

Promises Kept

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter I

It was the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life. As she hung up the phone, there was no way Annalise could squelch the flood of tears she'd been struggling to hold back for one second longer. She honestly didn't know how she'd managed to do it at all. Just how does one go about breaking her best friend's heart?

Libby was more than a best friend. She might as well have been her sister – and indeed, Anna thought of her as her "sister from another mother" and she knew Libby felt the same way. They had been with each other through everything – school, boys, other girlfriends, family problems and tragedies – as far back as either of them could remember.

And yet what Libby was asking of her was – as far as Anna was concerned – too much. Not that Lib wanted her to get on a plane. With Anna's fear of flying – the real kind, not the Erica Jong kind – she knew better than to expect her to do that. And she wasn't trying to get her to do anything dangerous or illegal.

No, Libby had just asked her to do something wonderful, something that should have made Anna feel honored: Libby wanted her closest friend to be the maid of honor at her wedding. It was a call that Anna had been both anticipating and dreading.

Libby had been dating Cal, the love of her life for more than two years, and had been certain for quite some time that he was going to pop the question any day now. Her birthday came and went with no ring, much to her disappointment, which she vented about to Anna on a regular basis. Cal was much like Libby's older brother in that he hated doing the expected, and, as a successful trial lawyer in San Antonio, he had enough money to pretty much do as he pleased.

So Cal hadn't proposed to her until a month after her birthday, and right after she got home, of course, her first act was to call her best friend even before she called her beloved older brother.

Anna was almost as happy as Libby was that Cal had finally proposed. They were so right together. He was good for Libby, although he brought a whole new meaning to the word stubborn. He was not the type of guy who could be manipulated. In fact, if Libby even tried to coerce him, she would experience rather uncomfortable consequences. So, she'd had to cool her matrimonial heels until Cal felt the time was just right.

Despite all of the happy dreaming and fantasizing Anna and Libby had done all their lives about what their respective weddings and receptions would be like, as the time had drawn near, Libby had scrupulously avoided the touchy subject of whether or not Anna was even going to attend her wedding, much less function as her maid of honor. Like the proverbial white elephant, it was a humongous issue, a burden that might threaten to destroy their friendship, and yet, neither had been willing to bring it up. Now it could not be put off any longer.

Then Libby had pulled such an underhanded trick – she hadn't even asked Anna, but instead just went on talking, assuming Anna would follow along. "Now that Cal has popped the question, he's in an all-fired hurry to get me down the aisle for some reason. It's going to be at the ranch on the sixteenth of August, and you're going to be my maid of honor, of course. I want you to come down a month beforehand to help me with all of the arrangements. You can stay as

long as you want, but we'll be leaving on our honeymoon right after the wedding. We're going to France, though, did I tell you that?"

Annalise bit her lip, not wanting to say what she knew she had to. The silence on her end of the line stretched to an uncomfortable length until she cleared her throat and asked in a tentative whisper, "Is Remy going to be there?"

"Of course he's going to be there," Libby snapped. "What with Momma and Daddy gone, he's going to be giving me away. You know that."

Silent tears trailed down Anna's face. This was the moment she'd been dreading. Ever since it had happened, ever since that horrible night when she and Remy had been friends, had gone on a date together. Lib had never asked for the details, she just knew that the only people in her family she had left – her brother and Anna – were no longer on speaking terms. Now Anna wished she'd explained it to Libby before... then this horrible moment could have been avoided. But how did you tell your best friend that her brother was a... a... she couldn't even come up with a word to define him.

And now he was going to ruin her friendship, for Libby was never going to forgive her. "I can't, Libby. You know I can't."

Libby's response was chilly. "I know nothing of the sort. All I know is what little I've been able to glean over these past years, and that's precious little. But you're the closest thing I have to a sister, and I want you to be my maid of honor. I don't care what problems the two of you have – settle them or not, I don't give a damn. But find a way to deal with it! It's my wedding and I want everything to be perfect, and that includes having you there as my maid of honor."

Anna covered the mouthpiece of her phone with her hand, hoping Libby wouldn't hear her cry. Why didn't Libby just get it! Anna had moved to Maine, for heaven's sake, just to get as far away from Texas – and Remy – as possible!

It had been challenging to maintain her friendship with Libby, considering she wasn't willing to step one foot on Texas soil. Libby had come to Maine a few times to visit. They'd met at a variety of interesting places in between – D.C., New York, Atlantic City – they did enjoy a little gambling from time to time.

Her voice broke as she repeated her refusal, confirming the tears she had tried so hard to hide. "I can't do it, Libs. I'm sorry."

"You have got to be kidding me, Anna."

Libby wasn't spoiled, but she also wasn't much used to being thwarted, especially not about something so important to her. She wasn't the angry type – neither of them were – but Anna's refusal had Libby tapping into her inner bridezilla. "What could my brother possibly have done that would make you refuse to do this for me?"

Anna's breath caught on a gasp. She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. She so did not want to go down that memory lane. Not now, not ever. She was tempted to just hang up, but she couldn't do that to Libby.

"He didn't hit you, did he?" Libby's tone was incredulous.

Her brother Remy was a big man, but he'd cut off his arm before he hurt a woman. Their mother had seen to that. Not that he was anyone's doormat – he was too much of a man for that. He would never take his fists to Anna, whom he had known since she was in diapers, and for whom he'd seemed to have a genuine fondness.

Anna was not only crying but blushing furiously as she curled up in the recliner, damned glad that Lib couldn't see it or she'd be hounded by questions about what exactly that blush

meant. As it was, she had to tell her friend a bit of a white lie, because the truth was much more than Anna thought Libby could handle. The truth was that he had spanked her that night – and had been spanking her since they had begun dating. It wasn't what he'd done that night, but rather what he'd said that Anna didn't think she'd ever be able to get over.

"No, of course he didn't."

Libby's relief was palpable even thousands of miles away. "Then what? Tell me what it is and I'll make him apologize for it. You know he will, for me."

"If it were that easy to resolve, I'd already have done it years ago and you know that. If he'd just done something to offend me, I would have smacked him a good one myself and that would have been that."

"It was more than that, though?"

"Yes. He-" she'd never really said it out loud to anyone, preferring to keep the pain to herself. "He hurt me emotionally, Libby. He said things to me that, even now, make me feel..."

"Honey, you remember how hard things were for us back then. The ranch wasn't doing well, and he thought we were going to lose it. Remy walked around with a perpetual frown on his face all the time. He lost his sense of humor entirely. The only bright spot for him was when he started dating you. He perked right up then. And he seemed to treat you different – better – than the other girls he had dated. And I was thrilled! I kept thinking that you'd become my sister-in-law, and I'd keep you in the family forever.

"I'm not saying that stress and frustration should excuse him for poor behavior, but can't you cut him some slack?"

Anna's only response was to blow her nose.

"I'm sorry, Anna," Libby whispered.

"It's okay."

"No, it's not, but that's neither here nor there." Libby sighed heavily. "Look. If I can promise you that you'll spend as little time with him as I can manage, will you come down here and be my maid of honor?"

Leave it to Libs not to want to give up. "How are you going to do that – especially if I'm coming down early? Are you going to hog tie him and ship him off to a motel for a month?" Anna would pay real money to see that, regardless of how this situation turned out.

"Yes, and I'll post the video to YouTube. I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

"Damn straight."

"Will you at least consider it, please? Pretty please, with Brad Pitt on top?"

They had long since dispensed with the usual "cherry on top" and had gone for whomever they thought was the best looking guy at that time. It had vacillated between Brad Pitt and Gerard Butler for a while.

At least it rated a watery chuckle, and a very slow, extremely reluctant, "Okay."

"Great!"

Anna wondered how Libby was going to hold up her end of the bargain. How was she going to make her big brother move out of the family home until after the wedding? Anna wiped her eyes. It wasn't her problem. Libby could be relentless, as the past phone conversation had confirmed. Libby would get what Libby wanted.

Anna grabbed another tissue and gave in to the sobs that had been building these past seven years. She had built a new life here... one that she thought she enjoyed. She taught kindergarten in a small community. She'd managed to finagle a first-time homebuyer's loan for a miniscule one-bedroom house that was just about perfect for her. She lived alone, worked alone,

and had resigned herself to the fact she would probably remain alone, except for her infrequent visits with Libby, and Topher – the orange tabby Maine Coon cat that took up half the couch as though it were his rightful throne.

At one time her dreams had been different. Libby wasn't the only one who had thought about becoming sisters by marriage. Anna had had a schoolgirl crush on Libby's big brother. He was big and strong, manly and gentlemanly, without being crude or vulgar like so many of the high school boys wading about in the available dating pool.

And now all those feelings came flooding back with tidal force. Feelings she'd dammed up for too long. One box of tissues was not going to be enough.

It was Remy's birthday in the spring the first time he officially asked her out, seven years ago. She'd been flirting – well, what was flirting for her, considering she'd done her level best to keep her true feelings for her best friend's brother locked as far away from him as she could. She wasn't sure how well she'd done, though. Ever since they'd both returned from their sophomore year at college, Remy had been looking at her with a different eye from what she remembered. And she remembered damned near every detail about him.

Her mom had passed away while she was in college and he had been a rock for her about that, helping her make all the arrangements, even to the point of making sure that the school didn't ding her for having to take so much time off to be with her mother, who had lung cancer and had been doing fine when she left for the semester, but had taken a turn for the worse not a month later.

They'd both been wonderful to her. Libby had collected all of her assignments from her professors so that she could do her course work while her mother was sleeping, and was there for her every time she took a moment to call and cry all over Lib's shoulder, long distance.

Libby had stayed in school until the last possible moment – which her friend understood - so Remy had been the one who was there throughout it all, even letting her cry all over him whenever she had a mind to, which was alarmingly frequent as far as she was concerned, but he didn't seem to mind. He simply drew her close, into the warm, safe circle of his arms, holding her tightly but not too tight and sometimes rocking. He didn't bother to murmur useless platitudes to her but then she didn't expect him to. There was nothing he could say to make the situation any easier, really. And he was already going above and beyond the call of duty by simply being there, and he was with her mom Diana nearly as often as she was.

After that, he seemed to pay closer attention to her, and she sometimes felt his eyes on her at odd moments. Lord knew, she spent every second she could memorizing every long, muscular inch of him, but it was a new experience to have him looking at her in more than a brotherly fashion.

Her mother's place was a rental where she still had a ton of stuff she didn't want to bring to their dorm with her, but she also couldn't afford to pay for the apartment and go to school at the same time. Remy himself had come up with a solution, and she quickly realized that he wasn't going to take no for an answer when he had her things moved into their house – into the bedroom she'd often occupied when she stayed with them, surprising her into a shocked expression when he said that she needed to be closer to family, and that, besides, she needed him to keep an eye out for her just as much as Libby did, maybe more.

Despite the warmth that suffused her when she realized that he, too, thought of her as family, she knew it wouldn't do to have him thinking that he could snap his fingers and she'd jump, no matter what the altruistic purpose of his autocratic command. Anna had frowned up at him when he made that pronouncement, standing there like the lord of all he surveyed – which,

unfortunately, he was – hands on his hips, looking down that patrician nose at her, a no nonsense expression on his face.

"I do not!" she huffed, mirroring his stance and taking a step closer to him, almost immediately wishing she hadn't when confronted with the broad expanse of him. If only she were taller so that they were nose to nose instead of nose to second button from the top. As it was, the broad expanse of his chest was the only thing she could see. The man was too damned big for her own good.

She would never get over the shock at the first feeling of his big hand smacking her bottom. And it was no love pat he gave her. If anything, it was hard enough that she thought he might have jarred something loose, especially since – once the sting had dissipated some - it made a fiery hot tingle race through her to concentrate right where she didn't want it to.

But what she truly could never have been prepared for was that his hand lingered there, his fingers spreading wide so that he could claim just that much more of her as he pressed her inexorably closer to him with an intimate touch. And he didn't stop until they were firmly plastered together, held there by that dominant hand.

"Just in case you didn't realize already, Annalise, since you'll be living under my roof, the same rules of behavior apply to you as they always have to my sister."

Her eyes opened wide, her mouth forming a perfect "o" of surprise. There was no doubt that she knew exactly what he meant when he'd very deliberately informed her in that one innocuous sentence that she was going to be subject to being spanked by him if he thought she'd gotten out of line.