

I DON'T WANT TO PICK A DATE YET



Sarah squealed as she caught sight of her daughter's left hand. "Oh my word, Baby! Is that a ring I see?"

Ria smiled broadly and held out her hand. She hadn't even made it past the entry hall before her mother had spied the antique family ring Andrew had slipped on her finger the night before.

Sarah grabbed Ria and hugged her, did the same to Andrew, and then dragged Ria into the living room where the rest of the family was enjoying Christmas afternoon. "Look everyone! Ria and Andrew are engaged!"

The noise level immediately went through the roof. Ria's sister Becca ran over to see the ring, and Richard crossed the room to hug his daughter. Then he turned to Andrew and slapped him on the back. "This is the best gift of the season, no doubt about it," he said beaming. "This calls for a toast."

Ria Davis and Andrew MacNeil had been a couple for almost a year, and finally, last night, he'd slipped his mother's antique ring onto her finger. He would have done it much sooner, but Ria had dragged her feet, fearing that becoming a 'Mrs.' would somehow make her stodgy. They were deeply in love, though, and complemented each other well with their different styles—Ria, a Southern

girl from Raleigh, full of spontaneity and humorous sassiness, and Andrew, a Scotsman who now lived in New Jersey but who had grown up in a traditional Scottish family and had a deep sense of personal honor and discipline.

Andrew had first met Ria's parents about six months earlier when they'd come to New Jersey for a visit, and they'd immediately liked each other. Richard and Sarah had been delighted that their daughter had finally found a man solid enough to hold her respect and balance out her carefree attitude, and at Thanksgiving, when Andrew had formally asked Richard's permission to wed his daughter, that permission had been happily given.

Now the newly-engaged couple had just arrived in Raleigh for Christmas with her parents, and Sarah had spotted the new ring even before her daughter could make an announcement.

While Richard was getting the champagne, Andrew went out to bring in the gifts they'd brought, and by the time he was back, Sarah was huddled with Ria, talking a hundred miles an hour, and as far as Andrew could tell, already planning the wedding. He hoped she wouldn't spook Ria by rushing things.

Richard returned and passed around glasses of champagne, while Tyler and Megan, the children of Ria's sister Becca, demanded to know if any of the new gifts were for them. Christmas Day plus an engagement announcement made for happy chaos.

Andrew could see that Ria was looking a bit overwhelmed. She loved seeing her family, but her mother and sister had been excitedly monopolizing her ever since they'd seen the ring. He went over and put his arm around her. "How are you doing over here?" he asked, leaning down to kiss her ear.

Becca got some apple juice for the children so they could participate, then everyone toasted Ria and Andrew. Ria was quiet and said only "Thank you," so Andrew added a few words about how much he looked forward to being part of their family.

The new gifts were passed around, and shortly afterwards they

all sat down to a Christmas dinner of ham, roast beef, and enough side dishes to feed a small army. The main topic of discussion remained the engagement.

Ever since dinner, Ria had been quieter than usual, so Andrew was relieved when everyone decided to call it an early night, and he was even happier that they were in the same private guest area they'd been in at Thanksgiving. He brought in the rest of their suitcases, then closed the door to their suite and took Ria in his arms, whereupon she immediately burst into tears.

"What's the matter, Baby?" he asked, surprised. He had a tendency to call her 'Baby' whenever they were with her parents, who frequently used that nickname.

Ria went on crying without answering, so he guided her over to a loveseat in the room and sat down with her on his lap.

"Tell me what's wrong, lass," he asked again, wrapping his arms around her. "Let me help you."

"You said we didn't have to get married until I wanted, but Mama's trying to make me choose a date. She said you have to make reservations way ahead of time, but I don't want to pick a date yet."

Tears were still running down her face, so Andrew started wiping some of them away with his fingers. He opened his mouth to answer, but Ria continued. "Anyway, I want us to make those plans together when I'm ready."

"Did you tell her that?" he asked, kissing her wet cheeks.

"Not really," admitted Ria. "When she gets all excited about things, it's hard to stop her."

Not unlike someone else I know, thought Andrew. He wasn't happy about the situation with Sarah, though. He didn't want her to spook Ria by pushing too much on wedding plans, but at the same time he didn't want to say anything to Sarah himself that might put a chill on his new relationship with her. This was going to have to come from Ria.

Or Richard. Maybe he was the one who could help. Tomorrow

he'd find a time to mention the situation to Richard. He was sure from earlier conversations with him that Ria's father would both understand the problem and know how to moderate Sarah's exuberance without causing a family problem. Meanwhile, Ria was going to have to draw some lines herself.

"I know our engagement is really exciting for your mother, but you need to hold your ground in a nice way," he told her. "She needs to understand that you're not ready to choose a date yet."

"Does that make you feel bad that I don't want to choose right now?" she asked, looking at Andrew with big wet eyes.

"No, lass. I told you, it's completely up to you. If I had my way, we'd climb out the window and elope tonight, but I'll wait as long as you want. When we get married, I want you to be so happy you can't stop smiling, not feeling like it's too soon and someone pushed you before you were ready."

Ria put her arms around Andrew's chest. She always felt so safe and understood when she was with him.

"Come on, let's go to bed." Andrew stood up, pulling her with him, and then started undressing her. She let him take off all her clothes but then started shivering slightly, so he immediately picked up a throw and wrapped her in it.

"What did you bring to sleep in?" he asked.

"That long shirt you hate," she answered, the hint of a mischievous smile playing around her mouth.

"Why would you bring something you know I hate?"

"So you'd have something to grump about." She giggled, and Andrew was glad to see she was perking up again. Ria never stayed down for long.

Ignoring the shirt he disliked, he took her to bed and made love to her, more to reassure her than to excite her, and then he held her in his arms all night. Tomorrow he'd find a way to protect her from her mother's premature rush to the altar.



THE FEW DAYS in Raleigh passed quickly. Andrew spoke to Richard, who promised his help reining in Sarah's premature agenda. The more time Andrew spent with Ria's father, the more he liked him. His own parents had died in a plane crash when he was nineteen, so he was glad that his soon-to-be father-in-law was such an honorable and common-sense man. He would be an important addition to his life.

During their visit, Andrew had a chance to get to know Becca and her husband Tom better. Tom was extremely busy with his cardiology practice at Duke and so spent long hours at the hospital, meaning that when he was home, both children clamored for his attention.

Andrew was almost amused at how different Becca and Ria were. They were both beautiful and quick-witted, but their personalities were night and day. Becca was very organized and analytical, and the few times he'd talked with her, he'd found her to be an interesting conversationalist, widely read and thoughtful but without Ria's added entertaining commentary. Becca obviously had a serious streak that Ria didn't.

One of the things he found so attractive in Ria was that she combined intelligence with insouciance. If you didn't know her, you might mistake her easy-going manner for mediocrity, but you'd only make that mistake once. She had a very quick mind and the family ability to see the flaw in an argument, and woe to the person who underestimated her.

She also had a sense of humor that entered into almost everything she did. Being with her was simply fun—fun and unpredictable. With Ria, you just never knew what might pop up.

On their last afternoon there, Ria, who was an interior designer, went over to Becca's house to give her some design ideas for the children's bedrooms. Afterwards, as they sat at the kitchen island, Becca, who was an attorney like their father, asked the question that had been on her mind since Thanksgiving.

“Do you remember last spring when you said that someone was spanking you?” she started.

Ria looked startled. “I never said that.”

“Not those words, but you implied it very strongly. We talked about it back then. Don’t you remember?” Becca wondered why Ria’d been so quick to deny it.

“I remember *your* talking about it, but you made a big deal out of nothing.” Ria had a closed look on her face.

“I’m not trying to get into your business, Ria, but it bothered me then. Now that I’ve met Andrew, I’m not sure what I think. It was Andrew that you were talking about, wasn’t it?” Becca waited for an answer, but Ria was silent.

“It was Andrew, wasn’t it?” Becca repeated.

“Maybe,” admitted Ria grudgingly.

“Does he still spank you?”

“Maybe.” A small pout was starting to play around Ria’s face as she added, “Andrew’s the most perfect man I’ve ever met. I don’t want you to criticize him.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“I’m not criticizing him. I like him, and I think he’s sexy as hell, but that still doesn’t give him the right to spank you if you don’t want him to.” Becca watched her sister’s face closely.

“You’re sounding like a lawyer instead of my sister,” complained Ria, frowning at Becca across the table. “And anyway, how do you know I don’t want him to?”

“Do you?” asked Becca in a very surprised tone. That option had never seriously occurred to her.

“Maybe,” replied Ria, reverting to her one-word answers.

“Look, Ria, I’m your big sister, and I need to know you’re okay. If you and he are into spanking as a bedroom game, that’s totally your business, and I’m sorry I brought it up. I just had the feeling last spring that you were referring to something different, like that he spanked you in a punishment way. That was what I was worried about.” Becca stopped talking and waited for Ria’s reaction, but again she got only silence.

“Ria, does Andrew spank you to punish you?”

There was a moment’s silence, then Ria flared up at her sister. “Why do you want to know? It’s not your business. I don’t ask you about what you and Tom do!”

Becca could see that Ria was upset, and that only made her more suspicious. “Ria, just answer the one question. Does he spank you to punish you?”

“So?”

It wasn’t a direct answer, but it was a clear one.

“So he has no right to. You’re an adult. He doesn’t get to control you that way.” Becca sounded outraged.

Ria thought about how often Andrew put her over his knee and spanked her. It made her tummy feel tight even thinking about it, but it also made her miss him this very minute. She bit her lip but didn’t say anything.

“Ria, are you listening? You two are equal people. He doesn’t get to spank you because he doesn’t like something. Why would you let him do that? Or maybe it’s just a joke. Are they just pretend spankings? Do they hurt or not?”

Ria looked like she wanted to cry. What her sister was saying was probably true, but she liked her life with Andrew just as it was.

“Do they hurt?” Becca repeated.

“Mostly,” replied Ria, “but it’s okay.”

“Why? Why is that okay?”

“I don’t know. It just is.” Ria wished she was with Andrew right now instead of sitting here in her sister’s kitchen.

“Are you afraid of him?” asked Becca.

“No. I told you, I love him.”

“Are you afraid of being spanked?” Becca sounded like she was cross-examining a witness.

“I don’t know. Sometimes, but only a little,” Ria answered truthfully.

Ria didn’t understand why her sister was so hung up on spanking. Andrew was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Yes,

there were definitely times when she was scared right before a spanking, especially when Andrew was really upset about something, but there was a tiny corner of her that knew it was all part of what she found so special about him. It was like magnetic sparks that made them so attracted to each other. She loved the excitement in their relationship, and somehow, in a way she didn't quite understand, spankings were part of that.

"Ria, promise me you'll think about what you're doing. Just remember that he doesn't have the right to tell you what you can or can't do. You're both equal adults."

Before Ria could answer, Becca's children came running in, so they hurriedly ended the conversation.

The next day Ria and Andrew said their goodbyes and headed north again. They'd enjoyed their time in Raleigh with her family, but were happy to be on their own once more. Andrew had some very specific ideas about how he planned to spend their first night back in their own bedroom.