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By Ann Aguirre

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Daniel Tyler has grown up too fast. Becoming a single dad at twenty turned his life upside down—and brought him heartache he can't risk again. Now, as he raises his four-year-old son while balancing a full-time construction management job and night classes, the last thing he wants is noisy students living in the apartment upstairs. But one night, Nadia's and Ty's paths cross, and soon they can't stay away from each other.

The timing is all wrong—but love happens when it happens. And you can't know what you truly need until you stand to lose it.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Ann Aguirre is a national bestselling author with a degree in English Literature. She writes urban fantasy, romantic science fiction, paranormal romance and dystopian young adult fiction.

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The first time I saw Ty, I fell down the stairs and tore my pants.

A superstitious person might call that an omen. He had nothing to do with it, of course; that was just a quirk of timing. While Lauren and I struggled with the sofa, a guy I presumed to be a new neighbor came into the building. He had auburn hair, brown eyes and a strong jaw dusted with gold scruff. I'd always had a soft spot for gingers, probably a result of growing up on Harry Potter movies. He was also tall and lean with a sculpted, ascetic face, like an austere warrior who would be at home on the prow of a ship. Okay, it was possible I'd watched too many episodes of *Vikings* this week.

When he saw us wrangling such a heavy piece of furniture, he only sighed, stepped around the boxes cluttering the foyer and checked his mailbox. No greeting, no "welcome to the complex." I was halfway up the stairs to the landing, heaving my end of the sofa, when my hands slipped and the couch bounced away. I lunged for it, missed and came tumbling after. Lauren jumped aside like it was a sled on the slalom track, so the brown plaid monstrosity thumped ahead of me back down to the floor. The couch just missed slamming into the wall; I wasn't so lucky. In honor of moving day, I had on old comfy pants, and they'd been washed one too many times, judging by the audible rip as I bounced off the wall and landed at Lauren's feet.

She pulled me up, eyes wide. "You okay?"

"Just bruises to pride and pelvis," I mumbled.

She tilted her head at the workload awaiting us. "Maybe we should wait for the guys to get back from their beer run?"

I surveyed the mess we'd created in front of the entrance and just outside, conscious that we were inconveniencing our neighbors. "We can't really leave things like this."

"I'll help you with the couch." As greetings went, it wasn't the warmest. Grumpy Ginger strode toward us, rolling up the sleeves on his dress shirt to reveal very nice forearms: lightly tanned and dusted with auburn hair, lean but strong with prominent wrist bones. His hands appealed to me just as much, long-fingered and elegant, without being overly manicured. You know, if you liked that sort of thing. I was bad at estimating ages, but he was probably out of school, judging by the business casual he had on.

Belatedly, I realized I'd been studying him for thirty seconds too long. "If you're sure."

"It's fine. I'll walk backward and guide it up."

"Thanks," Lauren put in. "We'd prefer not to commit so-ficular homicide our first day in the building."

Since my back was to the wall, I escaped the ignominy of the new neighbor seeing my panda underpants. He slid by and hefted the sofa up a few stairs on his own. Lauren and I worked together, and it was much easier with him doing the heavy lifting up top. With a minimum of fuss, we maneuvered the couch up to the second floor, where GG paused. "A or B?" he asked.

"B." I should win the prize for hilarious banter.

Nodding, he helped us carry it down the hall and into the apartment. We'd left the door open since we had so little in there. Most of it was still cluttering the lobby downstairs. Max and Angus had taken off as soon as we got everything unloaded: my car, Angus's and the rental truck. After that, they were gone like the wind with the excuse that moving in would be more fun with pizza, cold beer and a buzz on.

"You're right above me." He didn't look particularly happy about it, either.

I shot Lauren a *what's with this guy* look, and she shrugged.

"I'm Nadia," I said.

At first he didn't say anything, so she tried, "That makes me Lauren."

"Ty," he said finally, like this basic introduction was akin to signing a long-term cell contract.

Lauren started, "The guys will be back with drinks in a bit, if you want—"

"No, it's okay. I need to get home." If curt was a hat, he would be wearing it with jaunty disregard for our feelings.

*Awkward. And I still need to change my pants.*

"Well, thanks for helping us out. We can handle the rest of the boxes."

Ty took my comment as his cue to leave, so we followed him downstairs to work on the rest of our stuff. He looked tired as hell as he headed toward apartment 1B, the unit to the back of the building; it had a nice courtyard, unlike the front or upstairs. We had a balcony, but it wasn't big enough for a barbecue, unless you bought the kind people used for tailgating.

Lauren and I were moving in with a couple of friends, and since we'd lost the coin toss, we were sharing the master bedroom, while Angus and Max got their own rooms. The biggest perk was that we didn't have to use a grungy dude bathroom; we had an en-suite bath, along with a walk-in closet. Four people in a three-bedroom made the rent more manageable, and since I was often living on ramen by the end of the month, I couldn't complain. I grabbed one of my boxes, marked CLOTHING, and ran upstairs with it, wincing at the sore spot where I'd collided with the wall.

"Nice panda," Lauren said, deadpan.

"Shut up."

I ducked into our bathroom to put on sweats and then went back down, passing Lauren on the stairs. As I hefted a box, a gray-haired woman stepped out of 1B. She was distinctly pear-shaped, moving like her feet

hurt, but she smiled as she came through the foyer, giving me a friendly wave.

"Normally, I'd say 'see you tomorrow' but this is my last day." With that cryptic remark, she left, and I hauled my carton upstairs.

As Lauren and I traipsed down to load up again, Max and Angus were just coming in. When I smelled the pizza, I decided they didn't suck as much as previously estimated. They each grabbed two boxes and let Lauren and me carry up the pizza and beer. With four of us on the job, pretty soon we had all of our stuff in the apartment. The place was a jumble, but at least we could close the door.

"Sorry we were gone so long." Angus was genuinely concerned. "Did the couch give you any trouble?"

I warned Lauren with a look not to mention my pratfall or wardrobe malfunction. "Somewhat, but I gave it a stern talking-to, and it settled down. Promised to be less of a malcontent in the future."

Max dismissed the topic by frowning at the spot where we'd left the sofa. "It needs to face that way. That wall is better for movies and gaming."

*Typical.* Not that Max was a bad guy, but...

Since freshman year, he'd slept his way through half the women at Mount Albion. Since this was a midsize liberal arts college, that was both impressive and alarming. Lauren and I knew Max too well to be seduced. Oh, he'd tried early on, but we both shot him down. I had zero interest in troubled bad boys from broken homes. Someone else could love Max and fix him; I was just crossing my fingers that he'd do the dishes on schedule. Max *did* contribute a steady paycheck, and that weighed heavily into the roommate decision—I trusted him to pay his share of the rent on time. As for Angus, he came from a "good family," as my mother would say, so his dad had already prepaid his part of the rent with the leasing company. Lauren and I were on our own, but I had a part-time job, and so did she. *It should be fine.* I'd been telling myself that since I signed the lease last spring and put down the deposit, but this was a little scary, after living in the dorm as a freshman and sophomore.

"Fine," Lauren said, since nobody else seemed to care about couch placement, and helped Max move it.

He immediately conscripted her to help him set up the entertainment center while Angus and I situated the retro dining set I'd found at a rummage sale, complete with yellow vinyl chairs and cracked Formica top, edged in chrome. It had plenty of character, and probably dated from the actual '50s, but I covered the scratches with place mats while Angus organized the kitchen. I'd never lived in a house with a dishwasher before, though I wasn't about to admit that to the guys. Lauren knew, of course. My parents were covering my tuition with the help of an academic scholarship, but there had never been many luxuries. In fact, I was the first person in the family to go to college. Lauren and I had been friends since second grade. Her family used to have money, but her dad's investments didn't pan out, which left him bitter, and when she was eleven, he left the family entirely. Ten years later, we were in the same financial boat.

By the time Lauren and Max got the TV and peripherals set up, Angus had the kitchen done, and I'd set food and beer on the counter, along with plates I'd rinsed to get rid of packing dust and newspaper ink. I collapsed onto the sofa with a groan; more boxes could wait until later. Angus sat next to me, and Lauren settled on his other side, leaving Max the recliner. He promptly put on a noisy action movie from his collection, and I was too tired to argue.

"You've seen this twelve times," Angus said.

"Fourteen. What's your point?" Max flashed a grin that other people found charming.

I ate my pizza, staring blankly at a succession of car chases.

Afterward, I felt better, enough to start rummaging in the decor boxes. We didn't have a ton, but there were a few pictures, scented candles and a weird statue that Angus's mom made. Apparently, she was some kind of big-deal sculptor in Europe. I asked their opinions of where I should hang things at first, but it became obvious nobody cared, so I located hammer and nails and went to work.

Ten minutes later, someone knocked on the door. The other three looked at me.

"What?" Lauren said. "You're already up."

"Fine."

I answered, then my eyes widened when I saw Ty. If possible, he looked even wearier, damp and rumpled, too. He'd changed into a gray Converse T-shirt, and I had no idea what would create those splash patterns, but soft cotton clung to his upper body, revealing broad shoulders and a solid chest. His disheveled, touchable appeal made me smile until he opened his mouth.

"Do you mind turning down the TV and not banging on the walls so late?"

Surprised, I dug the phone out of my pocket. It read 8:42 p.m. For shit's sake, it wasn't even nine on a weeknight. I'd stayed up later than this in elementary school. "I think we disagree as to what constitutes late. But I'll tell Max about the TV." I pivoted to call, "Hey, he can hear your movie downstairs. Too loud, bro."

With a dirty look and a mumbled curse, Max pressed the volume on the remote. Holy crap, he had it all the way up to fifty. No wonder Couch Guy was cranky. It occurred to me that was why he'd sighed when he spotted Lauren and me moving in. College students were known to be pain-in-the-ass partiers, prone to aggravating their neighbors, barfing in strange places and occasionally leaving naked people where they didn't belong.

"Thanks." That was all he said before wheeling and heading off down the hall in a hurry.

"Great, we have a complete fun Nazi living downstairs," Max grumbled.

"We knew when we moved in this was a mixed community.

The all-college-student apartments we'd looked at cost more, both in monthly rent and damage deposits. This place rented to upperclassmen, and they didn't make us pay two months up front, either. It was a little farther from campus, but we had two cars between the four of us, and we'd worked out a good ride-share system. But we also couldn't be as wild as we might get away with elsewhere.

"I don't want our neighbors to hate me," Lauren said. "Especially hot ones who help us move furniture."

"You have terrible taste in guys," Max told her.

While they bickered, Angus snagged the remote and quietly turned the movie down another few notches. I put down the hammer and decorated more quietly, arranging knickknacks and candles; the picture-hanging could wait until the morning. For all I knew, Ty was a med student who hadn't slept in twenty-seven hours, so once I finished the living room, rather than agitate him on our first night, I dragged my boxes to my room and started hanging up clothes. Along the way, I found sheets and made up my bed. Elation bubbled through me when I unearthed towels, too; at ten, I stopped organizing and took my first shower in our new place.

My mom called at half past, just as I was stepping onto the rug. It was surprising until I realized she must've forgotten the two-hour difference. Again. She was on Mountain time; I was on Eastern. This happened about once a month. She'd get an itch to talk to me and dial away.

I grabbed my cell and said, "Everything's fine, no hitches."

"You're sharing a room with Lauren, right? Not the broody, handsome boy?"

I grinned. Max would hate being described that way. "Not a chance."

"I don't mind the other one."

"Angus is gay, Mom."

"Are you sure? Sometimes they seem that way, but they're really metrosexual. You see it on the TV all the time."

"I've met his boyfriend."

"That's compelling evidence." She sounded disappointed. "Well, I just wanted to make sure you didn't have any problems with the apartment."

"Nope, it's great."

"When does school start?"

"In two days."

"Do you have everything you need? Things are tight, but—"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Whatever she was going to offer, I couldn't accept it. They had scrimped, saved and sacrificed enough for me. Two more years, and I'd graduate with a degree in special education; going forward, I was determined to stand on my own two feet. My parents didn't know this, but I had been keeping a tally of what they paid and I intended to reimburse them after I got my first teaching position. They'd never asked me to, but I knew how hard they'd worked. For a while my mom had two jobs to keep me in school, until she got promoted to management at the supermarket. Paying back that money would give them a nest egg for the future or maybe they could finally take a vacation. It made me smile to think about giving back.

"I'll send you a care package," she said, and I could *hear* the pride in her voice. "I can't wait to write your new address on the label."

"I thought you were supposed to be sad that your baby's grown up," I teased her.

"It makes me feel like I did my job to see you spread your wings and fly."

*Oh, Lord.* I had to get off the phone before my mom started in with the butterfly talk. I was an ugly duckling as a kid, slightly better in high school, and I'd more or less grown into my looks by college. I had dark, curly hair, a long nose, sharp chin and strong cheekbones. You could say my face had character. Mom claimed I had "good bones," which meant I'd age well, like Katharine Hepburn. Since I barely knew who that was now—and she was a really old woman who died when I was a kid—that wasn't much comfort at age nine.

"Love you, Mom. Kiss Dad and Rob for me." Rob being my older brother, who had gone into construction like my dad.

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