
Chapter 1

Annie and Dane

Ann Margret Daring's green eyes flashed with anger as she glared at her husband Dane from across the room. "*What* is your problem?"

Dane ran his hand through his thick dark hair and sighed. Finally, he moved closer, until he stood in front of her. He replied angrily, "*My* problem, Annie? I think you're the one with the problem. You find fault with everything I do lately. There's no pleasing you."

"If you tried a little harder, maybe I wouldn't have so much to find fault with," she answered sarcastically.

"Maybe my little brother was right after all. He always said we rushed this marriage. He couldn't believe we got engaged three months after we met. I always scoffed at him, but I don't know now."

"Dane, are you saying you regret marrying me?" Annie's eyes met his defiantly.

"No, Annie. I don't know. Things were great between us until these past few months. I don't understand what's

happening to us. We can't seem to agree on anything these days. We fight about everything, from who's going to take out the trash to whether or not we're going to start a family. Is that the problem? You aren't ready for kids, and you don't want to tell me?"

Annie looked away for a split second before meeting his gaze again. In an exasperated tone, she replied, "That's not it, and you know it, Dane. I want a baby as much as you do. But I refuse to bring a child into this world with things the way they are between us. Something's got to change."

"And it's got to be me, is that what you're saying?"

"Dane, think about it. Lately, you're, well, just different. You're not the fun-loving, hot-blooded man I fell in love with and married. You're distant. You never want to go out, and when we stay in, you ignore me. You're either glued to the television or the computer. That's not what I signed up for. I miss our good times together."

"Is that what you think? Well, lady, I've got news for you. You're way off base. You're the one who's changed. That sweet, crazy, happy-go-lucky gal I fell in love with has left the building. You are demanding, always mad about something, and hard to get along with."

"Dane, we're not two kids dating. We're married. We're grown-ups with real, everyday problems. We have responsibilities. Life isn't always fun and games in the real world. We have jobs, housework, bills to pay. Do you see where I'm going with this? Add a baby or two to the mix, and our lives will be even busier. Until we can learn to balance the rest of it, and still manage to love each other like crazy and have fun, we can't move forward and have a baby."

"Are you saying you don't want to move forward with me now? Are you saying you want out?"

Annie sighed deeply as the tears threatened to flow. "I'm not saying that at all, Dane. What I'm saying is we need to grow up.

We should be able to handle the responsibility and still have fun. We don't seem to be able to do that."

"So what you're really saying is marriage to Dane Daring isn't what you thought it would be. I don't measure up to your idea of the perfect husband. News flash, baby, no husband is perfect, just like no wife is perfect. You're going to have to learn to accept my faults or move on."

"You just don't get it, do you, Dane?" She turned to go.

"Everyone tried to tell me I was just your rebound guy. I guess I should've listened. I let my heart rule my head when it came to you. I was so crazy in love with you, I didn't care. I wanted you, and I was determined to have you, at all costs. I thought we could make it work. I thought cute, feisty, little Ann Margret Spade was the girl I'd always dreamed of."

Annie turned to face him. "I can't believe you just said that to me. I wouldn't have married you if I didn't love you, Dane. I still love you. I just think we need to work out our differences and stop talking about having a baby until we do. I don't find fault with everything you do. You just infuriate me at times, when you don't help out around here or when you think, just because we're married, we have to stay home every weekend."

"Is that what this is really about, Annie? Because I can assure you, your darling Russ wouldn't have been perfect, either. Hell, he wouldn't even stick around when you started talking marriage."

Smack! Annie slapped him hard across the face. "You're a son of a bitch, Dane Daring. To bring up what happened between Russ and me when you know how hurt I was about it. I told you about our breakup because I wanted you to know what happened, not because I wanted you to throw it in my face every time we argue. I was being honest with you. When I met you, I was still afraid to let myself fall in love again. By telling you why I was afraid, I thought you'd understand my hesitancy, at first, to start a relationship with you. Once you convinced me you

weren't going anywhere, I fell and I fell hard, Dane, for you, not Russ. Apparently, you don't believe that. Maybe you never will."

Dane rubbed his cheek. As he glared into her green eyes with his own midnight blue ones, he said angrily, "Go find the one who got away, Annie. That's what you really want. That's what this is all about. You're still in love with Russ Casey. You can't stand the fact he walked out on you. If it weren't true, you wouldn't be so angry with me for bringing his name up. I really thought I could make you forget the guy. But I guess I was wrong, and everyone else was right. So, no, I don't believe you when you say it's me you want. Because everything about you tells me you're still not over him. You may love me in some way, but not the way I want you to. You've never fully given yourself to me, never really submitted. I know he's still in the back of your mind and in your heart. So, go, find him. See what you're missing out on. See if he's changed his mind. Maybe the two of you will be ecstatically happy together."

"You can't mean that."

"Try me. I'm giving you my blessing. I can't go on with you, if I'm not the reason you wake up in the morning or the reason you can't wait to get home from work at night."

"You. Make. Me. So. Mad."

"Apparently, I do. I don't see you trying to end this argument. I don't see you rushing into my arms. That must mean you're contemplating what I just said."

Annie turned and fled to the sanctity of their bedroom, unable to control the tears any longer. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. He'd only accuse her of crying for her lost love, Russ. Was he right?

She slammed the door, then she went to the bathroom, stripped, and ran a hot bath. After she'd soaked until her skin was wrinkling, she stepped out and dried herself with a fluffy white towel. When she was snugly settled under the blankets in the queen-sized bed she shared with Dane, her thoughts

wandered. She thought back to the day she had once thought her world had ended. She and Russ Casey had dated for two years. He was, well, hot. That was the only way to describe the tall, well-muscled, tanned blond who looked like a surfer boy. She had, in fact, met him at the beach, while vacationing in the Jacksonville/St. Augustine area. They had immediately bonded and, soon after, had entered into a hot, steamy romance. She had even moved to the area to be near him. Angela, her best friend since high school, who had been with her on the trip, agreed to move with her, since she had nothing keeping her in the Midwest. Both girls had quickly found jobs and an apartment to share. But as young girls often do, Annie had dreamed of a future with Russ, complete with the white-picket fence, two kids, a dog, a cat, the all-American dream. When she had mentioned her dreams to Russ, on occasion, he simply laughed and kissed her. Of course, all coherent thought was gone after that, and the subject was always dropped. Russ had known how to play her.

She would never forget the conversation that had ended it all—the day she'd refused to back down. Russ had stopped by after work one Friday evening, ready for a night of bedroom play. But Annie had other ideas. She brought up the subject of marriage again. When he'd tried to kiss her, she had pulled away, not about to be put off again.

"Russ, we have to talk. We never finish this conversation."

"Okay, sweet thing, talk away," he'd said.

"I want to get married. We've been together two years now. We're good together; you can't deny that."

"I can't deny we're hot together, babe, but I don't know about this whole marriage gig. I don't think it's for me."

"Not for you? Russ, if you love me as much as you say you do, there wouldn't be any hesitation. Either you want to spend the rest of our lives together, or you don't. You have to decide."

"Are you giving me an ultimatum, Annie? Are you saying I have to decide tonight?"

She'd stood her ground as she replied, "Yes, I guess I am, Russ. I love you, and I feel the time has come for us to move to the next level."

He'd looked at her long and hard. "Then I guess this is good-bye, Annie. It's been fun, but I can't give you what you're asking for." He'd leaned over, kissed her, and walked out the door, leaving a broken-hearted Annie behind.

When he hadn't called her over the next few days, she'd gone to his place. His neighbor told her he'd left town. "Just packed up all his stuff and drove off. The landlord already has someone else lined up to rent his apartment."

Annie had driven home, blinded by her tears. For six months she had mourned the loss of Russ in her life. Finally, after resigning herself to the fact he was never coming back, she forced herself to attend a party one night with a friend from work. It had been at that fateful party that she had met Dane Daring. Dane was a hunk, to say the least, ruggedly handsome, with dark brown, almost black, hair, midnight-blue eyes, and a smile that could melt any girl's heart. He was tall but not as tall as Russ, stockier built, all muscle, not an ounce of fat on his gorgeous body. He'd made her laugh as they'd shared a drink and pleasant conversation that night. At the end of the evening, he'd asked for her phone number and told her he'd like to see her again.

"I'd like that, too; call me," she'd said as she left the party.

The rest, as they say, was history. They began dating, and within three months, he'd asked her to become his wife. Two years with Russ, and he hadn't been ready to commit, but after three months of bliss, Dane knew he wanted to spend eternity with her. Now, tonight, after this last argument, she had to wonder, *Did I rush into this marriage because I was so touched by the sudden proposal, or was it truly meant to be?* Was Dane right, had she never really gotten over Russ? *No, it's just not true, I love Dane. Sure, I'll always wonder what might have been, but my life is with Dane, isn't it?*

When Dane hadn't come to bed by midnight, Annie rolled over and attempted to fall asleep. Normally, after one of their frequent arguments, he gave her some time to simmer down before joining her in the bedroom to make up. Apparently, tonight, he was still angry with her. Annie began to cry again, burying her face in the pillow as she realized her world might very well be headed for a shake-up once more.

She finally cried herself to sleep. It was a deep, fitful sleep as she tossed and turned most of the night. And as she fell deeper into oblivion, she began to dream about a night long ago and what might have been.

ANNIE FOUND herself scurrying about the apartment. It was Friday, and Russ would be here any minute. Tonight's the night, she told herself. Tonight, he's not going to steer the conversation away from our future. This is the night I'm getting engaged to the love of my life.

She finished straightening up the living room and went into the kitchen to check on dinner. She had offered to cook for the two of them, and a romantic evening at home was part of the plan. As she stirred the pasta sauce, she hummed to herself, Here Comes the Bride.

When she heard his familiar knock on her door, she grinned. They had a secret code knock, so she always knew when he was at her door. She flung open the door and said, "Hey, hot stuff, ready for my spicy pasta sauce?"

He leaned in and kissed her as he walked in the door. "I'm ready for some spice, but I'm not talking about pasta, sweet thing."

"Dinner first, spicy love later," she teased as she took in his tanned skin and windblown, sun-kissed hair.

"Damn, woman, you're cruel. Come here; let me warm you up. You might decide to try spicy love first and spicy pasta later."

She giggled as she walked into the kitchen, followed by her lover.

"On second thought, that smells pretty damn good. Maybe I will eat

first." He took the wooden spoon from the counter and helped himself to a sample of her homemade sauce.

As she playfully smacked his hand, she set the table and picked up a book of matches. She lit the candles and turned to him. "Tonight's a special night for us, Russ. You just wait and see."

"Oh, I like the sound of that, babe. How about a teaser before dinner?"

"Behave, Russ," she said, laughing.

After he had devoured two helpings of pasta, a salad and three breadsticks, she offered chocolate mousse for dessert.

"You're spoiling me, sweet thing."

"That was the general idea. You know, I could spoil you like this every night if we were married, Russ. You might want to think about that the next time you say marriage isn't for you," she said.

"I've been thinking about that, Annie, and maybe we should discuss it."

"I was hoping we could do that tonight," she replied, smiling sweetly.

"Let me help you with the dishes, then we'll get comfy and I promise, we'll talk about it," he said as he got up from the table and began clearing the dishes.

Not used to him helping her in the kitchen, Annie stood back for a minute, watching.

"What's the matter, babe?" he asked.

"Er... nothing..." she replied as she walked to the sink.

"Ah, you're not used to seeing me helping out. That's all going to change, sweet thing. You're going to see a whole new side of this boy from now on. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately."

And later as they snuggled in her bed, he said, "Annie, marry me. I know you're not going to let up on this. One of us has to compromise. Since I know you're not going to back down, I realize if I want to keep you in my life, I need to change my ways, so let's do it."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"As a heart attack," he replied, grinning. "And I can prove it." He picked his shirt up off the floor and took a small box out of the pocket. He handed it to her.

When she opened it, she gasped. Inside the small velvet box, sat a small

The Daring Doms

diamond solitaire in a rose-gold setting. She took it out of the box and put it on her finger.

"Does it fit?" he asked.

"Perfectly," she answered with tears in her eyes.

"Don't I get a kiss for this?" he teased.

She leaned up for the kiss to seal the deal. There was no more discussion that night about the wedding.

In fact, there was no more discussion about the wedding for several weeks. It was almost as though Russ had bought the ring to appease her. Now, he could postpone the marriage a while longer. But Annie was too happy to care. She quickly dismissed that thought from her mind as she happily went about her daily routine, reserving her nights for her hot young fiancé.

After a few months went by, Annie gingerly brought up the subject of setting a date. Russ didn't balk as she had feared he might. He said he'd go along with whatever she wanted. She could plan everything, and he would do his part. He would show up at the altar. And that was exactly what he did. He wasn't there for any of the planning or shopping. He planned to move into her apartment after the wedding. As far as she knew, he was still partying with his friends while she and her friends planned the big event.

Let him have his fun, she told herself. He'll settle down after the wedding.

The week before the wedding, he began slowly moving his things into her place. It didn't seem as if he was bringing much, but she assumed he'd gotten rid of some things while he was packing up his apartment for the move.

Everything went as planned. The wedding was perfect and the honeymoon hot and steamy.

When they settled into a routine afterward, things seemed fine. They worked during the day and made love at night. After a few months, though, Annie could tell Russ was feeling antsy, and she didn't raise a fuss when he told her he was going out with the guys for a drink and some pool after work one night. After all, she'd gotten him to the altar without much of a fuss; she couldn't keep him tied to her all the time. She believed if she gave him

breathing room, he'd be a better husband, so she made plans of her own. She took in a movie with her friend, Angela.

When he'd come home that night, he had rolled over and gone to sleep with nothing more than a goodnight kiss for the first time ever.

Things were going along splendidly, as far as Annie could tell. Their first holiday season as a married couple had been spectacular. On New Year's Eve, at a local dance, Annie felt as if every female in the room wanted to trade places with her. He took her home in the wee hours of the morning and carried her to bed, as she was just a little tipsy from the champagne.

Russ undressed her gently and tucked her in. He brought aspirin and water from the bathroom and made her take two of them. "So you don't get sick, babe."

She obeyed and lay back on the pillows. Within minutes, she was passed out. When she woke up a few hours later, Russ was not in bed with her. She got up to find him. He was on the computer. When he heard her walk in, he quickly turned it off and turned to her. "Feeling better, sweet thing?"

"Yes, come to bed, baby. We need to ring in the New Year right."

"Now, that's an offer I can't refuse." He got up and followed her back to the bedroom.

When he crawled in bed beside her, she quickly rolled on top of him and kissed him, scraping her tongue across his teeth, and he allowed access by opening his mouth. He devoured her with a passionate kiss as he began caressing her back. As she sat up and straddled him, his eyes widened. "You're really ready to go, aren't you, babe?"

"Oh, yeah, hot stuff," she replied as she positioned herself for the ride. She put her hands on his chest and began masterfully caressing him. He was inside her, but she hadn't begun to move. She teased him by caressing him and leaning down to kiss him again. He reciprocated by tweaking her already-hard nipples before rubbing her bottom. When he playfully smacked her, she grinned devilishly and began the ride, slowly at first. While she built the momentum, she was in total control as he allowed her to freely abandon herself to him. And when the climax came, it was a combination of New Year's Eve and Fourth of July fireworks for both of them, the grand finale of sensation.

The Daring Doms

Annie was in heaven that year, enjoying the sweetness of being a newly-wed. Russ's nights out with the guys became more frequent. Often, she found him on his phone or on the computer, but Annie blindly ignored the facts staring her boldly in the face.

Occasionally, on the weekends, she found herself wishing they'd just stay in, but he was always ready to party. They were almost always at a club or a party with friends, on Friday and Saturday nights. Still, Annie didn't give a thought to the fact that Russ rarely spent time alone with her these days.

Until one day, she was getting his clothes ready for the laundry. As she cleaned out the pockets of his jeans, she felt a piece of paper in one of them. As she took it out, she was going to pitch it in the trash but thought she'd better see if it was important first.

When she read the words written on the paper, she shook her head to clear her thoughts. Surely, I'm reading this wrong.

But deep in her heart of hearts, she knew it was no mistake. Russ had been having an affair with someone named Sheila since before they were married. Apparently, it was still going on. So, why had he married her? Why not break things off and go to this Sheila person? Or was he so devious, he wanted both of them and the only way to get that was to keep Annie happy by marrying her, while carrying on with Sheila on the side? True, he had the sexual appetite to keep two women happy, but what was the real story?

And when she confronted him that night, it all became crystal-clear. Sheila was married. Marrying Annie had been no big deal to him. It was a way to have both his women, while Sheila had both her men. It all made sense, the nights out with the guys, when he'd come home and turned his back to her, the nights of passion, only when he was in the mood. She'd let him lead the way, never dreaming he was playing her for a fool all along. He never wanted to be home like a normal, young, married couple. He always wanted to be in a crowd of friends. The picture-perfect marriage she'd always wanted turned out to be nothing but a scam. If only I'd found a guy who loved me and only me, a husband who had eyes for only me and enjoyed an evening at home with his wife, relaxing, playing, loving, she thought to herself.

AND WHEN ANNIE awoke and looked around, she was startled. It took a minute, but she finally realized it had all been a dream. Thank God that wasn't the way it had really happened. Her beloved Dane was asleep in bed beside her, the way it should be. She leaned over and kissed him as he slept. "I love you, baby," she whispered.

She lay awake remembering the dream, piecing it all together. She was convinced the dream had been the result of the latest argument with Dane, and she knew it had been the universe's way of telling her she was right where she needed to be, with the man she was intended to be with.

Dane, sweet, loving Dane, the husband who prefers staying home with me on the weekends to partying around town, she thought. So what if he forgets to take out the trash or leaves his socks on the bedroom floor? In the grand scheme of things, he's all I've ever wanted. From now on, I'm not going to worry about the little annoyances. He's mine, I love him and he loves me. He's faithful and devoted. I have everything I've ever wanted, and I was too stupid to see it.

She snuggled closer to him and drifted back to sleep, content and happy for the first time in months.