

Chapter 1

Today is my twenty-fifth birthday and my life is like a bright red lollipop covered in lint. Even if I could pull all the crap off of it – I still wouldn't want it.

I work at a dead-end minimum wage job, live in a rundown apartment, drive a ten-year old car that refuses to start most morning, experience debilitating migraines and have no romantic prospects. Hoping to change something in my life, I'm at Starbucks, my designated meeting place for online blind dates. My mom gave me a fifty-dollar Starbucks gift card for Christmas. She's hoping for the pitter-patter of little feet she can spoil before I reach thirty. With my batting average on dates – I don't see that happening.

They all start out with such possibilities. Sherman will be my fifty-ninth attempt from the fourth internet dating site I've tried in the last two years. The weather has taken a turn for the better as the relentless drizzling rain of three days has stopped and the evening sky is a dark sapphire blue riddled with bright stars. All positive signs for a successful meeting and the eventual fulfillment of my mother's only dream.

Ridgeside is a small rural town in northern California and our Starbucks is about the size of a studio apartment living room with three tables, a display of coffee beans, mugs and tea sets, and behind the counter – two baristas. It was packed tonight. Obviously, lots of people were also out enjoying the weather and Starbucks' latest drink craze.

Hunger.

Sorrow.

Calm.

Relaxation.

Excitement.

My pulse spiked and breathing accelerated as the emotions swirled around and assaulted my strained calm. I closed my eyes, clenched my teeth and pushed each sensation away so not to absorb the teeter-totter effect of the positive and negative energy that emanated from each feeling. Being an empath and able to sense other people's emotions is occasionally a gift, sometimes a disability, but mostly a total pain in the ass. Of course in my case, it was more like an agonizing throb in my head.

In one corner, a group of teenagers were silently gathered. All the boys were dressed in baggy jeans, long T-shirts, and expensive Nike tennis shoes, while the girls wore short skirts and green tank tops embroidered with "Ridgeside Rivercats." They were huddled in the corner, with phones on their laps and their heads bowed, thoroughly engrossed in whatever was on their screens. Maybe they would have a conversation later – by texting each other.

A book club met in the other corner. It was easy to spot them since the small table held seven copies of *Spirit of Consequence*, a new paranormal novel that just made it to the top of the New York Times best seller list. The seven women ranged in ages from eighteen to eighty-six. They were local and I knew them all. They usually met at one of their houses. Mrs. Crow, a good friend of my mother's, finger waved at me and smiled. My mother's spy, I'm sure.

At another table, a tall thin girl wore red sandals with four inch heels and thin straps that laced all the way up to her knees.

Happiness – to the point of giddiness.

Because I wanted to keep a positive attitude about tonight, I ignored her companion, an older, balding man whose eyebrows were creased together and lips turned down in a serious frown.

Anger.

Were the shoes new? Had they cost more than he thought they should? Was he upset about something else? I had no idea. I can't read people's minds; I just get a sense of their feelings. The stronger the emotion, the more effect it has on me. It's almost like my reaction to eating food with spice. The right amount – perfect. A little too much – a little nausea. Too much – sick as a dog and with the emotions, excruciating head pain and blackouts.

Lust.

Why is it that no matter where I go, I feel someone pining after someone else? Is everyone in the world having sex except me? Being a twenty-five year old virgin was not what I had anticipated for myself. By now, I thought I would be married, with at least one child – satisfying my mother's dream – and working part-time as a family counselor. I mistakenly thought that my empathic abilities would make me a better therapist. In fact, it had the opposite effect. After only six months of my counseling internship, I learned that people are crazy and family dynamics are even crazier! The stress of sharing my clients' emotions coupled with the other therapists' own screwed-up feelings almost sent me to the local funny farm. Now I work in a local burger joint with customers who broadcast very few emotions besides hunger. It barely pays my bills, but I've kept my sanity.

It isn't easy to meet, let alone find the man of my dreams or my mother's. I don't drink, smoke or stay up late – so no bar pickups. Church hasn't been part of my life since I left my parents' home at eighteen – so no help there either. I'm a cashier at a local small burger joint with five other employees: two who speak very little English and are still in high school, one who is old enough to be my grandfather, a very pregnant Sandra, and Glen. Glen's my best friend and gay – so there is no way I'll be dating a co-worker. The only place I can meet Mr. Right is online and so far all I've met is Mr. Way Too Wrong. But I'm always hopeful.

With that in mind this early spring evening, I dressed meticulously in tight black jeans, white cropped sweater, and red boots. I like my hair gelled and spiked up a bit but it puts some people off so I left it out of my short black hair. It was a more stylish look rather than my usual slightly punk persona. I even put on a little make-up. My mom would be so proud. Since the air was warm, I hadn't worn the leather jacket draped over my arm, but I brought it in case the weather decided to mock the local meteorologist and turn miserable again.

I spotted Sherman, casually dressed in tan slacks and a light blue polo shirt, as he walked through the door. He smiled with perfectly straight white teeth. His profile picture hadn't done justice to his clean-shaven baby face, complete with dimples, and sparkling green eyes. He came right to the table and extended his hand. Manners are always a plus although he was at least a

head shorter than my five foot ten inches, to which I had added another two inches with my boots. I already knew from his profile that he was shorter than me but for me size doesn't matter.

Hunger.

Not a bad emotion. It was after seven and maybe he hadn't eaten yet.

"Hello, Annie," Sherman smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Sherman," I said and shook his hand.

"Can I get you something to drink, ma'am?" he asked with a slight southern drawl to his words.

"Sure, thanks. I'd like an iced tea."

Sherman nodded and jogged to the counter.

Jessica, one of the baristas, waved and mouthed hello to me.

I nodded and smiled. She knew why I was there, as did Ida, the other barista. Actually, after so many blind dates, I suspect the entire town chats about why I frequent Starbucks.

Sherman came back a few seconds later and set my tea down in front of me. For himself, he had gotten an iced coffee. My nose suddenly filled with a rancid odor. I'm not a coffee drinker, but something seemed definitely wrong with his drink. I noticed a tiny piece of something on his blue shirt collar. What was it? Was that where the stench came from?

I took a sip of my own drink, soaked in its aroma and tried to focus on Sherman's words and not what was stuck on his collar. "So, Sherman, your profile says that you own a meat business. I work at a small burger joint in town. Where is your store?"

"Well, ma'am," his voice dropped as he began to speak. "I do own my own business but it's not an entire store. I have a small meat counter in the Steakhouse Grill. People come in and buy steaks and ribs to take home and cook themselves."

When he had started to clarify his profile, his voice seemed more tentative but as he explained his business, his voice elevated with pride. I like a man who is proud of his accomplishments. Another plus for Sherman. That explained the glob on his collar and the smell. Raw meat does go bad very quickly. In the next ten minutes he described every cut of meat, which marinades were the best and cooking tips, using hand movements to emphasize every word. I'm a big carnivore, so the subject was actually interesting. His intermittent injection of ma'am during his monologue got old fast, but he spoke with excitement in his voice and a gleam in his eye. Does he put this much enthusiasm in everything he does? I wondered. That could be a plus, too. I smiled and nodded to encourage his meat expertise discourse.

When the lecture stretched to fifteen minutes, I'd had enough, so I interrupted and asked, "What do you do for fun on the weekends, Sherman?"

He spent the next ten minutes describing how to grill meat. With each new technique, my nerves stretched thinner. I counted ten more ma'ams. When he began to debate the pros and cons of different types of grills, my nerves snapped and I interrupted again, "Have you lived in Ridgeside long?"

"Only a few months, ma'am. I moved here because my old neighbors didn't like the smoke from my smoker." Then he began an oration of how to smoke meat.

I wanted to put my head on the table and groan, but I continued to smile and nod, feeling like a bobble-head doll. During our entire conversation, his emotions never changed, they just got stronger.

More hunger.

I had dressed very carefully and seductively, if I say so myself, for this date and not once did his emotion change into a feeling directed toward me. I would have appreciated sensing a little bit of pleasure in my company from him, even if I didn't get actual desire.

As I took another sip of tea, I wondered how quickly I could abandon Starbucks and this date. I could live with the gross piece of meat on his collar, maybe he just missed it when he cleaned up to come here, and his single subject brain which was enough to convert me to vegetarianism. However, his breath was a mixture of garlic, onions, pork sausages and mints, and the twentieth ma'am grated on my last nerve.

After the second cup of tea, I excused myself and explained that I had to get up early the next day for work.

"I really had a good time tonight, ma'am. Can I see you again, Annie?"

"Let's talk about it online, Sherman." I told him and quickly scuttled toward the door. I'm probably the only person on Facebook who religiously chats with her eight hundred friends and only talks to one in real life.

As I exited Starbucks, I pulled my jacket over my head. In the thirty minutes it had taken me to realize that Sherman would not be the love of my life, the weather had changed back to a light drizzle.

My mom would be disappointed again, especially when she found out Sherman was a butcher and loved to cook. Those two qualities alone would have shot him right to the top of her perfect husband list. After all, she knows I can't even scramble an egg without tossing half of it on the floor and leaving the other part too runny to consume. My idea of a home cooked meal is to make a box of Rice-a-Roni, add a pound of ground beef and eat. That's why I often find myself at my parents' house at dinner time.

I took in a deep breath to inhale the reassuring scent of home – tomatoes, sugar and methane. The cannery, candy factory, and hundreds of dairy cows were in full production mode tonight. The strange mixture settled my nerves as I prepared to walk that well-worn concrete path back to my apartment, yet again.

I meandered down the sidewalk and passed El Rositos, one of the fourteen Mexican restaurants we have in our small town. The white, green, and red curtains symbolized the Mexican flag, as did the cacti etched into each window. They had recently added a large brown eagle devouring a snake to the center of the front door, which I couldn't get used to.

Bill Sterling, owner of Brown's Auto Repair Shop, had just repainted and added a massive brown bear to his front door. The Garden Boutique sported several colorful daffodils and butterflies on their store front, and the two banks that sat cross-cornered from each other had both been recently renovated with new paint and updated landscaping. Our new mayor's entire

campaign had promised to give the city a facelift. In this economy, I don't know where he got the money – but the town looked great.

The drizzle changed to a small downpour so I picked up the pace. It was only six more blocks to my apartment. I felt my new white wool sweater shrink with each step and the smell of wet dog permeated the air around me. My pulse and breathing kicked up with each long stride. My New Year's resolution this year had been to exercise three times a week and I hadn't quite gotten to it yet. My body told me that I had waited too long.

Anger.

Lust.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled up, a shiver ran down my spine, and my stomach rolled with a wave of nausea as the negative emotions hit me. When I glanced over my shoulder and into the shadows made by the auto repair shop, no shape moved. The emotions probably came from a couple of teenagers in one of the parked cars so I slowed my pace and changed it to the light steps I had often used when I was younger. I always would sneak up on my mom in the kitchen. She'd scream, I'd laugh.

Then I heard him.

“Evening, Annie.”

Ridgeside is a small place and the fact that he knew my name didn't mean that I actually knew him. Being a cashier at a local burger joint with a nametag gave me a broader circle of people who thought they were my friends.

When I turned to say, “Hello,” I felt his hand on my shoulder.

Physical contact with someone enhances my perception of their feelings, so when he touched me, his emotions hit me like I had been thrown against a brick wall.

Anger.

Determined.

Lust.

He was a tall man, well over six feet who wore a dark blue sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head. I couldn't see his face, but his emotions bombarded me like a meteor shower.

I ducked, brushed his hand off, and sprinted down the sidewalk. Only three blocks to my apartment complex. His footsteps slapped the wet sidewalk behind me, echoing in my head. My heart pounded hard and fast, slammed against my chest and screamed to get out, as my breath panted out in short bursts. I didn't have time for my life to flash before my eyes. I didn't have a moment to think, just pushed my feet to run faster.

His hands clamped down on my shoulders and I felt his warm breath on the back of my neck.

Frenzied fury.

His surge of emotions and my panic made my legs buckle as my head exploded in lights and pain.

The world went black.