

The Snowball Effect

Chapter One

Friday 7:32 p.m.

There is this memory I happen upon every time I do something stupid. Unfortunately, I only pull it to the surface *after* the damage is done, like now, as I sit on my bed awaiting the dictator and executioner. (I say this with love...honest!) The childhood experience was my first lesson on *not* to do things the easy way; to *think* before I act – a good lesson, and if only I had learned it, it would have served me well the rest of my life.

I should write it down and post it on my fridge. There will be a moment, later, when I am good and sorry (his words not mine, but true, nonetheless), where he will ask what I think I can do to prevent future mishaps – I think I will suggest that. It will please him, I'm sure.

I flop back onto my pillow and stare at the stucco ceiling. He is angry, and I know he won't come until he is calm. That is a good thing, I guess, but it makes me relive my reverie over and over, and the more I replay it, the more my nerves swirl and pop like those candy rocks that come alive on your tongue. I take a big, slow breath to ease the sizzle. My face puckers sourly at my mind's use of the word *sizzle*. The double meaning induces a tremor before I start to recall my past again.

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Nine and disgruntled at being ousted from my group of friends and their plan to make a masterpiece snowman that would make every other kid on the street jealous of its grandeur and perfection, I scrunched my nose bitterly. I stood at the top of Devil's Hill, watching. My breath puffed in a cloud around my scarf and up my nose, the moisture freezing the hairs in my nostrils almost instantly. The group pushed, shoved and pulled their perfectly packed snowball. I tapped my foot in annoyance until they gave up and slumped over in defeat. I grinned at the pathetic size of it. I knew there had to be a more efficient, less energy-sapping way of creating a bigger, better snowman base. I crossed my arms, narrowed my eyes and muttered, "Oh, yeah? Watch this!"

I decided I was going to make them regret kicking their most creative member out, if it was the last thing I did. I rolled a medium size ball of snow, not bothering with perfection – with the size of my magnum opus, everyone would be too in awe to notice it was lumpy with twigs, grass and half-decomposed leaves. With a satisfied grunt and a super-villain-worthy arched eyebrow, I gave my snowball a shove and rolled it down the gargantuan hill. I stood back, arms folded again, admiring my genius as it got bigger and bigger, faster and faster until my eyes were almost as huge as the discs we went sledding on. Someone needed to call a judge, I thought with excitement, because I was going to set a world record. I was going to be a legend!

But the moment of elation and pride turned sour when my father's car came into view, shining like the new silver dollars I got from my grandpa every visit. A sudden flash of nervousness attacked my guts. If my calculations were correct – like a predetermined event that would forever be inscribed on my 'bucket list' under the heading 'Never Do Again,' the ice ball was set to hit the road at the exact time my father's car drove in front of it.

With the huge sphere careening towards the man that had the power to ground me until my eighteenth birthday, I finally had my *aha* moment – of course, much too late. It was pretty dumb to think that the snowball streaking towards my house would just stop neatly on the middle of my lawn. What had I been thinking?

"Don't you think before you act?" were the words most often said to me by my parents, next to "I love you, but..."

My father turned to look up the hill, where he knew I'd be, and waved before noticing the snowball. His hand stalled in mid-air before his fast reflexes reacted. He swerved onto our neighbour's lawn just as the bolder-sized, ice-embedded snowman body, AKA weapon of mass destruction, rolled straight past him, across our lawn, through the front window and over the new beige carpet, knocking our Christmas tree right into the fireplace. I swallowed hard. My mother's shrill scream carried up the hill and found my ears beneath my muffs.

Then I clapped my gloved hand over my head and groaned as I suddenly remembered I was supposed to have been watering the tree daily so it wouldn't dry out and become a fire hazard – *aw, crap!*

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Twenty years later, it plays like a high definition movie for the billionth time in my head. I sit, blowing air forcefully out of my mouth. I can't stand much more of the waiting. I feel like a

twitchy, anxious junky-coming-down-off-a-high must feel. I lip-nibble and pick imaginary fluff from the bedspread, waiting for my husband to become calm enough to speak to me without steam flying out his ears. I relive the sound of the fire truck sirens and my mother's angry harping as we stand across the street from our house, watching it spew out smoke and flames. Even now, I can almost feel the death grip she had on my collar, or maybe that is helped along by the strangled feeling of dread mixed with relief at the sound of Miles's foot-stomps down the hall. I bolt up into a sitting position. My heart slams against my ribs. The door opens, and I look down at the comforter, preferring its soft warm colours to my husband's hard glare.

Why, even after all these years, hadn't I concluded that the 'easy way' was never easy and nearly always ended badly for me? The cold, crawling dread that winds its way from my prickling nape, down my spine, and curls into my abdomen until it finally ends at my quivering bottom cheeks is stronger than ever. I slide a loose thread on the blanket through my pinched thumb and forefinger, trying desperately to ignore the feeling that will soon turn from icy, finger-like projections scampering across my skin to millions of hot, sharp needles pricking me. I peek up at him through my lashes and swallow apologies as he opens his mouth to speak, and then my eyes drop to his jeans as his hands begin working the leather free of the loops. The slithering sound usually excites me – tonight, it makes my stomach contents curdle.

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Friday 8:07a.m. (Earlier that day)

"She's at it again," I say into the phone with a grumble. "I can brush off my own damn car!"

"Really? I don't know how you stand it, Rox. My mother-in-law lived a plane ride away, and she still drove me nuts. I am pretty sure she's to blame for the divorce."

"Mrs. Beagly is not my mother-in-law; she just thinks she is. And your divorce had more to do with a drunken night at an hourly-rate hotel, didn't it?"

"Tit for tat; she drove me to it." My best friend laughs.

I let the curtain fall back in place when Mrs. Beagly glances my way. "Shit, she almost saw me!" I giggle and turn from the window, slamming into a wall of lean, well-conditioned man. "Oh!" My mouth moulds into an oval and freezes at the dark thick brows hovering over hard hazel eyes. "Gotta go, Carly!" I hang up and grin at my husband.

"Roxanne –"

I stop him with my hand against his chest. "I know, I know! I am not the woman you thought you married. I am possessed by the devil when it comes to that lovely cherub of a woman who raised you. Yada, yada..." His brows tighten even more. I'm pushing my luck.

There are a few things my husband and I know and understand about each other that, alone, might destroy our marriage, but together, make it as strong as the snowball that broke my childhood house.

First, I am of the 'do/say first and think/regret later' variety. I am impulsive, sometimes rude and impatient. I am an immediate gratification kind of girl: *I want it, and I want it now* describes me to a tee. If I don't get it, right now, I will surely, truly die – at least, until times passes, and regret sinks in.

The next? My husband is an academic, a problem solver, who thinks outside of the modern man box. He's a hands-on type of guy who believes that some well-placed heat will change anyone's tune – well, mine, anyway. Which I appreciate...eventually, and I admit that I have responded well to it, so far. Example? I have a balance of zero on my Visa card, and all my shoes, minus one pair, have function rather than ornamental value – 'nuff said! Miles is the anchor to my ship of *must haves* and *must dos*. He's the life preserver I cling to when I am drowning in remorse. He's the voice of reason and logic.

Yes, I still say the wrong thing at the wrong time, in front of the wrong people, but Rome wasn't built in a day, and I'd be lying if I said our relationship dynamic isn't exactly what I crave – at least, ninety percent of the time – that other ten percent is reserved for the kicking, crying and mud-slinging that comes before the fiery realization that I'm wrong. I wonder if I'd be this way if my parents had taken a more hands-on approach to child rearing.

"Nan raised me," Miles says and presses his lips together.

Miles and I had been dating for only three months when we moved into a lovely bungalow together. Fast? Yeah, but not fast enough when you know it's right; at least, that was my stance on it. He thought of it in a practical monetary way: rent between two was cheaper than one. We were married a year later, and now we own the charming gingerbread house we call home. The only downfall to our perfect marriage and house is the neighbour – Mrs. Beagly, or as Miles call her, *Nan*.

"I adore Mrs. Beagly," I say and then mumble, "Especially when she's babysitting at her daughter's, on vacation, or playing bingo on Saturday nights."

Miles's mouth turns from firm line to curved scowl, and his foot begins tapping. Mrs. Beagly has lived in her house since the beginning of time – okay, since before Miles and his father had moved into the neighbourhood, thirty years ago. Miles was only six at the time, and his mother had just passed away. Miles's dad had been a bit of a wreck and pretty clueless as to how to raise his young son and run his plumbing business at the same time, and Mrs. Beagly was their saviour. If you ask her, Miles and his father wouldn't have survived without her.

But she seems to think it is her job to mother them still. I am merely an insidious usurper, meant to take over her adopted family and eject her like they did at the McDonald's she had worked for fifty-three years. I mean, seriously, they had to push her out the door at seventy-three! Her daughter seems to understand me and tells her mother to butt out as often as she can, but only because Mrs. Beagly still insists that her daughter should have married Miles and not that 'twaddle swindling man-child' she has recently found herself separated from. Too bad Miles can't see the side of her I do. The side that insists everything I do is wrong and never good enough for *her* boy. Maybe then, I wouldn't end up over his knee for the things I let fly out of my mouth whenever she irritates me. Believe me; I would spend a lot less time counting carpet fibres and shrieking apologies if it weren't for Mrs. Beagly.

"Uh, should I get the chair out?" I squeak, knowing I went too far again.

He clears his throat. "As much as that smart mouth of yours needs a reminder, I'm late, and I don't imagine you'll be inclined to help me find my cell phone if you're shooting me hateful looks and sobbing in our room." He crosses his arms when I give him my slow and cocky half-grin. A flicker of heat swirls inside me. I love his inconsequential threats. I'm a lucky girl.

"You are a smart man," I say, poking him in the chest and dodging a swat. "Hey now, I'm looking! Don't divert my attention." I search in all his usual spots and some unusual ones, too. He's been distracted lately. He blew off my observations when I asked about that the previous week, telling me a big project at work had his mind running on a mental treadmill – a project he has since finished and been praised for. He never loses his phone – that is my territory – and proof that it wasn't the project that had him out of sorts. After twenty minutes, we both give up. I lean against the counter and blow out a breath as if searching was a huge job, like lifting the Eiffel Tower or something else equally impossible. I'm not used to hauling ass in the morning. I am not a morning person – maybe not even an afternoon person.

"Will you keep an eye out for it today?" he asks, grabbing the to-go mug I have ready for him. He scratches his head, looking around puzzled, and I hand him his briefcase with a cocked brow. Maybe distracted is an understatement.

"Of course," I say and reach up on tiptoes to kiss his freshly shaved jaw. He lowers himself, drops his attaché and kisses me properly, patting and squeezing my rear. I'm thinking it is a prelude for some fun – a little sexy, over-the-knee action – later. I smirk. *Mmmhmm*, a very lucky girl!

"See you tonight, beautiful." He chuckles and rolls his eyes at my excited silly dance. "Be sure to go over and thank Nan for cleaning off your car."

I stop mid-move and grumble.

"And, Rox?"

"Yes, Master-Oh-Great-One?" I bat my lashes at him, and he gives me an expression that reminds me how quickly he can become serious.

"Unless you want to have to ask the dentist for an extra shot of Novocaine for your backside before your check-up tomorrow, you won't forget." My pouty nod brings out his smile, and he winks on his way out the door.

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My day starts incredibly normal: coffee, the newspaper and some cleaning, and then I find Miles's phone in the cupboard next to the cereal. I smile, happy that he won't be worried anymore, but then I frown in concern at the odd place I find it. He is *really* off. What could be worrying my husband so much? I make up my mind to ask again, and this time I won't be brushed off.

I grab my keys and walk out the door, wondering if Miles will notice my lack of winter footwear. He is always harping at me about wearing my boots – he is especially fond of reminding me how much I paid for them. The cost certainly didn't reflect convenience because they are a pain to put on, which is why I now avoid them. Yes, these are the one 'ornamental' pair – and when I talk of cost, I am not just referring to the monetary kind. The porch is slick and tricky from the recent drop in temperature and the thin layer of snow covering it. I am concerned about the mailman, so I set Miles's phone down onto the veranda floor on top of my purse, since I can't put it on the railing. (I have set a record for breaking electronics in our house, and I'm told that one more time is going to make me want to sit outside on a snow bank 'til summer.)

Unfortunately, I then slip in my runners, which, as Miles also likes to remind me, don't have the proper grip treads that my boots have. I pinwheel my arms like a whirligig fighting for balance but land on my butt on the ground, anyway. I am catching my breath when I realize I have fallen onto the recently replaced, third-of-its-kind, five-hundred-dollar cell phone and my cheap-ass purse. I scramble off it and let out a huge breath of relief, thinking the phone has squeaked by unscathed, thanks to a travel pack of tissues and a pair of gloves in my handbag. Until I notice the tiniest crack in the face. My heart skitters to a halt in my chest before beginning to gallop wildly, as if it could pound fast enough to escape the country before five-thirty when the dictator/executioner will arrive home from work. My eyes dart around for onlookers. My breath comes out in fast, cloudy puffs that should remind me of my past, but instead, only fog my glasses.

Lying is rule number one in our house, and I don't mean the rule is 'always lie,' either. Big lies, little lies, lies about nothing important at all – all are met with equal consequence. And yet, I still have a million of them bounding through my head. Lie number one: *"I found it this way."* Two: *"I couldn't find it; are you sure you left it at home?"* Three: *put a new one in the cupboard where I found the old one and claim I had no clue it was there and that I looked everywhere for it.*

"Shit!" I murmur, feeling the cold wet snow from the porch seeping through my jeans. Swearing is rule number two; however, it is unavoidable since the lie I've come up with to get out of consequences for breaking rule number one has just been debunked – I don't have five-hundred dollars! Wait! Yes, I do! There is my ski week in Banff savings fund. Can I borrow from that? Hmm, I wonder to myself. It was a girls' week I had been planning, saving money from every pay for well over a year, in hopes I could convince the dictator to let me go. He disapproves of my ski hobby, mostly because we met two weeks before my last trip, from which I came home via helicopter and was in traction for the duration of our courtship. I always joke that was why we fell in love. Firstly, because I couldn't escape, and secondly, because nothing loosens the tongue quicker than alcohol, except for prescription pain killers, and I was on plenty of them. Anyway, this trip has yet to be approved, so realistically, as much as it pains me to say it, I *can* take the money. Settled in my new plan, I pick myself off the porch, throw some salt down and get into my perfectly brushed off car.

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The mall is a zoo. It's sidewalk sale week and getting parking is a job all on its own. I am grumbling and giving people the finger within minutes of pulling in. Little patience, low blood sugar (I forgot to eat breakfast) and stress are a lethal combo for me. It is twenty minutes later that Mrs. Beagly decides to go for an herbal tea and see her old gang at the McDonald's. She is walking towards me, dressed in her Story-Time Stella outfit, a clown suit complete with red nose and floppy shoes. She volunteers at the mall childcare centre, bless her heart. She almost catches me arguing with a very large bald man over the spot I have scooted into.

I had failed to notice it was already occupied by a very shiny, very new Mini. Why the hell do those small car owners insist on squeezing as far into the space as possible to fool people like me? I am afraid my sense of self-preservation has the uncanny ability to mute itself regularly, so I am arguing that point with gusto as she gets within earshot.

"Oh, dear me," Mrs. Beagly says in her gentle, grandmotherly voice that resonates off my skull like nails on a chalkboard. "What is all the fuss about, young man? Can I help?" she questions, flopping closer. *Flap-click, flap-click, flap-click*, we hear from her shoes as she comes nearer. I quickly dodge out of her view and whisper an apology, offering to give the Cooper owner cash on the spot if he'll hide me from the rosy-cheeked clown heading our way. My new friend ushers Mrs. Story-Time to her car, distracting her while I hide in his really nice but incredibly small and slightly dented new car. It smells of sweet cigar smoke, and my nose tingles. When he returns, we drive over to the body shop across the road and get an estimate. With the cost of the phone and the repairs for my reckless driving, I am down to a lousy three hundred dollars in my ski fund, and just like the cruel way fate can be, my best friend and ski partner calls at exactly the moment the clerk hands me the receipt for my husband's new cell.

"Roxy!" It is normal for us to talk several times a day. Since her divorce, I have become her new number one. At the moment, I wish I fell somewhere around number twenty-seven, though.

"Hi, Carly," I say, giving the clerk a false smile before shoving the receipt in my bag and walking toward the exit.

"I found an amazing deal on our trip!"

I pull the phone away from my mouth and curse. "Oh?" I swallow hard.

She doesn't wait for an invitation but just launches into her explanation on how she came across her amazing once-in-a-lifetime deal.

"Holy shit, Rox! I was just merchandising a new display for some Burton Love snowboards when this guy walks in." Carly gives a high-pitched shriek that she had perfected in the eighth grade and continues, "He was gorgeous and oozed money, so of course I dropped – literally – everything I was doing to help him."

"It's a good thing you're the manager," I mutter, hoping I don't sound too terribly depressed. She shushes me with an unladylike sound. Sometimes I think she would benefit from a relationship like mine.

"So he's there to buy new suits and boards for several of his friends." She clears her throat. "Top of the line – I'm-getting-a-shitload-of-commission – ski suits and boards. I give him my employee discount and every other discount I can find or come up with, and then I ask him where he's going skiing, and he tells me he *owns* the Big Bear Mountain Resort in B.C!"

"Really?" I ask, feeling my stomach sink as if I've eaten a bowling ball instead of the slightly fuzzy mint I found at the bottom of my purse. We have talked about that resort a million times, usually after the words 'if I win the lottery' were uttered.