like she was going to hyperventilate and defensively started drawing in deep breaths. Surely it was all just that. A coincidence. Or perhaps just her imagination. She'd talk to Ashe about it later and he'd concur it was her imagination.

She felt someone touch her shoulder and since her thoughts were filled with ghosts of her past, she jumped. "What...", she exclaimed. She heard Ashe's laughter.

"Sorry sweetheart. I didn't mean to startle you." She looked into a grinning face and knew he was up to one of his practical jokes. He tossed her a shopping bag. "Here are some shirts for you and Chloe. I'm going to go put mine on. Meet you back out here in a few. Then you can go change too." He winked as he walked away.

"I don't need to change," she argued, across the swath of people.

He turned around and from the middle of the walkway, spread his arms dramatically and said, "Oh, I think you should. You know, so you fit in better." She saw a glimmer in his eye and just shook her head.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the restroom. She spotted him through a fresh throng of passengers rushing in front of her. He was wearing an oversized neon tie-dyed shirt. When he cleared the crowd and got closer, she could read it. It said in huge black letters, *Welcome to Hollywood*. She burst out laughing.

"You're kidding. There wasn't just a gray or black t-shirt with smaller writing available?" She couldn't stop laughing at how silly he looked.

He stopped in front of her, cocked a hip, and struck a model pose. "Pretty cool, huh?" He fumbled in his trouser pocket and pulled out a pair of garish orange sunglasses. "Here, you need to see the whole look."

"As if the shirt isn't ridiculous enough?" She couldn't stop giggling. It was pretty funny. Then she stopped laughing and

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fingered the shopping bag. “You didn’t. Please tell me you didn’t buy a stupid looking shirt for me too.”

“I’ll hold Chloe while you go change. Chop-chop now, Mrs. Cramer, we don’t want to keep Lawrence waiting.”

She frantically shook her head before slumping her shoulders in surrender. She knew there was no use arguing with him. “This isn’t funny anymore Ashe. I’ll look ludicrous.”

“That’s the point, Isabella. We’re going to have some fun looking like enthusiastic tourists.” He nodded to the bag, “Hand me Chloe’s and I’ll pull it over her other shirt while we wait for you. Don’t forget the new sunglasses.”

A few minutes later she exited the ladies’ room, still giggling at the absurdity of the whole prank. Chloe’s chin was on her chest and was intently fingering her new shirt, clearly delighted by the bright colors. Noticing Izzy was back and that they all matched, she pointed at Izzy, then herself, and then finally Ashe. “Mommy, me, Daddy.”

Ashe stood and loaded their bags on his shoulders as Izzy held Chloe. He pulled out his phone, insisting on a selfie of them before saying, “C’mon, Mrs. Cramer. We have paparazzi to meet.”

“What? Where? How do you know that?” Izzy was not prepared for this complication so early in the morning. The clownish shirts just compounded her anxiety.

“TMZ and the other entertainment outlets are always at the airport. I thought dressing like this would be fun if they spotted you.” Ashe leaned over the bags and gave her a peck on the cheek. “You always look beautiful Isabella. No worries.”

“Maybe I should roll the sleeves up, preppy-style,” she murmured.

“Won’t help,” he said while laughing.

As they traipsed to the luggage carousels, her mind raced. She wasn’t sure what scared her more; if the paparazzi saw her and recognized her or if they didn’t notice her. She didn’t feel she was really that famous, particularly in this town. New York City had somewhat been a different story, since her face had been plastered on giant billboards during her Broadway run. She gritted her teeth, prepared to be humiliated no matter what.

CHAPTER 2

The three of them jaunted through the concourse. Izzy checked over her shoulder every few moments to see if she could spot Jenna again. So far she hadn't reappeared. It was a relief but she still wanted to talk to Ashe about it. She knew he'd reassure her; convince her that there was nothing to be concerned about if indeed it was Jenna.

Every time Izzy glanced at Ashe, he just smiled and winked. They all looked like zealous tourists from the mid-west. She could swear he was actually strutting with his chest puffed out. He was wearing his gaudy sunglasses proudly, she'd tucked hers into her collar, and Chloe was chewing on the ends of her toddler neon-pink ones.

After they exited the secure area, a tall handsome man wearing a black suit and gray tie, was waiting with a sign that read 'A2Z'—the name of Ashe and Zak's movie production company. With collar-length curly blond hair and a physique suited for a *GQ* cover, the man looked just like Thor from the comic books and movies. Chloe thought so too and pointed at him as she exclaimed excitedly, "Thor, it's Thor," and clapped her hands.

Ashe stepped forward to shake his hand. "Hello, I'm Ashe Cramer."

"Hello," the man said politely in a warm bass voice. "I'm Jamison Sigley. Lawrence Mateo hired me to provide security and be a driver for your family. He's waiting outside with the limo."

"Pleasure to meet you," Ashe said. "Lawrence texted me to look for you. This is my wife Isabella Roccine-Cramer and our daughter Chloe."

As Izzy offered her hand to him, Chloe unexpectedly leaned forward for Jamison to hold her. Jamison used his elbow to pin the

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sign against his suit, broke into laughter, and took her from Izzy. Chloe giggled and poked her pudgy finger several times into his whiskered cheek. She turned with enormous eyes and proclaimed more emphatically than before, “It’s Thor.”

They all laughed. Izzy knew Jamison was obviously comfortable around children; first when he readily held Chloe and then when he said, “Yep it’s me. Nice to meet you Miss Chloe.”

Jamison continued to carry Chloe as they secured metal carts and pushed their way through the crowd of passengers. Chloe had her arm casually slung around his neck and was completely enjoying being held by one of her heroes.

The luggage carousels were chaotic. People waited five deep then rudely shoved others out of the way if they thought they saw their bags tumbling down the conveyer belts. Izzy stood at the side, holding Chloe and guarding their carry-ons, as Jamison and Ashe methodically pulled bags and toddler paraphernalia to stack on the carts. Chloe kept laser focus on ‘her’ Thor, frantically bopping her head around people blocking her view, as if she expected him to fly away.

Once everything was gathered, Ashe and Jamison pushed the carts towards Izzy and she secured Chloe in her stroller. Seeing the overloaded teetering carts reminded her of when she moved from Colorado to New York, and she got the same tingle of excitement she’d experienced that beautiful fall morning years ago. It’d be perpetual spring or summer in California and she knew she’d miss New York autumns. They were glorious.

As a clustered group, they trekked towards the exit doors. Out of thin air, Izzy was mauled by paparazzi. Flashes blinded her, microphones were thrust in her face, and strangers jostled her arms. Jamison moved like lightning. In one stealth movement he quickly put a loose jacket over Chloe’s face, then pivoted like a linebacker in front of the cameras to protect Izzy. Frightened, Izzy attempted to back up but froze instead. This had never happened to her before. But these weren’t regular reporters, this was her rude introduction to rag press and tabloids. She felt her heart pounding and her hand flailed behind her back trying to find Ashe to hold onto.

Izzy heard a booming voice above the din that she didn't recognize—shouting at the paps to 'get back'. She thought maybe the voice came from an airport security guard or a police officer when a giant Native American Indian, in a perfectly tailored business suit, and chestnut colored braids trailing down his back, brushed past her. He authoritatively assumed a position, arms outstretched, next to Jamison.

"I said get back," he bellowed. Obediently, they all backed up and reluctantly put their cameras down. Once there was adequate space between the interlopers and Izzy, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her behind Ashe, for extra protection.

The paps dissipated quickly, looking for a new mark. The savior bodyguard turned to face Ashe and Izzy. "Sorry folks, didn't mean to intrude. I could see things were going to get out of hand with just one security man." He nodded to Jamison, "Great reaction and excellent move to cover the baby's face. Those scumbags don't need to be taking pictures of little kids." He smiled gently and focused his gaze on Izzy, "You okay ma'am?"

Izzy nodded, but was too shaken to say anything.

"Thank you," Ashe said and offered his hand. "We appreciate the assistance. We're just moving here and don't have our full security detail yet."

"You're welcome, sir," he said, enclosing Ashe's hand in huge fingers. "My name is Martin Running Bear—yes it's my real name," he smiled and winked, "and I'm also relocating." He pulled a business card out of his wallet and handed it to Ashe. "Here, give me a call or e-mail me. I'd be honored to interview for a position. I'll send my resume and references."

Ashe studied the card's front and back before returning his gaze to Martin. "Nice to meet you. I'm Ashe Cramer. Have you already made transportation plans? We have a driver waiting for us outside. We'd be happy to give you a lift and we can visit while we drive."

"Thanks, but I don't want to impose," he offered.

"No imposition. I insist." Ashe turned to Jamison. "Please let Lawrence know we have another passenger."

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Jamison nodded as he shook Martin's hand, murmured thanks, and pulled his phone out to text Lawrence.

Izzy thought Jamison looked a bit perplexed. Perhaps he was wondering why his new boss was offering a ride to a stranger. She trusted Ashe because she knew he had excellent instincts. He'd never invite someone they didn't know unless he felt comfortable. Also having Jamison and Lawrence with them provided a buffer against any nefarious activity or dangerous intentions.

They found Lawrence waiting outside—leaning against a sleek, black Cadillac limousine. He greeted Ashe with a man-hug, complete with thumps on the back, before squeezing Izzy and then ruffling Chloe's curls. It felt wonderful to be in his care again.

He matter-of-factly shook Martin Running Bear's hand before helping Jamison and Ashe load the luggage. Martin expertly hooked Chloe's car seat in place. Chloe meanwhile was craning her neck to make sure her new super-hero friend didn't disappear.

A few minutes later the limo was cruising down the freeway. Chloe was sitting next to Jamison and was trying to ask him about his hammer and Loki with swooping arm movements. He was only discerning random words from her toddler jabbering, but nodded patiently and told her he hadn't seen Loki in a while. Ashe and Martin were quietly visiting and Izzy tuned everyone out. She wanted to concentrate on seeing her new state.

The road was lined with majestic palm trees mimicking skinny, floppy headed skyscrapers. Enormous blooming shrubs—that she assumed were azaleas—filled the median. The giant bushes were an array of pinks, oranges, and reds showcased against glossy green leaves. Wandering fuchsia dangled over cement retaining walls and sangria colored bougainvillea meandered through fences. The houses on the hills above the road were a spectacular array of architectural styles. Each one was a unique jewel and she wondered what the people were like that lived in them. Everything was breathtakingly beautiful.

Chloe's voice pulled her attention from sightseeing since Chloe couldn't stop yammering at her new best friend. Izzy felt sorry for him being held hostage by a toddler's endless questions. She

wondered if the nickname would stick or whether they'd call him Jamison. Izzy hoped for the nickname since Jamison was eerily close to Ashe's porn-star name Jamie. She decided to ask if he minded an alternative identity.

"Is it okay if we call you Thor?" She ventured with a wry grin. "Or would you prefer Jamison?"

He laughed and shrugged. "Mrs. Cramer, I'm on your payroll. You can call me whatever you'd like. But I do like Thor, its rather flattering." He mock tossed his hair and two-fisted flexed his arms in his lap. Both Izzy and Chloe giggled.

"Please call me Isabella, Thor," Izzy grinned. "As you can see, my daughter is absolutely infatuated with you. She's certain you just stepped out of the movie." She watched him sweetly look at Chloe and knew in an instant he'd be assigned in general to Chloe and not her.

Izzy thought maybe she shouldn't resume her sightseeing and pay more attention to the rogue applicant in the car. It looked like he was getting along well with Ashe, which meant Ashe might hire him to protect her. She was certainly grateful he'd stepped in to help Thor ward off the tabloid goons.

"We haven't been properly introduced," Izzy began and offered her hand to Martin. "I'm Isabella. The little ginger girl, who seems to have a crush on Thor, is our daughter Chloe." Izzy noticed Chloe momentarily take her eyes off of her super-hero and glance at the other passenger in the car. "Thank you so much, Martin, for running interference at the airport."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Isabella," Martin said as his big hand engulfed Izzy's. "I'm a huge fan of yours. My former employer was also a fan. We saw you on Broadway. She fell in love with your dancing during your Broadway debut in *Music Box Shadow*, then followed your career closely. I'm certain we went to *Over the Violet Moon* a dozen times. I recognized you as soon as I saw you on the plane. I just happened to be in the right place at the airport to see you tangle with the cameras. And please, call me Bear."

Izzy noticed his coffee eyes were kind, but also held a mischievous glint. "Thank you," Izzy said. "We're moving here so

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that we can make a film version of *Over the Violet Moon*. I apologize, I haven't been paying attention to your conversation with my husband. I'm a little besotted by the landscape. Everything is so lush and colorful and I've never seen a real palm tree before. They're everywhere."

Bear nodded and grinned. "I've always wondered how they survive in the Santa Ana winds," he said. "They look so top-heavy." His expression was earnest as he changed the subject. "I've been away from LA for several years, working and living in New York, but the foliage and weather are close to perfection here in California. Happy to be back. And you haven't missed much with our conversation. Your husband graciously offered to set up an interview for your security detail, but indicated you'd have final say. So make a list of all your questions. I'll be happy to answer all of them. My last employer was a dear elderly woman who recently passed on. I'd love the opportunity to work for a young family. I think you all might have a bit more fun than she did in her final years." His wide grin made her smile.

Izzy thought he seemed really nice and his eyes had tenderly moistened when mentioning his former boss. He certainly moved his enormous frame quickly so he must be in good shape as well as possessing sharp instincts. Weeks ago, Ashe told her she needed security and even though she'd initially balked, she knew it'd be necessary in LA. The airport experience was real-time proof he'd been correct. She wanted someone she could trust as well as enjoy being around. Bear seemed fascinating and she loved his happy smile.

Ashe already had exchanged e-mail addresses and taken a phone photo of Bear's driver's license to verify his identity. She looked forward to interviewing him, although deep down she'd already decided she wanted him as her personal bodyguard. As soon as he'd started visiting with her, she'd felt safe around him. It was a bonus that he already knew about her career. Flattery will get you the job, she thought while smiling.

Lawrence interrupted their conversation. "Mr. and Mrs. Cramer," he began formally as if to impress Thor and Bear with high-brow

protocol, “we’re approaching your new house. I’ll drop you off and then take Mr. Running Bear to his hotel downtown.”

Izzy suspected Lawrence wanted to do a little preview screening and vetting, one-on-one, with the unsolicited security candidate.

Lawrence turned into a driveway with expansive ornate iron gates. Izzy wanted a closer look and told Lawrence to roll down the windows so she could poke her head outside. There was an incredible canopy of two beautiful amethyst blooming trees featured on each side of the drive. They emitted a sweet perfume and Lawrence informed her they were Jacaranda trees. She was impressed he knew the name; she’d never heard of them. There were also little guard offices on each side of the gate. Both were empty, so other than Thor, it was apparent Lawrence had postponed hiring additional staff until they arrived. Lawrence punched in a code and the gates squealed as they slowly opened. He eased the car down a very long driveway lined by tall palm trees. Izzy sucked in her breath as the house came into view.

Long, low, and sprawling, it seemed similar to Frank Lloyd Wright homes and was comprised almost entirely of glass. She could see the two story guest house off to the side. Both mid-century modern houses seemed enormous. There were expanses of lush golf-course-worthy lawn with more blooming trees, tall wispy grasses, and clustered shrubbery spattering the turf. The massive front door was framed by two incredible trees that Lawrence told her were Mimosa trees. They displayed exquisite pink and white silky-thread blossoms. She’d never seen anything like them.

As he pulled into a circular cobblestone driveway in front of the main house, Izzy’s heart pounded. She couldn’t believe this was really her life and that she’d be living here. Memories flooded her mind of her modest and beloved apartment when she moved to New York City. A few years later, when she and Brandon had moved to the penthouse in the same building, she felt like she was the luckiest girl on earth. But this was the stratosphere; a level so much higher it sucked her oxygen. It was like a gorgeous film set and didn’t seem real. She’d never aspired to live like this, but was determined to enjoy and appreciate every luxurious day.

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After they'd bought the house, Ashe informed her there was a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi spa, and a pool house in the backyard. She couldn't wait to use it all and envisioned herself lounging—in a new sexy bikini wearing iconic Jackie-O sunglasses—next to shimmering cerulean waters. Just like movie stars she'd seen in magazines.

Bear's voice interrupted her decadent daydream. "Sir, it looks like the main door of the guest house is ajar. Before your family exits the car, it should probably get a look-over."

Bear's voice was steady, calm, very matter-of-fact. She already loved his confident demeanor. Izzy could feel her pulse quicken in alarm, but Ashe seemed unconcerned.

"Uh, let me check on something," Ashe stammered and pulled out his phone. After reading some of his texts, Izzy could swear he was trying not to grin. "Lawrence and Jamison, stay here with my girls. Bear, why don't you come with me?"

Izzy thought Ashe's behavior was strange, but he looked self-assured as he strode from the car with the giant bronze man shadowing him. She noticed Bear say something to him, then clap him on the back. She could swear by the up and down movement of their shoulders that they were both laughing.

A few minutes later they emerged smiling from the guest house and Ashe told them it was fine to get out of the car. She was slightly annoyed that her Cinderella-coach-fairy-tale moment had been ruined by the damn mysterious open door, but grateful that everything seemed fine. It never occurred to her to ask why the door had been open. After the bouncy flight, thinking she'd seen Jenna at the airport, and the experience with the tabloid photographers—her nerves were shot and it didn't seem important. And with no sleep all night, she was tired. She replaced her thoughts of sitting by her new pool, with curling up on a bed for a much-needed nap.

CHAPTER 3

Ashe helped Isabella out of the limo as Thor freed Chloe from her car seat. As Ashe took Chloe in his arms from Thor, he couldn't wait to see his wife's expression when she viewed the inside of the house. Her face was full of anticipation as they walked to the door. He noticed she was savoring the moment as she touched one of the tree's dangling delicate blossoms floating near her hair. He pushed the modern glass door open and she walked in first. She meandered to the middle of the room and turned around slowly on the flawless marble floor.

"Oh my," she whispered incredulously. "This is stunning, Ashe."

Ashe put Chloe down and his precious daughter immediately started running around in circles. Chloe became fascinated with the echo in the room and was laughing as her feet flapped on the floor. Isabella just stayed in the center of the room, her eyes taking in every detail. Finally she walked to the long wall of glass patio doors to peer out at the pool and gardens. He noticed she was trembling.

"I can't believe we're going to live here," Izzy murmured. "This is like something out of *Architectural Digest*. Wow."

Ashe walked to her and circled her waist with his arm. He loved seeing her face full of hope and joy. He knew how badly she'd suffered when she lost Brandon. Ashe understood that same deep, painful grief because he'd lost his first wife to cancer. He'd been inconsolable for years. But then Isabella came into his life, opening his heart to new beginnings. He was so deliriously peaceful and happy, it was almost frightening.

Becoming a father to Isabella's child had been the icing on the cake. Chloe was an adorable little girl. Not only was she a miniature look-a-like of her beautiful mommy—she was smart, loving, and had

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the most delightful giggle. He watched her circling her mom's legs, bouncing and vivacious, enjoying the freedom to run around unencumbered. Chloe's joy was a reflection of his own and Isabella's. Every day he was grateful that they'd found each other again.

The house was indeed gorgeous. The veritable definition of open concept; it showcased vaulted ceilings, low-slung built-in's, and several modern sleek fireplaces. The gourmet kitchen was suitable for a Michelin-star chef, but yet a smidge quirky since it had a peony-pink paneled fridge and matching pink center island.

Leaving Chloe to continue to explore on her own, Isabella grabbed his arm and started walking towards the back of the house. "I want to see the bedrooms," she whispered reverently.

"Let's take a quick walk in the back yard first," Ashe said and glanced expectantly at the front door. He'd just unlatched the accordion wall of glass and was folding the enormous panels against the wall, when the front door opened. Both turned around.

"Oh my God, Dory!" Izzy exclaimed. The two girls ran to each other before embracing and giggling while jumping up and down like teenagers. "Ashe, did you know about this?"

Ashe nodded. "I did. She contacted me and let me know she was going to be in California to visit a friend and wanted to surprise you. I was worried the open door at the guest house would give our secret away." He could feel his face beaming. This was a good surprise for his sweet wife. Dory was Brandon's sister and Izzy spent long hours on the phone with her. They'd remained extremely close after Brandon's untimely death.

Dory stopped giggling long enough to say, "I made him promise not to tell you. I'll be here until Mom and Dad get here next week. Mom thought you might need a bit of help with Chloe and since I was coming out anyway to see my old college roomie; I decided to extend my trip a bit longer." Dory glanced at Ashe. "I figured it might be the only time I'd have the guest house and that incredible pool mostly to myself. Mom said that the family clan has filled out the schedule for nearly six months, in order to always have someone here to take care of Chloe, while you guys are working and filming.

So I'll get first crack to spoil my niece without Mom pulling her attention. And of course to watch her if you guys have shopping to do...or need private time." Dory winked and smiled, clearly inferring activities not related to the procurement of household décor.

The excitement of having her aunt in the room had hyper-energized Chloe and she was pretending to fly around the room, complete with arms outstretched and vrooming noises. Everyone laughed at her.

"That's fabulous Dory. Thank you so much," Izzy said and hugged her sister-in-law again. "We could use a nap." She looked at Ashe and giggled. "Well, at least one of us could use a nap. Ashe was able to sleep on the plane. It was bouncing all over. I was a wide-awake nervous wreck."

"I have a play-crib and some toys already set up in the guest house. Let me get her out of your hair for a while, so you can explore your new house. Lawrence already showed it to me. It's stunning. Just text me when you want her back." Dory nodded at Ashe. "Also you mentioned you've hired security. I've already met Jamison. Before he left for the airport this morning to fetch you guys, he helped me carry stuff inside the guest house. Have you noticed he looks just like...?"

Dory didn't finish the question, since before she could say the name, both Izzy and Ashe said in unison, "Thor."

"Chloe thinks so too. She's clearly smitten by him," Ashe interjected.

"Since he's security, should he stay inside with us?" Dory asked hopefully, causing all of them to laugh again.

"No," Ashe said while chuckling. "Sorry, Dory, he can stay at the gate." Ashe shook his head, "I'm certain Lawrence has this place buttoned down safe and sound."

Clunking and squeaking wheels interrupted the conversation as Lawrence and Bear hauled luggage through the doorway. Ashe turned to them, "I think I'd like to take my three favorite ladies out for lunch in a little while. Bear would you like to join us? A test run of sorts?"

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Bear nodded. “Sure, that’d be great. I just need to drop off bags at the hotel and freshen up a bit, then I’ll take a cab back here. No need to pull Lawrence off the job to chauffeur me around.”

Ashe was pleased with his idea. “After lunch and maybe a bit of Rodeo Drive shopping, if Dory wouldn’t mind entertaining Chloe, then Izzy and I can sit down to get to know you better.”

He’d been fully impressed by how quickly Bear had intervened at the airport. Bear, noticing that the guest house door was partly open, had just confirmed that he’d like Bear on their team. Izzy seemed comfortable with him too, but he wanted her to have full authority if she preferred someone different assigned to her. If Bear wasn’t her cup of tea, it didn’t mean that Bear couldn’t work for them in general. Ashe knew that security in LA was imperative. Anyone that had money or was any sort of public persona was a target for weirdos and whack-jobs. They’d need more than just a few security personnel.

“C’mon Chloe,” Dory called. “Let’s go see your new toys at the other house.” Under her breath so only Izzy and Ashe could hear, she added, “Mommy and Daddy have a few fun things to do without a toddler running around.” Dory raised her eyebrows mischievously and Ashe pulled Izzy close to him while Izzy blushed.

The rest of their luggage had been deposited in the entryway and Dory was carrying a giggling Chloe out the door as Ashe cradled Izzy’s head and kissed her. “So what do you think of our new home so far?”

“It’s incredible. Thank you so much Ashe. This was a fabulous idea to buy Marcie and Sam’s house.”

Ashe knew Izzy had become close friends with Marcie when Izzy moved to New York City. Izzy’s first apartment was a sub-let of Marcie’s because Marcie wanted to move in with Sam upstairs in the penthouse. Izzy and Marcie had grown sister-like over the years. Sisters that had never been in the same room or met in real life. Ashe was aware they used FaceTime or talked and texted constantly, but circumstances had never allowed them to actually hug each other. He also knew Izzy living in Marcie’s former home would give her a

level of peace and belonging. It was different from moving into a stranger's house.

According to Sam, since Marcie became an A-list international actress and was always filming in exotic locations, she'd only actually stayed or lived in this house a few months. It'd been long enough for Marcie's loving spirit and her avant-garde decorative panache to encompass the property. Ashe had become good friends with Sam who was a sought-after investment guru. He depended on Sam's astute advice as well as sense of humor. He wasn't sure how Sam and Marcie's marriage survived the long absences. Ashe couldn't fathom being away from Izzy even for a full night, resulting in odd-hour flights when business necessitated travel. It was even difficult being apart during the daytime when both had obligations.

"Okay, Isabella," Ashe began, "you mentioned something about pink when we boarded at LaGuardia. Does the pink fridge have anything to do with your comment?"

Izzy giggled. "Uh, yea. Marcie is simpatico for anything and everything pink." Izzy explained how Marcie's former apartment and penthouse were drenched in pink. "She uses pens with pink ink to write notes and every gift I've ever received from her has been pink. She swears it's her auspicious color. We should probably wander the rest of the house to see how much white or taupe paint we'll need." In a lowered voice, Izzy confessed she'd like the pink in the kitchen to remain 'as is' and that she'd always retained a bit of Marcie's pink—just in case there was any merit to the superstition.

"Alrighty then," Ashe agreed, "we may have some painting in our future. Let's look around—make a list. At least this part of the house and the kitchen look okay. The pink fridge will grow on me. It's kind of artsy. I don't want to mess around with any lucky pink karma." Truthfully, he was so happy being married to Isabella, he wouldn't care if the whole house resembled a flamboyance of flamingos.

They wandered the regular bedrooms—only one which was pink and could become Chloe's room. Next they inspected the bathrooms. Fortunately there were no pink toilets, sinks, or tile. The master bedroom was another story and was completely dripping in pink.

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Both burst out laughing. Pink walls, pink carpeting, pink drapes. Even the walk-in closets were punked-out pink.

“Oh my, this needs an overhaul,” Izzy groaned. “I guess we can use one of the guest rooms while it’s being re-done. I’m a bit scared to look in the master bath.” She grimaced and Ashe laughed.

Fortunately a quick look revealed that the sinks and toilet were white and Carrara marble had been used to line the enormous shower and floor. In unison, both sighed in relief. The bathroom’s gaudy fuchsia walls could be quickly painted and the bubble-gum-hued pendant lights over the sinks could be switched out easily.

“I think we dodged a bullet,” Ashe said while grinning. “There’s nothing here that can’t be remedied in a few days.” He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “So recap for me what pink we’re keeping.”

“Just Chloe’s room—she’ll love it—and the two accents in the kitchen.” Izzy sighed, “It could’ve been much worse. Hopefully the den on the other side of the house will be okay too.” As they were leaving the master bedroom they noticed a locked door at the end of the hallway.

“This must be the mystery room Sam kept teasing me about,” Ashe said. “I have a key for it in my pocket.” Ashe pulled out his key chain and after trying a few in the lock, finally found the one that worked. “Let’s see what all of Sam’s muffled guffaws were about.”

Izzy’s eyes were wide, her face slack, and Ashe couldn’t contain his laughter. “Isabella, I’m sure it’s nothing evil or from a horror film or Sam wouldn’t have been continually laughing about it.”

“You look first,” Izzy said, while covering her face, giggling, and hiding behind him.

Ashe swung the door open. He burst out laughing. “Well I’ll be damned. I never thought I’d see one of these in real life.”

“What is it?” Izzy asked, without uncovering her face. “Is it lots more pink?”

“Oh sweetheart, there’s no pink in this room. I doubt Marcie ever set foot in here to decorate or add her pink flair.”

She finally got the nerve to peek around him. He burst out laughing again when he saw her face register complete shock.

“Is this what I think it might be?” Her voice was small and incredulous.

Ashe loved her more than ever in this moment. Sometimes she seemed so innocent he wanted to just protect her forever from anything seedy. But one night, after they’d reunited and she’d consumed several glasses of wine, she’d confessed that she’d watched hours of varied porn while researching defloration. So she wasn’t as naïve as she came across. However, he understood that seeing something in a video compared to seeing it in real life could be jarring, even to someone more worldly.

“Yes, Isabella. This is a Red Room. A sex dungeon.”

Her hands flew to her cheeks. “You don’t think that Sam and Marcie...,” she couldn’t even finish the question, she looked so rattled. “So maybe whoever owned the house before them left all this stuff?”

“Probably,” Ashe said as he pulled a crop, with long straps of leather at the tip, off a rack on the red velvet tufted wall. “I don’t think Sam and Marcie ever utilized the facility,” he said and chuckled. “Everything is pretty dusty.”

“Put that down,” she demanded. “You have no idea where it’s been.”

“I know exactly where it’s been. On someone’s ass cheeks.” He couldn’t contain his delight in her discomfort. “Soooo...,” he began as he slapped the crop on his palm, “should we keep the room? Clean it up a bit. Have some fun when Chloe’s asleep?” Her face looked stunned. In an effort to soothe her, he walked to hug her while still holding the flogger.

“Don’t touch me until you’ve washed your hands,” she scolded and backed away from him. “And no. The room goes. Everything goes. Strip it out. Gut it. Wash it down with Clorox and then paint it a tasteful taupe. It can be your office.”

He replaced the crop on the wall and walked to a wall of drawers. “Let’s see what’s in here,” he mused as he chuckled. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure you want to get rid of everything?”

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“Yes, everything!” Izzy exclaimed emphatically. Her face was a mixture of astonishment and embarrassment. Her cheeks blushed crimson. She turned on her heel and stomped out the door, hollering over her shoulder as she went down the hallway, “It all goes Ashe. I mean it.”

He remained standing while still holding the handcuffs. He couldn't stop grinning. She's going to come back, he thought. Five, four, three, two..., he could hear her heels clicking in the hallway back towards the room.

She popped her head in the door. Her brows were knitted tight in distress, “Is our sex life bland, Ashe? Do you want to keep some of this?” Her expression had turned to sad and devastated. “Should I be...more open to...new things?”

She looked so forlorn; Ashe struggled to hold in his laughter. “The expression is ‘vanilla’, Isabella.”

“What...?”

Now she looked puzzled and Ashe had to squeeze his lips together to keep from laughing. “The expression for ordinary sex without bells or whistles is referred to as vanilla,” he clarified.

“So are we,” she screwed up her face and wrinkled her nose, “vanilla?”

He wanted to put his arms around her and reassure her that he loved every moment of making love to her, but he was having too much fun watching her squirm. “Perhaps, a bit,” he answered.

She abruptly turned and left to stomp down the hallway again. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand, trying to keep his laughter muffled. Knowing she'd once more come back, he counted down. Five, four..., and sure enough he heard her heels clicking in the hall. She walked in and snatched the handcuffs from him, dangling them between her thumb and forefinger like a dirty diaper.

“We can keep these. But that's it. The rest goes into the trash,” she proclaimed. “I don't want to be Vanilla-Isabella. That nickname would haunt me.”

He knew she was watching him as he plucked a wooden paddle from the wall. He thoughtfully turned it over and over in his hand as if examining a fine wine.

Her eyes became enormous. “And if you as much as get near my butt with that, you’ll be sleeping on the couch.” Once more, she stomped from the room—the handcuffs clanking as she walked.

“We don’t have a couch yet,” he protested. “Hey, maybe we could donate the stuff somewhere,” he called out. He could hear her answer from somewhere near the kitchen.

“Oh, sure thing, Ashe. I’m certain the Salvation Army would love that donation.” Izzy called back, her voice drenched in sarcasm.

He jogged down the hall and found her scrubbing the handcuffs in the kitchen sink. She had a tear trickling down her face and he instantly felt bad about teasing her.

“Isabella,” he crooned as he pulled her into his arms. “Everything is perfect the way it is. You never have to worry about not pleasing me. Having you in my life and my arms every night is all I’d ever want. I’m sorry I ruined your perfect happy day in your new home. That was really inconsiderate of me. I was just having so much fun teasing you.”

“I’d never want to disappoint you,” she said while choking back a sob. “I know you’re more sophisticated than me. You’ve seen and done so much. You acted in porn and you also edited the films. All of them. Showing everything. I’m sure there were things you’d fantasized trying someday.”

Ashe chuckled softly, “Yes, Isabella, I did things and saw things.” He lowered his voice and shrugged, “I’d like to forget about my acting participation in the porn endeavor. And...when I edited I didn’t pay much attention to the activities. I was busy editing out farts and queefs, or un-timely giggles, or ensuring the cum-bag didn’t show. All of those things are not very sexy. Since the day I met you, any fantasy I’ve ever had was about spending the rest of my life with you. Nothing else.”

“Queefs?” She’d apparently never heard the word.

“Uh, that’s the fart like noise a woman sometimes makes with her vagina,” he answered patiently. She looked horrified and embarrassed that she might’ve made the noise.

“The cum-bag?” Isabella was clearly baffled and had no idea what he was talking about.

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“Uh, yea, a little mechanical device used to augment...well you know what.” She still looked perplexed and he had to spell it out for her. “Ejaculation.” He laughed heartily and squeezed her. “It’s just film trickery. Stuff that happens while filming is rarely real. It’s intended to be provocative, fantastical, and out of the ordinary.” He kissed the top of her head. “Don’t ever worry about things, sweetheart. I’m very happy just the way things are. Just be you.”

“I wouldn’t mind trying out some toys,” she said determinedly, as she wiped another tear from her cheek with her hand. “They just have to be new. And able to be sterilized. And if I don’t like something I can always say so. Right?”

“Of course,” he said before kissing her. “Isabella, I’m sorry I was teasing you. If something interests you, then of course we can try it. But, please, please, don’t think I need anything else in our life. I love you just the way you are. Making love with you is always a beautiful gift I probably don’t deserve. Don’t be thinking I’m missing anything.”

She sniffled, “Okay,” and finally laughed. “I can’t believe you suggested donating that stuff. I had all sorts of visuals of a thrift store volunteer, fishing through the pile wondering what in the hell.”

Ashe joined her laughter. “That would be pretty funny.” Changing the subject he suggested, “Let’s go check the other side of the house to make sure our new den and other rooms are pink-free zones. Then if you can handle the pink master bedroom for a while, I’d like to show you how much I love you.” He lifted and lowered his eyebrows a few times mimicking Groucho Marx. “Afterward you can take a little nap before lunch.” He really did feel bad about spoiling her day. Sometimes he was just a clunk when it came to reading a situation. Damn.

“Sounds wonderful,” she said and her smile permeated the room.

“Go ahead and bring those silver bracelets with you,” he quipped.

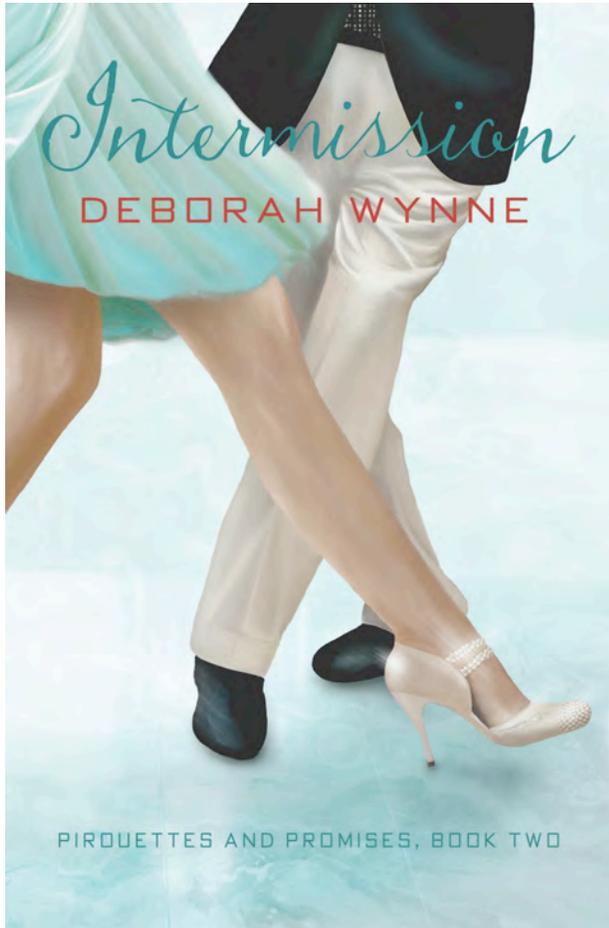
“You just can’t let it go can you?” There was no irritation left in her voice, and her musical laughter filled his soul. “Don’t we need a key or something?”

“Sweetheart, those are not police issue handcuffs. We don’t need a key.” My lord he loved his adorable wife. She meant everything to him. He knew he was the happiest man on the earth.

About the Author

Deborah Wynne began writing as a young girl, filling dog-eared spiral notebooks with whimsical stories and terrible poetry. A University of Colorado alumna, Ms. Wynne entered the workforce listening to the advice of her parents who said, “Get a good government job,” and subsequently had two distinctly different careers in municipal government before becoming a private sector consultant. Unlike other authors that have a long list of interesting hobbies, Ms. Wynne claims to have left such things in her past in order to focus on writing and creating the perfect cup of coffee. Using music as her inspirational backdrop, she tends to listen to her favorite artists in repetitive loops—Neil Diamond, Imagine Dragons, Frank Sinatra. Her writing marathons allow her to live vicariously through her characters and stories which bear no recognizable similarity to her real life. Ms. Wynne is married and lives at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. She has two grown daughters and four grandchildren. *Intermission* is her second novel and *Opening Act* was Ms. Wynne’s debut novel. One of her very short stories was included in *VSS365 Anthology: Volume One 2019*. She is currently working on *Encore*, the third installment in the *Pirouettes and Promises Series*, as well as *Cassie’s Woods*, a conspiracy thriller.

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Izzy's journey continues in the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. After tragedy strikes twice, Izzy returns to New York City to rebuild her life. Meeting a famous actor with a rogue reputation and stellar dance skills may open her heart again for love.

**INTERMISSION:
Pirouettes and Promises: Book Two**

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