

Chapter One

Celeste Jones had kissed so many frogs looking for her prince, she should have turned green and grown warts on her lips. But she'd finally gotten it right in the man department. Emerson Willis was strong and smart. And sexy. Masculine and excitingly alpha. And a spectacular dancer. And sexy. And a cop. Did it get any sexier than that? They'd been together a year, and what a great year it had been. He'd spent so much time at her place, he might as well have moved in, but he felt it wouldn't look good, with her being a teacher and all. As if first-graders knew anything about the birds and the bees or cared what their teacher did in her off hours. As if anyone cared what anyone did with anyone else these days. It had been sweet of him to think of that, though, and she loved him all the more for it.

Still, why not make what they had official since it was so great? "We're having a good time," he was always saying. "Relax and enjoy the ride."

She could do that. Spring had come, and she was looking ahead to a summer of off-roading, trips to Eastern Washington to visit the wineries, hitting the shooting range—you had to do that when you were with a cop—and meeting each other's families.

Nothing wrong with taking your family along on the ride. But whenever she tried to get him over to her mother's or suggested a trip to the beach to meet her sister, Jenna, and her great-aunt Edie, something came up to prevent it. Same with meeting his family. There was always an excuse. His parents were busy. He was busy. He had to work an extra shift. That seemed to happen a lot lately. Was it normal for a police officer to have to pull so many extra shifts?

If it wasn't for his reluctance to take things to the next level, Emerson Willis would be perfect. No, no, he *was* perfect. He just didn't want to rush into anything. And really, there was nothing wrong with that. Celeste had done her share of rushing and it hadn't led to anything good. But after all this time, it was hardly rushing to meet the parents.

They needed to have a talk, she thought as she left school late on a Friday afternoon. She and Emerson were planning to hit the gym together; then he was coming over to her place for pizza and to watch a movie. Before they got lost in movie land, she was determined they'd talk about what was going on in the real world. She stopped by Papa Murphy's and picked up a take-and-bake pizza, then popped into the grocery store for a six-pack of Hales Ales, his favorite microbrew, to go with it, along with some salad makings.

She was getting into her car when he called on her cell. "Can't hang out tonight, babe," he said. "I feel like shit."

"Oh, no. What's wrong?"

"I think I've got a fever. Maybe it's the flu."

Flu in late May? She thought people got that during the winter. "I'm sorry," she said. "And here I just picked up pizza for tonight."

"Freeze it."

"It's Papa Murphy's." Okay, did that sound like she was trying to guilt him or bribe him into coming over? Yes, she wanted to see him, but she didn't want him to get worse. And while she wanted to see *him*, she didn't want to see his germs. "I guess I'll bake it and then freeze it. We can have it when you're well."

"Whatever," he said.

Whatever was right. As if he cared what she was going to do with their pizza when he was sick. “Well, feel better,” she said. “Love you, Law and Order.”

“Back atcha,” he said and ended the call.

Back atcha. That was about as close as he ever came to getting mushy. Oh, he had no problem saying he wanted her, was crazy about her, was into her, but the L-word seemed to get stuck in his mouth.

A couple of times she’d tried to teasingly pull it out of him, offering to give him speech therapy. “Repeat after me, loooooove.” He would smile and shake his head and say, “You know how I feel about you.”

She did. Of course she did. Didn’t she?

“I’m not sure about this,” Celeste’s sister, Jenna, had said when she’d checked in after Valentine’s Day and learned there was still no ring, no proposal, no mention of meeting the family.

“Remember, he was married once before,” Celeste had reminded her. He’s just cautious. You should understand that.”

“There’s cautious and then there’s taking advantage of a woman,” Jenna had said.

That was when Celeste had to go...do something, anything. Bye. Her sister’s words had sounded like what their mother would say—if her mother knew that Celeste and Emerson had hooked up. Months ago. Fortunately, Mom never asked, and Celeste never volunteered the information.

But Mom did ask when she was going to meet the “amazing” man in Celeste’s life.

Soon, Celeste decided. As soon as he got well, she was hauling him over to her mother’s house. Even if she had to use his handcuffs on him.

Meanwhile, though, the poor guy. What could she do to help him feel better? Chicken soup! She wasn’t the most talented cook around, but she did make a mean chicken soup. And even though the weather was warm, when you were sick you needed soup. She went back into the store and bought a rotisserie chicken, then drove to her apartment and got to work.

Within an hour she was pulling a fragrant chicken rice soup off the burner to cool. That would make him feel better. While it cooled she redid her makeup, checked out Instagram and Facebook and texted her friend Vanita. Then she put her soup in a container, hopped in her Prius and drove over to Emerson’s apartment on her mission of mercy.

He rented a slick unit in a building that had a pool and a party room. Two bedrooms. Plenty of room to spread out. Okay, once they moved in together, someone would have to sacrifice some stuff because his place was pretty full and her apartment, also two bedrooms, was packed to the gills with furniture and cute garage-sale finds. Her second bedroom served as an office and craft room. They could always buy a house.

She wanted a house. And a yard. And kids. And a dog. Emerson needed to get with the program. She was enjoying the ride, but she’d enjoy it a lot more if she knew they were going to get serious. She was thirty-six, for crying out loud. Thirty-six and a half, to be exact. The alarm on her biological clock was going off. Yes, once he was well, they were definitely going to have that talk, she decided as she went up the stairs to his second-floor unit.

She was sure she heard music coming from inside as she knocked on the door. And voices. Did he have the TV on?

She was about to knock again when the door opened. There stood Emerson in swimming trunks, chest bare, muscles on display. Why?... What?... Was he taking a swim to cool his fevered brow?

“Is that the pizza delivery?” called a female voice.

Pizza delivery! Emerson had a fever going, all right, but it wasn’t from the flu. “I thought you were sick.” *You big, rotten lizard.*

He blinked as if trying to bring her into focus. “Uh, I’m feeling better.”

“I just bet you are,” she snapped and pushed past him.

“Celeste,” he protested.

There, coming out of his second bedroom, was a woman showing off long hair with an expensive rainbow tint job. Her hair wasn’t all she was showing off. That bikini barely covered anything. Not that she had much to cover.

Really? Emerson was cheating on her with that? Celeste looked so much better in her bikini.

“Not pizza delivery,” she snarled as she marched to the kitchen. “Chicken soup. For the sickie.” She slammed the container on the counter.

Emerson was in the living room now, looking back and forth between the women, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Celeste demanded.

He swallowed. “This is Becky.”

“Becky,” Celeste said sweetly. “I’m Celeste. The girlfriend. Emerson and I have been seeing each other for a year now. You know, hanging out, taking trips, going to the shooting range. Having sex,” she added, throwing him the look of death. “How about you, Becky? How long have you and Emerson been seeing each other?” *Having sex.*

Becky’s eyes were slits, and she turned them on Emerson. “You...bastard.” She wheeled around and marched back to the bedroom.

“Becky, wait,” he called. Then he frowned at Celeste. “What are you doing here?”

“I made you chicken soup because I thought you were sick. You’re sick, all right, you rotten, cheating douche bag.” She grabbed her offering. “You don’t deserve this.” And he sure didn’t deserve her.

Emerson trailed after her. “She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Yeah, that was why he’d lowered his voice.

But Becky had heard. She’d gathered her clothes and was steaming toward the door. “Thanks a lot,” she yelled.

“Obviously, I don’t mean anything, either,” Celeste said and followed her.

“Beck, I mean, Celeste, wait!” he called.

Celeste stopped long enough to glare at him. “I wasted so many kisses on you. And a year of my life I’ll never get back.” She pointed a finger at him. “I thought you were so noble. A cop, for heaven’s sake. There oughta be a law against cheating and you oughta be sent to love jail. For life.”

With that parting shot, she banged the door shut and stamped down the stairs behind Becky, almost as fast as the tears racing down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Becky said as the two women walked to the parking lot, fuming side by side. “I had no idea. He said he was divorced.”

“Oh, he is. His wife was a bitch.”

“Wouldn’t have sex with him,” Becky added. “Didn’t really care about him.”

Celeste wiped away a tear. What a pair of fools they were. “How long...?”

“Three months.”

Three months! For three months he’d been playing her, seeing another woman on the side. “So you were those extra shifts he’s been pulling.” Enjoy the ride, he’d kept saying. Some ride.

“He told me he had to work extra shifts, too,” Becky said. She stopped at the jazzy little convertible next to Celeste’s Prius. “I really am sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Celeste assured her. “I just hope someday he gets what’s coming to him.”

The smile blooming on Becky’s face looked positively evil. “He will. My dad’s his chief. And Daddy feels strongly about his men living up to the badge they wear.”

Celeste gave her a smile in return. “Good. I’m sorry we met like this. I hope next time you find someone who’s not a... Emerson.”

“I will,” Becky said with confidence. “You, too.”

Celeste thanked her and got in her car. With her chicken soup. Then she cried her way home. Emerson had seemed so perfect. She’d wanted him so much, given so much of herself to the relationship, and all she’d gotten in return was a broken heart.

“Girl, I don’t know how you do it,” her friend Vanita said later that night as they sat on Celeste’s little balcony. She’d called Vanita, who had come over to be with her in her time of sorrow, bringing a listening ear and ice cream.

“What is wrong with me that I didn’t figure out what was going on?” Celeste gave her chocolate cherry ice cream a stir. Her second bowl, but who was counting? At least she wasn’t eating out of the carton. She hadn’t stooped to that.

“Other than the fact that you’re too trusting and figure everyone has principles? Nothing.”

“I shouldn’t have gotten serious so fast,” Celeste said with a frown. “Jenna’s right. I’m always rushing into relationships.”

“Well, I gotta say, he did seem like a keeper.” She shook her head. “What a pile of poop that man is.”

“Now I know why he never said he loved me. He didn’t.” Oh, boy, here came the tears again. Celeste dabbed at her eyes and took a big spoonful of ice cream.

“Be glad you found out now. What if he’d finally asked you to marry him? If he’d cheat on you now, you know he’d do it when you were married.”

“I am so through with men.”

“Your sister said the same thing and look at her now, with *two fabulous* men after her. Guys aren’t all bad. Your perfect man will come along.”

“There is no such thing.”

Vanita pointed her spoon at Celeste. “Don’t you go talking like that. You’re gonna find someone who appreciates you. Meanwhile, don’t be such a pushover for a great bod and a nice smile.”

“I’m not *that* shallow!”

“No, but you’re just too... I don’t know. Eager.”

Yes, she supposed she was. But darn it all, she only wanted a good man and that TV sitcom happy life she’d yearned for as a kid. Not that her mother and grandparents hadn’t given her and her sister a good life. But there’d been a key part missing. A dad. Her father had died when she was a baby.

So was that her problem? Was she always looking for the father she’d never had? Did she need therapy?

No, darn it. She needed a man who wouldn’t cheat.

“You gotta start protecting your heart, girl. And don’t be givin’ it away to every man who comes along with a smooth line.”

“Hey, no shaming,” Celeste said irritably.

“I’m not shaming. I’m lecturing. Get tough.”

Get tough. Yeah. She could do that. Next time she went to the gym and saw Emerson... Eew. She didn’t want to go to the gym anymore. She was bound to see him there.

What if she did run into him? What if he told her he realized he’d been a fool and he wanted her back?

Heaven help her, she’d probably take him with open arms. She had to get out of town.

“Why don’t you go spend some time with your sister this summer,” her mom suggested when Celeste told her that she and Emerson were no more. “Life is always good at the beach.”

“Life isn’t good anywhere right now,” Celeste grumbled.

“It’ll get better,” her mom promised. And if anyone should know, it would be Melody Jones. Widowed young and left with two little girls to raise, she’d carved out a happy life for herself. And all without a man.

“Meanwhile,” she added.

“I know. Look for the rainbow in the storm.”

“Exactly.”

Her mom was right. What was the sense in moping? When the going got tough, the tough...went to the beach.