

BETH MILLER

A Whole New Game

Sample

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*This book is dedicated to Mike, who is always ready to raid,
and to Jill, who introduced me to the wonderful world of shinies.*

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Chapter 1

The entire parking lot of Miss Tonya's School of Dance was full. Gage drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he considered options. The most obvious was to park at the grocery store across the street and cross four lanes of traffic on foot. He glanced to the backseat and asked Isabelle, "Where does Mommy park?"

She rolled her eyes. "Mommy's never late."

He hadn't realized eye rolling started so young. "We're not late."

"Daddy, I can see the clock."

"Then you can see that you have five more minutes until you have to be in class."

"Mommy says five minutes early is ten minutes late."

Gage gripped the wheel, annoyed. He was well aware that Annie was always early. It was one of the many things, even in their very short relationship, they hadn't seen eye to eye on. With time running out, he drove across the street.

Normally he'd have held Isabelle's hand and let her walk next to him. They didn't have time. As soon as they were out of the car he threw her dance bag over his shoulder and squatted. "Hop on."

She climbed onto his back, wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. "Good thing I work out, kid. Cuz you're getting awfully big for this."

She giggled, "I'm only seven, Dad."

Once they were safely in Miss Tonya's parking lot, he set her down and took her hand to lead her into the building. They stepped into the foyer of the dance studio and he asked, "Where's the mom who's supposed to do your hair?"

Isabelle tightened her grip on his hand and stood on her toes, trying to see over the heads of the other students. "I don't see her."

The door to the practice studio opened and the line of girls filed in. Gage pulled Isabelle over to a wooden bench, dropped her dance bag on the end, and began digging through it. He found her brush and the baggie of elastics. "Sit, I'll do it."

Her eyes widened. "You don't know how."

"Sit." She sat and he pulled her hair into a ponytail as gently as possible and wrapped an elastic around it. Then he twirled the ponytail, tying it into a blonde knot of sorts, and added another elastic. "All set."

She touched the bun gingerly. "This doesn't feel right."

The sloppy, lopsided mess didn't look right, either. Nothing like the neat bundles of hair all the other girls had on top of their heads. "Go, so you're not late."

"I need my shoes."

He helped her change into her pink ballet slippers, gave her a quick kiss, and watched through the viewing window as she took her place in line. It was hard to wrap his mind around how easily she joined the class, how she followed along with all the other girls in their matching pink tutus without missing a beat.

Of course she'd know exactly what to do; it had been months since she'd started dance. It was he who was new to this. His chest tightened with love, and with longing. This was a part of Isabelle's life he hadn't experienced before because her mom brought her to class. He'd offered, and Annie had reminded him that their agreement didn't include Tuesdays, or any other weekday. He got Isabelle from Friday night to Sunday night, every other weekend.

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Except when Annie had to go on a business trip. Then, suddenly, she was happy to adjust their schedule.

That was fine with him. He'd take whatever time he could get with his daughter.

He turned away from the window, settled into one of the wooden chairs along the wall. Dance class was fifty minutes long. Annie had told him he didn't have to stay, as long as he was back before the class was dismissed. He wasn't about to leave. Instead, he pulled out his phone to check his email.

Technically, Dawson's Auctions was open from nine to five. But Gage took care of clients any time they called, texted, or emailed. He didn't have a choice; his father expected it.

There was an email from Macy, which was a relief. As he scrolled through the pictures she'd sent, various angles of a white Thunderbird, he thought how lucky he was that everything had worked out with her. He'd found her and he'd hired her, against his dad's wishes. He'd had no idea she was going to end up with his brother, Talan, or that their relationship would eventually result in both Talan and Macy leaving Dawson's. It had nearly cost Gage his job as well. The situation was so complicated he figured he'd need an entire book to explain it.

In the end all that mattered was that he'd smoothed things over with his dad, Macy was still providing pictures of cars for Dawson's, Talan was finally pursuing his dream of being a musician, and everyone was happy.

There were no new emails from clients. Not surprising, since he'd only left his desk an hour before. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and looked around.

When Annie had told him Isabelle wanted to take dance, she'd talked about how dance instilled a sense of accomplishment, increased confidence, and exposed children to experiences they wouldn't otherwise have. Then she told him that she'd gotten their daughter into Miss

Tonya's, which was the best school in the area.

That part was obvious. Shelves on either side of the viewing window held trophies of all shapes and sizes. First place banners from competitions spanning decades were interspersed with poster size photos of dance teams. Some of the dancers in the team photos looked younger than Isabelle. That seemed insane. Annie had informed him, though, that Isabelle was starting late. Most girls started at two.

His gaze skated over the women sitting in random chairs around the room, reading or playing on their phones. A group surrounded a table littered with coffee cups. If he'd known any of them he might have joined them. Instead, he stayed where he was.

It was an odd feeling to be the only man in the room. Definitely not what he was used to. Being in the classic car business, most of the people he dealt with were men. Not that there weren't women who were into cars. Macy, for instance. And his mom.

The door to the studio opened. Isabelle came out, her hair hanging around her shoulders. "Daddy, it fell out." She held out her hand, showing him the hair elastics.

"I'm sorry. Come here, we'll fix it." He began to carefully untangle her long, blonde hair.

She fidgeted. "I'm missing class."

A chair scraped from the other side of the room. He tried to ignore it but out of the corner of his eye he could see that all the women at the table were watching.

Black Doc Martens, surprisingly quiet on the hardwood floor, stepped into his field of vision and a woman with shoulder length dark hair, the blue streaks in it matching her blue glasses perfectly, knelt next to Isabelle.

She spoke softly, "I'm Ashleigh's mom. I can help, if you'd like."

Isabelle turned to her. "Yes, please."

Gage handed over the brush and watched, fascinated by the grace

of long, sure fingers, as the woman twisted his daughter's hair into a perfect bun. In seconds Isabelle was headed back to class.

The woman handed him the brush. "I'm Lora."

"Gage." He took the brush and held out his hand.

She shook it, smiling. "Nice to meet you."

"Thank you for that." He gestured towards the studio.

"No problem." She sat in the chair across from him. "When you have time, when you're not rushed, try it again. If you want it perfect, like for competitions, you need a bun wrap. For class, though, the way I did it is fine. Make sure the ponytail's nice and tight, then twist it until it starts to wrap around itself. Make sure to tuck the tail under the second elastic. She has very thick hair, so you may need a few elastics to hold it."

He'd probably never bring Iz to dance again, but he still appreciated the tips.

They sat in silence, watching the class through the viewing window.

He wondered about Lora. All the other moms in the room looked like his idea of dance moms: stylishly cut hair, tasteful makeup, nice outfits. In contrast, Lora's face was devoid of makeup other than black eyeliner. Tattoos covered her slim arms and peeked out of the neck of her black t-shirt. Flowers in various shades of blue, a string of Roman numerals, a pair of orange fish. He wondered which of the girls in the pink leotards was hers, considered asking, then didn't want to break the silence that had stretched between them.

It was oddly pleasant to sit in silence. Although maybe that was only because he didn't know what to say. Somehow, asking why she had II.XXV.MMV tattooed on her arm seemed inappropriate.

Chapter 2

The headlights of Lora's minivan flashed across the bright pink stucco of her house as she pulled into the driveway. Even after seeing it every day for six years, the Pepto-Bismol color still made her nauseous.

When she'd bought the house, repainting the exterior had been way at the bottom of her to-do list. It had been much more important to repair the sheet rock the previous owners had smashed holes in, remove the carpets they'd ruined, and replace everything they'd taken from the kitchen. Buying a foreclosure had been a big commitment.

It had also given her the chance to redo everything just the way she wanted it. White cabinets, grey tile and stainless steel appliances in the kitchen. Grey hardwood floors throughout the rest of the house. Variations of grey on the walls of every room. She'd wanted a neutral palette upon which she had the freedom to decorate with bold blues and deep greens for their common areas, and whatever the kids wanted for their bedrooms.

Lora reminded Brodie and Ashleigh, "Take your bags, please." She grabbed her purse and headed for the house.

"I'm starving." Ashleigh followed so closely that when Lora stopped to unlock the door Ashleigh bumped into her.

"I'll have dinner ready in a few minutes." As she stepped into the kitchen, she said, "Go put your things away and come back, please. We need to call Grandpa and wish him a happy birthday."

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Ashleigh asked, "How come we can't go see him, if it's his birthday?"

"Because it's a school night. And because you had dance, and Brodie had robotics, and Grandpa goes to bed at eight so it's too late to go."

She asked, "Do you think his cake is chocolate or vanilla?"

"You can ask him when you talk to him. Go put your things in your room, please." Ashleigh dragged her bag down the hall and Lora pulled out her phone. Her dad answered on the third ring. "Hi, Dad! Happy birthday!"

"Thanks, honey. How's everything with you?"

He sounded sleepy already, his speech slightly slurred. Lora was glad she'd decided to call before feeding the kids dinner. "Busy as always. I'm sorry we couldn't come by today. Just too many things going on. Maybe we can stop by this weekend?"

"I'll have to check with the boss. You know she's in charge of the schedule."

Lora was well aware that she'd have to go through her stepmother if she wanted to see her dad. "How is Janice?"

"She's good. She—"

Lora didn't hear what he said, because Ashleigh tugged on her shirt. "Mom, can I talk now?"

"Dad, hang on a second. I have someone here who is really antsy to say hi."

Ashleigh took the phone. "Hi, Grandpa."

Lora turned to her son, who had his head in the refrigerator. "Brodie! I'll have dinner on the table in ten minutes." Not that it would matter if he did sneak a snack. At nine years old he pretty much ate all the time. "Go get your sister, please, so she can talk to Grandpa."

He shifted slightly towards the living room and yelled, "Kendra! Mom wants you."

"Thanks." Lora had to hide a smile because she'd have yelled the same way at his age. She half listened to Ashleigh, then Brodie, talk to her

dad while she made turkey sandwiches and cut carrots into sticks.

She could imagine her dad's puzzled expression when Brodie started explaining how he'd just hatched a perfect dragon in Crystal Wizards. She interrupted, "Brodie, give me the phone and go get Kendra, please. Dinner's ready."

"Mom, I'm telling Grandpa about my DragAxe."

"I can hear that. Please give me the phone and get your sister." She took the phone. "Hey, Dad. Sorry about Ashleigh interrupting. She's working on learning patience. What were you saying before about Janice?"

"Janice? She's around here somewhere." He yelled, "*Janice?*"

"No, Dad, I don't need to talk to her." She didn't *want* to talk to her, plus Kendra came in just at that moment.

Her dad continued, "I'll go find her."

"It's okay, Dad. I don't need to talk to her. I have to feed the kids, and Kendra wants to say happy birthday. So I'm going to let you talk to her." She handed the phone to her oldest daughter and whispered, "Make it quick, he sounds really tired."

Ashleigh carefully folded napkins and set them on the table. "Grandpa said he didn't have any cake for his birthday. He said Grandma Janice said it has too much sugar. Does your cake have too much sugar?"

"It does for Grandpa. He has diabetes so he has to be very careful about what he eats."

Brodie set out the last fork, picked up a carrot stick and wrinkled his nose. "If I had diabetes would I have to eat carrots?"

"Yes, you would. And you should be grateful that you have those carrots because wizards need to have good eyesight if they're going to beat the Crystal Dragon King."

"That's a myth." Kendra handed Lora the phone before she continued, "Carrots don't really improve your eyesight. That's just a story the British told because they didn't want anyone to know they had night

vision goggles.”

Lora half-thought it was a myth because parents wanted to convince their kids to eat carrots. “I only gave you two carrots, Brodie. You can manage that.”

She settled into her seat and listened to each of the kids talk about their day. Dinner conversation was, hands down, her favorite thing. Thoughts of her dad kept intruding, though. She thought maybe she’d woken him up, the way he’d been slurring his words. But Ashleigh talking about cake had her worried. Was slurred speech a symptom of diabetes?

She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind and concentrated on listening to Kendra. At twelve years old, Kendra still wanted to talk to her. But Lora knew if she wanted Kendra to continue to talk about her history teacher and complain about boys and ask for help learning to do her makeup, Lora had to listen every time she had the chance.

As soon as dinner was done and the kids had been sent to finish homework, she called her sister. “Hi, Chelsea.”

“What’s up?”

“Did you talk to Dad today?”

“For a minute, to wish him happy birthday.”

“Did he sound odd?”

“More than usual?” There was the sound of a toilet flushing, then the sink running.

Lora asked, “Are you in the bathroom?”

“What if I am?”

She snickered. “Nice. You could have let it go to voice mail and called me back later.”

“Please. I have an almost two year old. Any need for privacy I had went out the window when she started crawling. Anyway, I’m done now. Why do you want to know about Dad?”

Lora checked to make sure all the kids were in their rooms. “I don’t

know. He was slurring when I talked to him. Do you think that's a symptom of his diabetes?"

"Hang on, I'll google it."

There was the sound of typing. Lora could have googled it herself, but she needed to share her concerns with her sister. Needed to know she wasn't alone in this.

Chelsea broke the silence. "It says it can be a sign of severe hypoglycemia. That's when your blood sugar drops too low. This says it can be caused by keeping too closely to normal blood sugar, and it's more of a problem for people who use insulin. Dad does, doesn't he?"

"I think so. Wouldn't Janice know how to help him control this?"

She grunted. "You'd think, considering she was a nurse."

"Have they ever said anything to you about it?"

"Please. You know how they are. If he died, we'd probably find out from the newspaper."

Horried, Lora gasped, "Chelsea! That's terrible!"

"Yeah, well, it's not like they have a history of keeping us updated on their lives. Remember how we found out they were married?"

That was impossible to forget. They'd overheard Janice talking about how glad she was that they'd kept their wedding celebration small, that the guest list had been limited to the people most important in their lives. Apparently, that hadn't included Lora or Chelsea.

Chelsea changed the subject. "I want to do a thing for Pipsqueak's birthday. Are you guys free on the fourteenth?"

Lora was fine with the abrupt change of subject. "Let me check everyone's schedules and get back to you."

Chapter 3

The snooze button didn't seem to be working. Gage wiped sleep from his eyes and tried to focus on his phone, realized it wasn't an alarm and swiped to answer. "Hello?"

"Gage? Are you asleep?"

Annie's voice was bordering on hysterical and he hadn't even said anything yet. "Yeah."

"Jesus Christ. What the hell ever made me think you could handle this."

"Handle what?"

She snapped, "Isabelle has to be in school at 9:05 sharp."

He sat up and squinted at the clock across the room. It was just after seven. "Are you seriously calling me to tell me you think I overslept?"

"I'm calling you because if you're not up yet, that means Isabelle isn't up yet, and if she's not up yet there's no way she's going to make it to school on time."

Isabelle's statement from the day before, *five minutes early is ten minutes late*, flashed through his mind. "She won't be late."

"Put her on the phone."

"Annie, she's not up yet."

"I want to talk to her now."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'll have her call you back when she's fully awake and ready to talk."

Her voice rose a notch. "Now, Gage! Get her now!"

"Fine. Hold on." He grabbed pajama pants, pulled them on, and headed down the hall. There was no noise from Isabelle's room. He knocked once, waited, then opened the door to see her sleeping peacefully. "Hey, Iz, time to get up."

She didn't move.

He shook her gently. "Isabelle, time to get up."

She rolled over, blinking in the early morning light. "Hi, Daddy."

The way his heart felt squeezed when he heard her call him Daddy still caught him off guard sometimes. "Mommy's on the phone."

She took the phone, smiling. "Hi, Mommy." Her face fell. "I know."

Gage could hear Annie's voice, but not the words. He wished he knew what had made Isabelle's expression darken.

"We weren't late last night." Her eyes found Gage's. "Cheri just wasn't there. I don't know why."

After a moment she held the phone out to him. He forced a smile as he took it.

Annie started in immediately. "You were supposed to have her there twenty minutes early last night."

"She wasn't late."

"She didn't have her hair done."

"I did it."

She made a sound of disgust. "It fell, and *Lora* had to fix it."

The way she said *Lora's* name put him on edge. At least now, though, he thought he knew what this call was actually about. Annie didn't like *Lora*. "Annie, I've gotta go. Isabelle has to be at school at 9:05 sharp. I'll talk to you later." He hung up before she had the chance to continue.

Isabelle looked like she was about to cry. "I told you five minutes early is ten minutes late."

He sat on the edge of her bed. "I'm sorry about your bun." He ran his hand over her hair. It was the same pale blonde his had been at her age.

It was the one physical trait she'd inherited from him. It probably drove Annie nuts.

She shrugged. "It's okay. It happened to Alexa last week."

That made both of them smile a little. "Time to get up. Do you want waffles or yogurt for breakfast?"

"Mommy says we have to have fruit for breakfast."

"I give you waffles all the time when you're here."

"Mommy says that's because it's not on a school day."

'Mommy says' was getting old really fast.

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It was 9:30 by the time Gage pulled into Dawson's Auctions. He hadn't even put the car in park yet when his phone started ringing, his dad's name flashing across the screen. "Yeah?"

"Did you get the contract for that T-bird?"

"Last night. Macy sent scans along with the pictures. I'll be right in and we can go over it." He locked the doors on the maroon Cadillac Brougham he'd taken home the night before. He really didn't care for the car from the outside, it was ridiculously long and angular, but it was the epitome of 80's luxury on the inside. Someone would want it, especially since now he could add to the write-up that it drove like a dream.

He stopped at the key safe and swapped the Cadillac keys for his keys. That Caddy may have been luxurious in the 80's but it had nothing on his brand new Mustang. The phone in his pocket began ringing again. There were days he'd like nothing more than to throw the phone out the window. Or, more satisfyingly, smash it with a sledgehammer. Instead, he answered it. "Gage Dawson."

"Was she late?" Annie demanded.

He closed his eyes and counted to five. Then he lied. "She was fifteen minutes early."

"You know I get a notification on my phone when she's marked late."

Frustration rolled in his guts. “She was five minutes late. I didn’t know about the bus line and that I had to drive around the back, and that there’d be cars lined up for a block.”

“I told you she had to be at school at 9:05 sharp.”

“But you didn’t tell me about the bus line or the car pool lane.” He paused as Vanessa from the accounting department walked past him. He headed for the privacy of his office. Once he’d closed the door he continued, “If you had, she wouldn’t have been late. And she won’t be tomorrow because now I know.”

Venom in her voice, she said, “If you hadn’t hung up on me this morning I’d have told you.”

He nearly laughed at the outrageousness of that lie. “She was five minutes late once in first grade. This isn’t going to ruin her chances of getting into a good college.”

“You need to take this seriously.”

“I am. And if it makes you feel any better, she was really upset about being late. I guarantee you that tomorrow she won’t be.”

“Oh, that’s great. So she was late *and* upset when you dropped her off? I suppose she was also a mess, with her hair all over the place and socks that don’t match.”

“Annie, I’m at work. I have a client coming in ten minutes and I still have to have my morning meeting with my dad. I’d love to hear the full list of my shortcomings, though, so if you could just type those up in an email, I’ll review them over my lunch break.”

She made a sound of disgust. “What the hell I ever saw in you I just don’t know.” The line went dead.

He dropped the phone on the stack of folders on his desk and mumbled, “Right back at ya, Annie.”

Isabelle’s hair hadn’t been a mess and her socks had matched. It would have been nearly impossible to mess up her socks, or any other part of her clothes. Annie had packed one outfit for every day, each in its own

CHAPTER 3

ziptop bag, labeled with the day Isabelle was supposed to wear it. It was exactly how Annie had been packing Isabelle's clothes since the first time Gage had been allowed to have her overnight.

The screen on his phone lit up, showing 'Dad' across it. Gage left it on the desk, picked up folders piled on his chair, and headed to his father's office.

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Gage didn't review an email from Annie over his lunch break. Even if she'd sent one, he wouldn't have had time to read it. He'd had lunch at his desk and still didn't finish everything he'd needed to. Since Talan had quit, Gage had been forced to spend time every day verifying the work his brother's replacement, Joey, handed in.

Joey had not been Gage's choice to replace Talan. His father had hired him because he and Joey's father went way back. Except that, even though Joey had been raised around classic cars, he knew nothing about them. And it didn't appear that he had any interest in learning. That was a problem since his job was to verify the accuracy of the information given about every classic car that went through Dawson's.

When it had become apparent that Joey was clueless, Gage had suggested they find a different position for him. Detailing cars or sweeping the lot or any-fucking-thing that didn't involve Gage. The suggestion had been flatly rejected. So Gage was stuck with him.

The extra work wasn't normally an issue. It was even somewhat beneficial to have a more hands-on understanding of each car. But normally Gage didn't have Isabelle on weeknights. And Annie may have neglected to tell him about the car pool lane, but she had told him about the fee for late pickup from Aftercare. Probably, Gage thought, because it would be billed to her account the following month.

He'd reimburse her if he was late. There was just no way he was going to be. It would be one more thing for her to complain about. And he

really didn't like the idea of Isabelle waiting for him. He could picture her standing at the window in the school cafeteria, staring out at the empty parking lot, wondering why all the other kids had gone home except her.

He drove faster.

He got to her school fifteen minutes before he actually needed to be there. The kids were on the playground, being watched over by teenagers wearing shirts that identified them as Aftercare Staff. He was happy to see Isabelle with another girl, drawing with chalk on the asphalt.

Once he'd shown the teenager at the checkout table his ID, he sat on a bench and waited for Isabelle to put the chalk away and collect her things. She skipped over and he took her hand to lead her to the car. "How was school today?"

"Fine. How was work?"

It was cute that she asked that. "Fine. Did you turn in all your homework?"

"Yup. Did you?"

He laughed. "I did."

When they got to his car, she asked, "You don't havta test drive a car?"

"Not tonight"

"Why not?"

They settled into their seats as he answered, "Because I only test drive the cars that are being sold through our dealership. If they're for auction, Macy drives them when she does the pictures." That was a bit simplistic, but it was good enough.

He pulled into traffic. "Who was the girl you were playing with?"

"Ashleigh."

"From dance?"

"Um hm."

"Was that her mom who did your hair last night?"

“Yeah.”

“Is she in your class at school, too?”

“She was last year. Can we have chicken nuggets for dinner?”

“Sure.”

At home, Isabelle settled on the couch to do her homework. Gage put chicken nuggets and French fries in the oven, keeping one eye on his daughter. He’d chosen this condo specifically for the open floor plan. It meant he could watch Iz while he did what he needed to do. It wasn’t so much an issue now, but when she’d been a toddler he’d needed to keep her in his sight every second. He was very much aware that if anything happened to her on his watch, Annie would use it as ammunition against him.

Once he had everything in the oven, he sat next to Isabelle with his laptop and checked emails. There was a bunch of spam, and one actual new email. A potential client was looking for clarification on Dawson’s fees. He began crafting a response.

Isabelle huffed in frustration next to him.

“What’s going on?” He glanced at her paper.

“Why do we have to learn math? I’m not gonna ever use it.”

He raised his eyebrows. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’m gonna be a dog walker, so I can play with all the dogs whose people work all day, and dogs don’t do math.”

It took all his will power not to grin at her very solid reasoning. “That sounds like an amazing job.”

“It is. I already started practicing.”

“You did?”

“Yup. Aunt Emily pays me five dollars to walk Tippy every time I go there. I probably have a hundred dollars already.” She crossed her arms, “Except Mommy makes me put all the money I earn in the bank for college.”

“It is a good idea to save for college, just in case you decide you want

to do something else besides dog walking. And it's also a good idea to learn addition and subtraction. Otherwise, how will you be able to keep track of all your dog walking earnings?"

She looked up at him, her face very serious. "Did you go to college?"

"I did."

"Mommy did, too. But she didn't finish and that's why we have to live in a tiny house." Her expression became troubled. "And why I can't have friends over."

"Mommy doesn't let you have friends over?"

The look of disdain she gave him was pure Annie. "Mommy says if we want to have play dates we have to do spa days or go out to lunch. I can't have friends over my house because we don't have enough room."

Annie lived in a cute, two bedroom ranch on a quiet, dead end street. There was no reason Gage could see for her to refuse to let Isabelle have friends over. It wasn't his call, though. "I'll tell you what. If you want to have friends over, they can come here."

"Really?"

"Of course." He tousled her hair. "Now, why don't you show me what you've got going on with this math paper."

~ End of Preview~

A Whole New Game is available exclusively on Amazon