

BRENDA
HARLEN

THE NEW GIRL
IN TOWN



Cherish

Brenda Harlen

The New Girl In Town

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The perfect woman? Beautiful big-city transplant Zoe Kozlowski came to Pinehurst to heal from a failed marriage and a frightening battle with breast cancer. So the passionate photographer instantly threw herself into an ambitious project: transforming her new home into a bed-and-breakfast. Luckily for her, the best architect—and most eligible bachelor—in town just happened to be her neighbor, Mason Sullivan. Gorgeous Mason's interest in the renovation quickly turned more than professional. But as captivating as he found his new neighbor, she was also a reminder of his painful childhood. Mason had vowed long ago never to risk losing his heart again—but how could he have known such temptation would lurk just next door?

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The New Girl in Town
Brenda Harlen



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This book is dedicated to everyone
who has fought the fight against breast cancer with
courage and strength—you are an inspiration.
And to the memory of those who ultimately
lost the battle—you are not forgotten.
With thanks to the researchers,
doctors and other health-care professionals
who offer direction and hope.

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Chapter One

Zoe Kozlowski definitely wasn't in Manhattan anymore.

Years of living in the city had acclimated her to the sounds of traffic—the squeal of tires, the blare of horns, the scream of sirens. She would no doubt have slept through the pounding of a jackhammer six stories below her open bedroom window or the wail of a fire truck speeding past her apartment building, but the gentle trilling of sparrows shattered the cocoon of her slumber.

In time, she was certain she would get used to these sounds, too, but for now, they were new and enchanting enough that she didn't mind being awakened at such an early hour. As she carried her cup of decaf chai tea out onto the back porch, she could hear not just the birds but the gentle breeze rustling the leaves and, in the distance, the barking of a dog.

She stepped over a broken board and settled onto the top step to survey her surroundings in the morning light. The colors were so vivid and bright it almost hurt to look at them—the brilliantly polished sapphire of the sky broken only by the occasional fluffy white cloud. And the trees—there were so many kinds, so many shades of green around the perimeter of the yard. Evergreens whose sweeping branches ranged in hue from deep emerald to silvery sage. Oaks and maples and poplars with leaves of various shapes and sizes and colors of yellow-green and dark green and every tone in between.

She found herself wondering how it would look in the fall—what glorious shades of gold and orange and rust and red would appear. And then in the winter, when the leaves had fallen to the ground and the trees were bare, the long branches glistening with frost or dusted with snow. And in the early spring, when the first buds began to unfurl and herald the arrival of the new season.

But now, edging toward the first days of summer, everything was green and fresh and beautiful. And while she appreciated the natural beauty of the present, she was already anticipating the changing of the seasons. Not wishing her life away, but looking to her future here and planning to enjoy every minute of it.

She knew the yard was in as serious need of work as the old house in which she'd spent the night, but as she took another look around, she was filled with a deep sense of peace and satisfaction that everything she saw was hers.

She'd get a porch swing, she decided suddenly, impulsively. Where she could sit to enjoy her first cup of tea every morning. She would put down roots here, just like those trees, dig deep into the soil and make this place her home.

It was strange that she'd lived in New York for almost ten years and never felt the same compelling need to put down roots there. Or maybe it just hadn't occurred to her to do so in a city made up of mostly concrete and steel. Not that she hadn't loved Manhattan. There was an aura about the city that still appealed to her, an excitement she'd never felt anywhere else. For a young photographer, it had been the place to be, and when Scott had suggested moving there after they were married, she'd jumped at the opportunity. They'd started out at a tiny little studio apartment in Brooklyn Heights, moved to a one-bedroom walk-up in Soho, then, finally, only four years ago, to a classic six on Park Avenue.

She'd never imagined leaving there, never imagined wanting to be anywhere else. Until a routine doctor's appointment had turned out to be not-so-routine after all.

In the eighteen months that had passed since then, her life had taken a lot of unexpected turns. The most recent of which had brought her here, to Pinehurst, New York, to visit her friend Claire and—

Oomph!

The breath rushed out of her lungs and her mug went flying from her fingers as she was knocked onto her back by a furry beast that settled on her chest.

She would have gasped if she'd had any air left to expel. Instead, she struggled to draw in enough oxygen to scream. As she opened her mouth, a big wet tongue swept over her face.

Ugh!

She wasn't sure if the hairy creature was licking her in a harmless show of affection or sampling her before it sank its teeth in. She sputtered and tried to push it away.

A shrill whistle sounded in the distance and the dog—at least, she thought it was a dog, although it didn't look like any kind she'd ever seen before—lifted its head in response to the sound. Then the tongue was back, slobbering over her again.

“Rosie!”

The animal withdrew, just far enough to plant its substantial behind on top of her thighs, trapping them beneath its impressive weight.

Zoe eyed it warily as she pushed herself up onto her elbows, bracing herself for another attack. A movement at the edge of the woods caught her attention, and she turned her head to see a tall, broad-shouldered figure moving with long-legged strides across the yard.

She shoved at the beast again, ineffectually, and blew out a frustrated breath. “Can you get this darn thing off me?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“Sorry.” The man reached down to grab the animal by its collar. Zoe's irritation was forgotten as her gaze swept over her rescuer.

His hair was dark, almost black, and cut short around a face that seemed to be chiseled out of granite. His forehead was broad, his cheekbones sharp, and his nose had a slight bump on the bridge as if it had been broken once or twice before. His jaw was dark with stubble, and his eyes—she couldn't be sure of the color because his face was in shadow, but she could tell that they were dark—were narrowed on the beast. He wore an old Cornell University T-shirt over a pair of jeans that molded to the lean muscles of his long legs and a scuffed pair of sneakers.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice as warm and smooth as premium-aged whiskey.

“I'm fine. Or I will be when you get this thing away from me.”

“Rosie, off.” He spoke to her attacker now, the words accompanied by a sharp tug on the collar. The four-legged beast immediately removed its weight from her legs and plopped down on its butt beside the man, tongue hanging out of its mouth as it gazed at him adoringly.

Zoe figured the beast was female. She also figured the man was used to that kind of reaction from the women he met. She might have been inclined to drool herself except that a half-dozen years as a fashion photographer had immunized her against the impact of beautiful faces. Well, mostly, anyway. Because she couldn't deny there was something about this man's rugged good looks she found appealing enough to almost wish she had her camera in hand.

The unexpectedness of that urge was something she would think about later, Zoe decided as she pulled herself to her feet, then rubbed a hand over her face to wipe away the dog drool. She tugged at the frayed hem of the cut-off shorts she'd pulled on when she'd rolled out of bed, conscious of the fact that they fell only a couple of inches below the curve of her butt.

“What the heck is that thing?” she asked, taking a deliberate step back from man and beast.

“He's a dog,” the man responded in the same whiskey-smooth tone. “And although he's overly affectionate at times, he doesn't usually take to strangers.”

“Obviously it's a dog.” At least it had four paws and wagging tail. “But what kind? I've never seen anything so—” ugly was the description that immediately came to mind, but she didn't want to insult the man or his best friend, so she decided upon “—big.”

His smile was wry. “He's of indeterminate pedigree—part deerhound, part Old English sheepdog, with a lot of other parts mixed in.”

She glanced at the handsome stranger again, saw that he was giving her the same critical study she'd given his pet. She was suddenly aware that her hair needed to be combed, her teeth needed to be

brushed and her T-shirt was covered in muddy paw prints. Then his gaze lifted to hers, and she forgot everything else in the realization that his eyes were as startlingly blue as the sapphire sky overhead.

“Did you ever consider putting your dog in obedience classes?” she asked. “Preferably before it—he—knocks somebody unconscious.”

“As a matter of fact, Rosie graduated top of his class. He can heel, sit, lay down, roll over and speak.” He shrugged and smiled again. “He just hasn’t learned to curb his enthusiasm.”

“No kidding,” she said dryly. Then she frowned. “Did you call him ‘Rosie’?”

“It’s short for Rosencrantz.”

“Rosencrantz,” Zoe echoed, wondering what kind of person would inflict such torture on a helpless animal. Not that this one was helpless, but the name still seemed cruel.

“As in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,” he told her. “From Hamlet.”

She was admittedly surprised—and more intrigued than she wanted to be by this sexy, blue-eyed, Shakespeare-reading stranger.

“Where is Guildenstern?” she asked apprehensively.

“With my brother,” the man answered. “My business partner found the two puppies abandoned by the creek in his backyard. He and his wife wanted to keep them, but they already have a cat and a baby on the way, so I got one and my brother took the other.”

She noticed that he spoke of his partner having a wife but didn’t mention one of his own. Not that it really mattered, of course. She had a lot of reasons for moving to Pinehurst, but looking for romance was definitely not one of them—especially when the wounds of her failed marriage had barely begun to heal.

“Well, you need to keep that thing on a leash,” she said, forcing her thoughts to refocus on the conversation.

The animal in question immediately dropped to its belly and whined plaintively.

Zoe frowned. “What’s wrong with him?”

“You said the L-word,” he told her.

She looked at him blankly.

“L-E-A-S-H.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

He shook his head. “Rosie hates being tied up.”

“Well, he’ll have to get used to it because I don’t appreciate being attacked in my own yard by your mongrel pet.”

“Your yard?” He seemed surprised by her statement. “You bought this place?”

She nodded.

“Are you rich and bored? Or just plain crazy?”

She bristled at that. “You’re not the first person to question my sanity,” she admitted. “But you’re the first who’s had the nerve to do so while standing on my property.”

“I’m just...surprised,” he said. “The house has been on the market a long time, and I hadn’t heard anything around town recently about a potential buyer.”

“The final papers were signed yesterday. This is my house, my land, my space.”

“If this is your house, your land, and your space, then that would mean—”

He paused to smile, and she cursed her traitorous heart for beating faster.

“—you’re my neighbor.”

Mason watched as her pale cheeks flushed with color, making him think she might be attractive if she cleaned herself up. Right now, however, she was a mess. Her long blond hair was tangled around her face, her brow—above incredibly gorgeous eyes the color of dark chocolate—was creased with a scowl, and her skimpy little T-shirt was covered in mud. But he couldn’t help but notice that the shirt clung to curves that looked soft and round in all the right places, and he felt the stir of arousal.

He gave himself a mental shake, acknowledging that he'd definitely been too long without a woman if the sight of this disheveled little spitfire was turning him on.

His current hiatus from dating had been a matter of choice as much as necessity, since his break-up with Erica had coincided with a flurry of big jobs that had required all of his attention and focus. Recently, however, things at the office had started to slow down a little. Enough at least that he could catch a decent amount of sleep at night and maybe even consider getting out socially again. If he did, maybe he'd meet a woman who was more his usual type.

But it was this woman who had his attention now. Because she was, if not his type, at least his neighbor, which made him naturally curious about her.

"Tell me something," he said.

"What's that?" she asked warily.

"What possessed a city girl like you to buy an abandoned old house like this?"

"What makes you think I'm a city girl?"

He allowed his gaze to move over her again, lingering, appraising. "The designer clothes and fancy watch, for starters. But mostly it's the casual self-confidence layered over restless energy that says to hell with the rest of the world and somehow fits you as perfectly as those snug little denim shorts."

She tilted her chin. "That's quite an assumption to make after a five-minute conversation."

He smiled. "I enjoy studying people—and women are a particular interest of mine."

"I don't doubt that's true," she said dryly.

He wasn't dissuaded by the comment or her tone. "You never did answer my question about why you bought this house."

"It's a beautiful house."

"It might have been a dozen years ago," he allowed. "Before Mrs. Hadfield got too old and too tight-fisted to pay for the repairs."

"What happened to Mrs. Hadfield?" she asked, in what seemed to him a blatant attempt to change the subject.

"She passed away about eighteen months ago, left the house to a grandson who lives in California. He put it on the market right away, but there was only one early offer on the property and he refused to sell to a developer, insisting his grandmother wouldn't have wanted the house torn down and the land divided."

After that deal had fallen through, Mason had learned from the real estate agent that the grandson had some specific ideas about the type of person Beatrice Hadfield wanted living in her house after she was gone. But he'd refused to elaborate on the criteria, even to the agent, and she'd mostly given up on selling the house—until now, apparently.

"And you know about this unsuccessful sale because..." she prompted.

"Because there are no secrets in a small town."

"Great," she muttered. "And I hated feeling like my neighbors were on top of me in the city."

She really wasn't his type, but she was female and kind of cute, and he couldn't resist teasing, "I'll only be on top if that's where you want me, darlin'."

Her chocolate eyes narrowed as she drew herself up to her full height—which was about a foot shorter than his six feet two inches. "It won't be," she said coolly. "And don't call me 'darling.'"

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "I didn't mean to offend you..." He paused, giving her the chance to offer her name.

"My name is Zoe," she finally told him. "Zoe Kozlowski."

It was an unusual name but pretty, and somehow it suited her. "Mason Sullivan."

She eyed his outstretched hand for a moment before shaking it.

Rosie barked and held up a paw.

His new neighbor glanced down, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. He found himself staring at that mouth, wondering if her lips were as soft and kissable as they looked.

Way too long without a woman.

“You didn’t tell me he could shake,” she said, removing her hand from his to take the paw Rosie offered.

“Another of his many talents,” he said, oddly perturbed that she seemed more interested in his dog than in him. Not that he was interested in her, but he did have a reputation in town for his success with the ladies, and never before had one thrown him over for an animal.

“Now if only you could teach him to respect the boundary line between our properties.”

“That might take some time,” he warned, as she released Rosie’s paw and straightened again. “He’s become accustomed to running through these woods over the past several months.”

“It won’t take any time at all if you keep him tied up,” she said.

Rosie whimpered as though he understood the threat, compelling Mason to protest on the animal’s behalf.

“He’s a free spirit,” he said, then smiled. “Like me.”

She tilted her head, studying him like she would a worrisome crack in a basement foundation. “Do the women in this town actually fall for such tired lines?”

It was an effort to keep the smile in place, but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of letting it fade. “I haven’t had any complaints.”

“I worked at Images in New York City for six years,” she said, citing one of the industry’s leading fashion magazines. “I spent most of my days surrounded by men who made their living playing a part for the camera, so it’s going to take more than a smile to make me melt.”

Okay, so she was tougher than he’d expected. But he hadn’t yet met a woman who was immune to his charm—it was only a matter of finding the right buttons to push. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Just a statement of fact,” she told him, bending to pick up a mug that he guessed Rosie had knocked from her hand with the exuberance of his greeting. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have things to do today.”

He stepped down off the porch, his hand still holding onto the dog’s collar, his eyes still on his new neighbor. “It was nice meeting you, Zoe.”

“It was certainly interesting,” she said, but with a half smile that allowed him to hope she wasn’t still annoyed at Rosie’s manner of introduction.

And as he turned toward his own home, he found himself already looking forward to his next encounter with his new neighbor.

Zoe walked into the house with a smile on her face and a positive outlook for the day despite—or maybe because of—the unexpected events of the morning. Though she couldn’t have anticipated meeting one of her neighbors in the backyard, and so early, she thought she’d handled the situation. She’d even managed to engage in a casual conversation without worrying too much about where he was looking or what he was thinking. It was a gloriously liberating experience.

Mason Sullivan was a stranger who knew nothing of her or her past, a dog owner simply apologizing for the affectionate nature of his pet. He was a man who’d looked at her like she was a woman—a completely normal interaction that followed a year and a half of wondering if anything would ever seem normal again.

In the past eighteen months, she’d lost everything that mattered: her husband, her job, her home, and—most devastating of all—her sense of self. She’d packed most of what she had left into a tiny storage unit, loaded a dozen boxes in the back of her car, then driven out of the city, determined to start her life over again somewhere new. What she really wanted was to go someplace where no one knew who she was, where no one would look at her with pitying glances or talk to her in sympathetic murmurs. Someplace where she could pretend she was still the woman she used to be.

What she'd found—on a visit to Claire, her best friend and confidante—was a charming Victorian house that caught her attention so completely she actually stopped her car right in the middle of the road to stare.

It was an impressive three stories of turrets and towers despite having been badly neglected and in desperate need of repair. The roof on the wraparound porch was sagging, the chimneys were crumbling, paint was peeling, and several of the windows were boarded up.

As Zoe studied the broken parts of the whole, she had to fight back tears. There was no doubt the house had once been strong and proud and beautiful. Now it was little more than a shadow of its former self—abandoned, neglected and alone.

Just as she was.

She almost didn't see the For Sale sign that was mostly hidden by the weeds that had taken over the front garden, but when she did, she knew that it was meant to be hers. She'd pulled her car off the road and into a gravel driveway as overgrown with weeds as the yard, then picked up her cell phone and dialed the number on the sign.

For the past year and a half, she'd been looking for some direction and purpose, and here, at last, she'd found it.

Or maybe she really was crazy.

She acknowledged that possibility as she set her mug in the sink. But even if she was, she was committed now. The house was hers—along with the weighty mortgage she'd secured for the purchase and improvements. And though there was a part of her that was terrified to think she'd made a huge mistake, another—bigger—part of her was excited by the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.

She was going to fix up this broken-down house and turn it into a successful bed-and-breakfast. Although there were several such establishments already in town, none were as majestic as the building that was now her home. Or as majestic as she knew it would be when she was finished with it.

She glanced at her watch, noted that it was almost eight o'clock. The architect—who happened to be the husband of the lawyer who'd helped her purchase the property—was due to arrive in a little more than half an hour.

She was excited about meeting him, anxious to get started. But she also felt the first niggles of doubt, a twinge of uncertainty. It was one thing to spin elaborate dreams inside her mind, and something else entirely to share these hopes with someone who could help her realize them—or destroy them.

As she made her way across the dusty floor, questions and doubts dogged her every step.

What was she doing?

It was what her friends and colleagues had asked when she'd walked away from her job at the magazine. They'd expressed sympathy for what she'd been through but on the whole agreed that the best thing for Zoe was to maintain the status quo as much as possible. She thought it ironic—and more than a little irritating—that so many people who hadn't been through what she had could have so much advice about how to cope.

It was only Claire who really understood. And it was Claire who agreed Zoe should live the life she wanted to live rather than the one she had; Claire who knew that sometimes a person needed a new beginning in order to continue. And Claire had been thrilled when her friend had chosen Pinehurst for that fresh start. Admittedly, her excitement had been tempered by apprehension when she'd seen the house Zoe intended to buy, but her support had never wavered.

As Zoe batted away a cobweb, she wondered what her former colleagues in Manhattan would think now. Then she shook her head, refusing to let her mind continue along that path. She didn't have time for doubts or recriminations—she needed to get ready for her appointment with the architect.

The taps creaked and the pipes groaned, but Zoe managed to coax water out of the shower head in the main-floor bathroom. It wasn't very warm or clear, but it was enough to wet a washcloth

to scrub over her face and her body. Trying to rinse the shampoo out of her hair was a different story, and she wondered if she should have spent the money on a motel room last night—at least then she could have had a hot shower with good water pressure. But she knew the renovations on the house would be costly, and what was left in her bank account after medical expenses and the down payment wasn't exactly extravagant.

She banished the negative thoughts. Although the real estate agent had warned her that the house needed a lot of work, Zoe wasn't afraid of rolling up her sleeves and getting her hands dirty. In fact, she looked forward to it and even believed the work might be therapeutic for her. What worried her was the work she couldn't do herself—the cost of hiring electricians and plumbers and whatever other tradespeople she might require. Hopefully, Jessica's husband would be able to tell her exactly what she needed and maybe make some recommendations.

Another quick glance at her watch warned that she had less than ten minutes before he was expected to arrive. She felt the twist of anxiety in her belly as she pulled on a pair of jeans and a plain white T-shirt. She didn't know what to expect, what the architect would suggest, what the cost would be.

She glanced around with a more critical eye. Was it a pipe dream to believe she could turn this run-down old home into the proud beauty she knew it had once been?

Well, pipe dream or not, it was hers now—and she was determined to give it her best shot.

The phone was ringing when Mason walked through the front door with Rosie. The dog ran across the room to his water dish and began slurping noisily; Mason picked up the receiver. "Sullivan."

"You're there. Good." Nick Armstrong sounded frazzled, which wasn't at all like the man Mason had known since college and worked with for almost fifteen years.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I need you to cover an appointment for me this morning." Then his voice dropped a little as he said, "Hang in, honey. We're almost there."

After a brief moment of confusion, Mason realized the second part of his friend's comment wasn't directed at him. He also noticed that despite the soothing words, there was a note of panic in Nick's tone.

"What's wrong with Jess?" he asked, immediately concerned.

"Her water broke. Only about half an hour ago, but her contractions are already coming hard and strong and way too close together."

Now Mason understood the panic.

Nick and Jess had both waited a long time for the baby they were finally having, and the thought that anything might go wrong at this stage was too horrific to even contemplate.

"Breathe, honey," Nick murmured to his wife.

Mason heard Jess's response—sharp and succinct and completely unlike the cool, poised woman she usually was. That's what having a baby did to normally calm and rational people, he guessed, and was grateful that parenthood wasn't looming anywhere in his future.

Marriage and babies? He shuddered at the thought. Hell, just the suggestion of commitment was enough to make him break out in hives. He'd learned a long time ago how completely love could tear apart a person's life, and he wanted no part of any of it.

His best friend had chosen a different path, however, and Mason was willing to help in any way he could. "Concentrate on your wife," he said. "I'll take care of the business."

"Thanks, Mason."

"Don't worry about it." He winced in automatic sympathy as he heard Jess swear again in the background. "Tell Jess I'll bring her a pint of strawberry ice cream from Walton's later."

"She'll love that," his friend said. "I gotta go now—we're pulling up at the hospital."

"Wait!" Mason said before his friend could disconnect.

“What?”

“When and where is this appointment?”

He took the information from his friend and smiled as he hung up the phone.

This day, he thought, just keeps getting better and better.

Chapter Two

Zoe recognized Mason as soon as she responded to his knock at her front door.

He'd shaved and changed into khaki pants with a shirt and tie rather than the jeans and T-shirt he'd had on earlier, and he didn't have the mammoth beast with him, but the deep blue eyes and sexy smile left her in no doubt that it was her neighbor.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"We have an appointment," Mason said, unfazed by the lack of welcome in her question.

"You're Jessica's husband?"

"No." His quick response was confirmed by an emphatic shake of his head. "I'm his business partner. Nick sent me along with his apologies for not being able to meet with you personally. He was on his way to the hospital—it looks like Jessica is going to have the baby today."

It had been apparent to Zoe when she'd been introduced to Jessica Armstrong that the other woman was nearing the end of a pregnancy, but she hadn't realized she was quite that far along.

"I know you were expecting Nick," Mason continued. "But I'm sure you understand that he needed to be with his wife right now."

"Of course," she agreed immediately. But she couldn't help remembering when she'd been in the hospital, without her husband by her side. It hadn't been a happy occasion but the beginning of the end of their marriage.

"Zoe?"

Her attention snapped back to the present.

"Sorry," she apologized automatically. "My thoughts were just wandering."

"Would you rather reschedule when Nick is available?"

"No," she said. "I don't want to reschedule. I just want to know what has to be done to fix this house."

"How much time do you have?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just suggesting you take a good, hard look around you," Mason said.

She did, and she saw the beauty that had been neglected. The gleam of the hardwood under the layers of dust, the sparkle of the leaded-glass windows beneath the grime, the intricate details of the trims and moldings behind the spider webs. She saw history that needed to be preserved and promise waiting to be fulfilled. But she wasn't comfortable telling him any of those things, so all she said was, "The real estate agent assured me that the building is structurally sound."

"The foundation looks solid," he admitted. "But the roof needs to be replaced, the chimneys need to be reconstructed and the porch rebuilt. And that's just what I could see from the outside. If you really want a home here, it would probably be easier and cheaper to tear this building down and start over again."

It might be easier and cheaper, but it wasn't what she wanted to do. She needed to fix the house—to prove it was valuable and worthwhile despite the damaged parts.

"I'm not interested in easy, and I don't have any illusions that it will be cheap, but I want to restore this house," she told him.

He shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure you considered all of the options."

She nodded stiffly, although in her heart she knew she couldn't consider demolition as one of the options. Destroying what was left of this fabulous old building would break her heart all over again.

As they moved through the house, Mason took measurements and made notes with brisk efficiency, but he never failed to point out various flaws and defects as they moved from one room to the next through the house. She was frustrated by his incessant negativity and on the verge of telling

him she would find another architect when she noticed the inherent contradiction between his actions and his words.

He warned her that the ceiling had sustained some obvious water damage, but his gaze lingered on the pressed tin squares. He claimed that all of the plumbing was horribly outdated, but she'd seen his eyes light up when he'd spotted the old clawfoot tub. And while he was complaining that someone had painted over the mantle of the fireplace, his fingers caressed the hand-carved wood.

"The frames on all of these windows are starting to rot," he said. "They'll have to be replaced."

She sighed, and when she spoke, her words were infused with reluctant resignation. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should just tear this place down."

His head swiveled toward her, as she'd known it would. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Is that what you want to do?"

"I'm starting to believe it's the most logical course of action."

"It is," he said again, after a brief hesitation.

She smiled. "I hope you're a better architect than you are an actor."

"What are you talking about?"

"You can't stand the thought of this beautiful building being destroyed."

"This building is a far cry from beautiful," he told her dryly.

"But it was once, and it can be again, can't it?"

He was silent for a moment before finally conceding, "Maybe."

After so much verbal disparagement, Zoe wasn't willing to let it go at that. "You can see it, can't you?" she pressed. "You can picture in your mind the way it used to be—the way it should be again?"

"Maybe," he said again. "I've always thought it was a shame that someone didn't step in and do something to save this house before it completely fell apart."

"Why didn't you?"

He gave her one of those wry half smiles. "Because as much as I can admire the graceful lines and detailed workmanship, I'm also aware of the time and money needed to fix this place."

"I would think a successful architect would have the necessary resources for the job."

"What I don't have," he warned her, "and anyone in town will tell you the same thing—is the ability to commit to any kind of long-term project."

"Is that why you were baiting me—to determine if I was committed?"

"You had to have dropped a bundle of money already to buy this place," he said. "I'm guessing that's proof of your commitment. I only hope you have a bundle more, because you're going to need it to restore this house properly."

Anxiety twisted knots in her belly. "I'm hoping to do some of the simpler jobs myself. Patching, sanding, painting."

"This house needs a lot more than patching, sanding and painting," he warned.

"I know." And she'd budgeted—hopefully enough—for the other work she knew would be required. "But I want to be involved with the project, not just writing the checks."

His gaze skimmed over her, assessing. "You said you worked at Images magazine?"

She nodded. "As a photographer."

"Have you ever done any home renovating before?"

"No," she admitted reluctantly.

"Why did you leave that job to come here?"

"I don't think that's relevant."

"Of course it is," he disagreed.

"I'm committed to this restoration," she said. "That's all that matters."

He studied her for another few seconds before saying, "There are a couple of good general contractors I can recommend. They're local and fair."

She opened her mouth to protest, then decided it wasn't worth arguing with him—she'd rather save her energy for the work that needed to be done. “You can give me their names and numbers after we take a look at the attic.”

Mason followed Zoe up the narrow and steep flight of steps that led to the attic. He tried to keep his focus on the job, but he couldn't tear his gaze from the shapely denim-clad butt in front of him. He'd been right about one thing—Zoe Kozlowski cleaned up good.

The blond hair that had been tangled around her face this morning was now tamed into a ponytail, with just the tiniest wisps escaping to frame her oval face. She'd put on a hint of makeup, mascara to darken her lashes, something that added shine to her soft, full lips. Not enough to look done up, but enough to highlight her features.

She was an attractive woman. A lot more attractive than he'd originally thought. Still not his usual type, although he enjoyed women too much to be picky about specifics. And though he enjoyed a lot of women, he never got too close to any one of them except in a strictly physical and always temporary sense.

She turned at the top of the stairs and stepped through an arched doorway and into darkness. He heard the click of a light being switched on, illuminating her slender figure standing in the middle of the attic. He felt the familiar tug of desire any unattached man would feel in the company of a pretty young woman. Emphasis on young, he thought, guessing her age to be somewhere between early-to mid-twenties. Which meant she was too many years younger than he to consider acting on the attraction he felt.

And yet there were shadows in her eyes that hinted she had experienced things beyond her years, a stubborn tilt to her chin that suggested she'd faced some tough challenges—and won. He figured she was a woman with a lot more baggage than the suitcase he'd seen tucked beside the antique couch in the living room, and that was just one more reason not to get involved. While he could respect her strength and determination, Mason didn't do long-term, and he definitely didn't do issues.

He liked women who laughed frequently and easily, women who wanted a good time with no expectations of anything more. He'd thought Erica was such a woman. Until, after less than three months of on-and-off dating that was more “off” than “on,” she'd told him it was time he stopped playing around and made a commitment. The night she'd said that was the last time he'd seen her.

He didn't regret ending things with Erica. He couldn't imagine himself in a committed relationship with any woman, and he had no intention of ever falling in love.

But he couldn't deny there were times—times when he was with Nick and Jessica—that he wondered what it would be like to love and be loved so completely. Usually the longing only lasted a moment or two, then he'd remember his father and how losing the woman he loved had started a slow but steady downward spiral that had eventually destroyed him. No, Mason didn't ever want to love like that.

“What do you think?” Zoe asked.

Her question jolted him out of his reverie. He glanced around the enormous room illuminated by a couple of bare bulbs hanging from the steeply sloped ceiling. There were old trunks covered in dust and cobwebs hanging from the rafters. “I think it's dark and dreary.”

Some of the light in her eyes faded, making the small space seem darker and drearier still.

“It is now. But if there was a window put in there—” she gestured to the far end “—the room would fill with morning sunlight. It would be perfect for a bedroom and office combined. And there's a bathroom immediately below, so it would be easy enough to bring up the plumbing for an ensuite.” She gazed at him hopefully. “Wouldn't it?”

“I'm not sure it would be easy,” he warned her. “But, yes, it could be done.”

She smiled at him, and he felt as if his breath had backed up in his lungs. He hadn't seen her smile like that before, was unprepared for how positively beautiful she was when her eyes shone, her cheeks glowed. And her mouth—his gaze lingered there, tempted by the sexy curve of those full lips.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets to resist the sudden urge to reach for her, to taste those lips, to test her response. He wondered how it would feel to have a woman look at him like that, to know her smile was intended only for him, the sparkle in her eyes because she was thinking about him.

He gave himself a mental shake, forced himself to focus on what she was saying rather than his imaginative fantasies.

"This will be my space," she decided. "With gleaming hardwood floors, walls painted a cheery yellow, a four-poster bed and—"

Not wanting to think about Zoe tucked away in her bed, he interrupted quickly, "You'll never get a four-poster bed up here. Not the way those stairs curve."

She considered, then sighed. "You're right. Well, the furniture is only details."

"If you're going to tuck yourself away up here, what do you plan to do with the rest of the house?"

"I'm going to open a bed-and-breakfast." She smiled again, her eyes lit up with hope for her grandiose plan.

He hated to dim the sparkle in her eyes again, but someone needed to ground this woman in reality. "There are already a half-dozen bed-and-breakfasts in town," he pointed out. "And even in the height of summer, they're never booked to capacity."

"I'm not looking for busloads of tourists," she said. "But creative marketing and effective advertising will bring enough people here to make the business succeed."

"You never did tell me what brought you here from the big city," he said.

"Obviously I was looking to make some changes in my life."

"Why?"

She narrowed her gaze on him. "Are you this nosy with all of your clients?"

"You're not just a client, you're also my neighbor," he reminded her.

"That's just geography."

"Okay—we'll hold off on the personal revelations until you consider me a friend."

"Friend?" she said, with obvious skepticism.

"Does that seem so impossible to you?"

"Not impossible," she said. "Just surprising."

"Because most men want to skip that part and head straight to the bedroom?"

"Maybe," she admitted hesitantly.

He grinned. "But I'm already in your bedroom."

"So you are." Now she smiled, and again he felt the punch of attraction low in his gut. "But only because you have a really impressive...tape measure."

Zoe left Mason to take his measurements of the attic, heading downstairs on the pretext of needing to dust off the dining room table and a couple of chairs so they could talk about her ideas for the renovations when he was finished. The reality was that she needed some space. The oversized attic that she envisioned as her living quarters seemed far too small when he stood so close to her.

If her purchase of this house had been irrational, her attraction to Mason Sullivan was even more so. He was obviously educated and intelligent, and he was undeniably handsome, but he was also heartache waiting to happen. He was the type of man to whom flirting came as naturally as breathing.

Yeah, she knew the type. And while she couldn't deny she was attracted, she could—and would—refuse to let it lead to anything more. She'd lost too much in the past year-and-a-half, taken too many emotional hits to risk another. And yet, there was something in the way he looked at her that

made her feel young and carefree again, that made her want to be the woman she used to be—if only for a little while.

A fantasy, she knew, and a foolish one at that. And when she heard the sound of footsteps at the top of the stairs, she pushed it out of her mind and hastily finished wiping the table.

“I can’t even offer you a cup of coffee because I haven’t had a chance to get out for groceries yet,” she said apologetically.

“That’s okay,” he said, taking the seat across from her.

She linked her fingers together on top of the table, tried not to let her nervousness show. This was the moment of truth—the moment when she found out if her dreams for this house could be realized or if she’d made a colossal mistake in clearing out most of her savings for the down payment.

He opened his notebook, turned the pages until he found a blank one. His hands were wide, his fingers long, the nails neatly cut. They were strong hands, she imagined, and capable. Hands that would handle any task competently and efficiently, whether sketching a house plan or stroking over a woman’s body—

Zoe felt heat infuse her cheeks even as she chastised herself for that incongruous thought.

“You want the attic divided into three separate rooms—a bedroom, bathroom and office,” he said, reviewing the instructions she’d given him. “Four bedrooms and two bathrooms on the second level, with each bedroom having access to one of the bathrooms.”

She nodded.

“What about this floor?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I don’t know that it needs any major changes, but the layout doesn’t feel right.”

“Because it’s been renovated and modernized,” he told her. “The space is too open.”

“What do you mean?”

“This room—” he gestured to the open flow between the dining and living areas “—is too contemporary for this style of house. You need to break it into individual rooms more appropriate to the era.”

As soon as he explained what he meant, she realized he was right. “What do you suggest?”

“A traditional center hall plan with a large foyer as you come through the front door. With this whole side as the dining area so that you can set up several smaller tables for your guests, connecting doors to the kitchen, and, on the other side, a parlor in the front, maybe a library behind it.”

The possibility hadn’t occurred to her, but now that he’d mentioned it, she was intrigued by the idea.

“You could build bookcases into the walls on either side of the fireplace, add a few comfortable chairs for guests to relax and read.”

She could picture it exactly as he described and smiled at the cozy image that formed in her mind. “You’re really good at this.”

“It’s my job.”

She shook her head. “I’d say it’s a passion.”

He glanced away, as if her insight made him uncomfortable, and shrugged. “I’ve always loved old houses.”

“Why?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Because of the history and uniqueness of each structure. Don’t tell Nick, or he might start looking for a new partner, but I actually enjoy renovating old buildings more than designing new ones. It’s an incredible experience—revealing what has been hidden, uncovering the beauty so often unseen.”

She didn’t want to like him. It was awkward enough that she was attracted to him, even though she was determined to ignore the attraction. But listening to him talk, knowing he felt the same way

she did about this old house, she felt herself softening toward him. “It must be enormously satisfying to love what you do.”

“The key is to do what you love,” he told her.

She nodded, understanding, because there had been a time not so very long ago that she’d done just that. But somewhere along the road that love had faded, too.

“Isn’t there anything you’re passionate about?” he asked.

She expected the question to be accompanied by a flirtatious wink or suggestive grin, but his expression was serious, almost intense. As if he really wanted to know, as if he was interested in what mattered to her.

“This house,” she answered automatically.

“That’s obvious,” he said. “But what fired your passion before you came to Pinehurst?”

She shook her head, refusing to look back, to think about everything she’d left behind. “Can we focus on the house right now?”

“Okay.”

But the depth of his scrutiny belied his easy response, and she didn’t relax until he’d turned his attention back to his notebook.

“Where did you want to put your darkroom?” he asked.

The question made her realize she’d relaxed too soon.

“I don’t need a darkroom,” she said.

“There’s plenty of room in the basement,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “And it’s certainly dark down there. Or you could convert the laundry room.

“I designed a home for Warren Crenshaw and his wife, Nancy. They’re both nature photographers—not professionally, but it’s a hobby they share. We put a darkroom right off their bedroom.”

“I don’t need a darkroom,” she repeated tightly. “I’m not a photographer anymore.”

“Whether or not you have a camera in your hand, you’re still a photographer. It’s the kind of thing that’s in your blood—like designing houses is in mine.”

She shook her head, swallowed around the lump in her throat. “I left that part of my life in Manhattan.”

He hesitated, as if there was something more he wanted to say, but then her cell phone rang.

“Excuse me,” she said, pushing her chair away from the table.

She dug the phone out of her purse, connecting the call before it patched through to her voice mail. “Hello.”

“Where are you?” Scott asked without preamble.

The unexpected sound of his voice gave her a jolt, and made her heart ache just a little. The question, on the other hand, and the tone, annoyed her. “Why are you calling?”

“I just wanted to check in, see how you were doing.”

She walked toward the window, away from where Mason was still seated at the table. “I’m fine.”

“I’d be more likely to believe that if you were where you said you’d be.”

“I am in Pinehurst,” she told him.

“You said you’d be staying with Claire.”

“Not forever.”

He sighed. “She told me you were thinking about buying a house.”

She frowned at that, wondering why her friend would have told Scott anything. But she couldn’t blame Claire because she knew, better than anyone, how charming and persuasive he could be. “And?”

“Buying a house is a major decision,” he said gently. “And you’ve had a tough year.”

“Too late.”

She heard his groan, fought back a smile.

“It was completely irrational and impulsive,” she admitted. “I saw the sign on the lawn, contacted the agent and made an offer.”

“Please tell me you at least had a home inspection done.”

Now she did smile. Reasonable, practical Scott Cowan would never understand the need deep within her heart that had compelled her to buy this house. “A home inspector would have told me it needed a lot of work,” she said, not admitting that she’d been given a copy of the report from an inspection done on the property just a few months earlier. “I already know that.”

“Christ, Zoe. Have you gone completely off the deep end?”

“That seems to be the general consensus,” she agreed.

“Let me contact my lawyers,” he said. “Maybe there’s a way to undo the transaction.”

“No,” she said quickly.

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

She sighed. “I mean, I don’t want it undone. I want this house.”

“You could be making a very big mistake,” he warned.

She knew he was right. But she’d spent the better part of her twenty-nine years doing the smart thing, the safe thing—and she’d still been unprepared for the curves that life had thrown her way. Even if buying this house turned out to be a mistake, it would be her mistake.

“Why should you care?” she challenged. “You walked out on me, remember?”

“You kicked me out.”

He was right, she had to admit. But only because she couldn’t continue to live with him the way things had been.

“Does it matter?” she asked wearily. “The end result is the same.”

“I’ll always care about you, Zoe.”

And that might have been enough to hold them together if other obstacles hadn’t got in the way. She rubbed her hand over her chest, trying to assuage an ache she wasn’t sure would ever go away. “Was that the only reason you called?”

“When’s your next appointment with Dr. Allison?”

She felt the sting of tears. If he’d been half as concerned about her twelve or even six months ago, what had been left of their relationship might not have fallen apart.

“I have to go, Scott.”

Before he could say anything else, she disconnected the call. She heard the telltale scrape of chair legs against the hardwood floor and blinked the moisture from her eyes.

She felt Mason’s hand on her shoulder, gently but firmly turning her to face him. “Zoe?”

She didn’t—couldn’t—look at him. She just needed half a minute to pull herself together, to find the cloak of feigned confidence and false courage that she’d learned to wrap around herself so no one would see how shaky and scared she was feeling inside.

“Who was that on the phone?” he asked.

She took a deep, steadying breath and prepared to dodge the question. After all, it was none of his business. She hardly knew this man; she certainly didn’t owe him any explanations.

But when she looked up at him, she realized he wasn’t trying to pry or interfere. He’d asked the question because he knew she was upset, and he was concerned. In the past eighteen months, she’d withdrawn into herself. She’d been let down by people she’d counted on, disappointed by friends who hadn’t been there for her. Except for her almost daily phone calls to Claire, she’d been on her own. She’d learned to rely on herself, to need no one else.

After only a few days in this small town, she knew that was one of the reasons she’d come here—because she didn’t want to live the rest of her life alone. She wanted—needed—friends to care about and who would care about her.

So she took what she hoped was the first step in that direction and answered his question honestly.

“That was my husband.”

Chapter Three

Husband?

Mason's head reeled. Zoe's announcement had caught him completely unaware. And delivered as it was, in that soft, sexy voice, the punch was even more unexpected.

It took a minute for his brain to absorb this startling bit of information that—at least for him—changed the whole equation.

Zoe was married.

He couldn't have said why her revelation surprised him so much, or why it left him feeling oddly disappointed. He only knew that he needed to stop thinking of this woman as his sexy new neighbor and focus on the fact that she was someone's wife.

Damn.

Zoe might not be his usual type, but he found himself drawn to her regardless. There was just something about her that intrigued him—enough so that, in the brief time between their first meeting that morning and his return for their scheduled appointment, he'd found himself looking forward to spending time with her, getting to know her. And maybe, eventually, moving toward a more intimate and personal relationship with her.

Of course, that was all before he'd learned she was married.

It was his own fault for letting his fantasies get ahead of him, and he silently cursed himself for that now. His hand dropped away and he took a step back.

She gazed at him uncertainly as she folded her arms over her chest. Her cell phone was still clutched in her hand—her left hand. He noted that fact along with the absence of any rings on her fingers.

"You don't wear a wedding band," he noted.

Of course he knew that not everyone did. But he sensed that she was the type who would, that if she'd made a commitment to someone, she would display the evidence of that commitment. Then again, he'd been wrong about assuming she was uninvolved, so maybe he was wrong about this, too.

She shook her head and moved back to the dining room, returning to the chair she'd vacated to answer the call. "No, I don't wear a ring. Not anymore. Not since...that is, I'm—I mean we're—getting a divorce."

"Oh," he said, as he absorbed this second unexpected—but more welcome—revelation. And then he felt like a heel, because he was relieved to know that her marriage had fallen apart so that he didn't need to feel guilty for fantasizing about a married woman.

"We're just waiting for the final papers to come through," she admitted.

"I'm sorry," he said lamely.

She shrugged. "It happens."

Yeah, he knew that it did. He also knew that a break-up was never as easy as she implied, even if it was the right choice.

"How long were you married?" he asked.

"Almost nine years."

He stared at the woman who didn't look like she was twenty-five. "Did you get married while you were still in high school?"

She smiled at that. "Fresh out of college."

"How old were you when you went to college?"

"I'm twenty-nine," she told him.

And he was thirty-seven—which meant there weren't as many years between them as he'd originally suspected, but there was still the barrier of her marriage. And even if her divorce papers

came through tomorrow, she was obviously still hung up on her husband. Her evident distress over his phone call was proof of that.

“What did your soon-to-be-ex-husband want?” he asked. “Did you take off with his coffeemaker or something like that?”

“No, nothing like that. We actually had a very civilized settlement.”

“Then why was he calling you now?”

“He heard from a friend of mine that I bought a house and wanted to tell me he thought it was a mistake.”

“Did you tell him it was none of his business?”

“Yes,” she said. “But after nine years of marriage—and not just living together, but working together, too—some habits are hard to break.”

“Is he a photographer, too?”

“No. He’s the senior fashion editor at Images.”

“Is that why you left Manhattan?”

She shook her head. “It’s a big enough city that I could have stayed, found a new apartment, a new job, and probably have never seen him again if I didn’t want to. But everything just seemed so inexplicably woven together there. I needed to get away from all of it, to make a fresh start somewhere else.”

“Well, you picked a good place for that.”

“Speaking from experience?”

His surprise must have shown, because she smiled.

“Maybe I didn’t peg you quite as quickly as you did me,” she said, “but the more I listen to you talk, the more I hear just the subtlest hint of a drawl.”

“You can take a boy out of the south, but you can’t take the south out of the boy,” he mused.

“How far south?”

“Beaufort, South Carolina.”

“What brought you up here?”

“I came north to go to college, met Nick Armstrong there, came to Pinehurst for a visit one summer and decided to stay up here to go into business with him.”

“Do you go home very often?”

“This is my home now.”

“Don’t you have any family left in Beaufort?”

He shook his head again. “There’s just me and my brother, Tyler, and he’s living up here now, too.”

“No wife or ex-wife?” she wondered.

He shuddered at the thought. “No.”

“Well, that was definite enough.”

“Not that I’m opposed to the institution of marriage. In fact, I was the best man when Nick got married.” He grinned. “Both times.”

“He was married to someone before Jessica?”

“To your real estate agent actually.”

Now that came as a surprise to Zoe.

“I don’t know Jessica very well, obviously,” she said. “But the way she talked about Nick, I got the impression they’d been together forever.”

“They’ve been in love forever,” he agreed. “Had a brief romance when they were younger, then went their separate ways and found each other again only last year.”

“Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“It’s a small town,” he reminded her. “And Nick’s ex was remarried long before Jess ever came back to town.”

Zoe thought about the possibility of Scott marrying again, and wondered if she could ever bring herself to be friends with her ex-husband's new wife. Then she decided it was a moot point. He was out of her life; she'd moved away; they'd both moved on.

She felt the familiar ache of loss, but it wasn't as sharp or as strong as it once had been. She'd finally accepted that he couldn't be what she'd needed him to be any more than she could be what he'd wanted. And while her body would always carry the scars of what had finally broken their marriage, she realized that her heart was finally starting to heal.

Mason didn't know anything about babies, but he couldn't deny that the pink bundle in Jessica's arms was kind of cute. Elizabeth Theresa Armstrong had soft blond fuzz on her head, tiny ears and an even tinier nose. She yawned, revealing toothless gums, then blinked and looked at her mother through the biggest, bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

"She's a beauty, Jess."

The new mother beamed. "She really is, isn't she?"

"Absolutely," he agreed. "Just like her mother."

Jess chuckled. "Actually, she looks exactly like Nick's baby pictures."

"No kidding?" He glanced at the proud father standing by the window. "Let's hope she has better luck as she grows up."

His partner chose to ignore the comment, asking instead, "How was your appointment with Ms. Kozlowski?"

"It was... interesting," he said, unconsciously echoing Zoe's description of their initial meeting. He carried the vase of flowers he'd brought for Jessica over to the windowsill to join the other arrangements that were already there. "The house needs a lot of work."

"What did you think of the owner?" Jess asked.

"I think she needs her head examined," he said. "And so do you, for not trying to talk her out of buying that place."

"No one could have talked her out of it."

Mason had caught only a glimpse of Zoe's steely determination and guessed Jess was probably right.

"You still should have tried," he said, setting the pint of promised ice cream and a plastic spoon on the table beside her bed.

"If she hadn't bought it, we wouldn't have got the referral," Nick pointed out. "And it would've killed you to watch another architect put his hands all over that house."

"So long as you keep your hands on the house," Jess said.

Nick lifted an eyebrow in silent question.

Mason shook his head. "She's not my type."

"Is she female?" his friend asked dryly.

"A very attractive female," Jess interjected. "Who's new in town and doesn't need to be hit on by the first guy she meets."

"I was the consummate professional," Mason assured her, and it was true—even if he'd had some very personal and inappropriate thoughts about her.

The baby squirmed, and when Jess started to shift her to the other arm, Nick swooped in and picked her up.

"Do you want to hold her?" he asked his friend.

Mason took an instinctive step in retreat. "No, um, thanks, but, um..."

Jess took advantage of having her hands free to reach for the container of ice cream. As she pried open the lid, she commented, "I've never seen you back away from a woman before, Mason."

“My experience is with babes, not babies.” He felt a quick spurt of panic as his friend deposited the infant in his arms and stepped away, leaving the tiny fragile bundle in his awkward grasp. Then he gazed at the angelic face again and his heart simply melted.

He reminded himself that he didn’t want what his friends had. Marriage, children, family—they were the kind of ties he didn’t dare risk. Yet somehow, these friends had become his extended family.

He’d had a family once, a long time ago. Parents who had loved one another and doted on their two sons. He’d been fourteen years old when his mother got sick; Tyler had been only ten. Elaine Sullivan had valiantly fought the disease for almost two years, but everyone had known it was only a matter of time. The ravages of the illness had been obvious in her sunken cheeks, dull eyes and pasty skin.

Gord Sullivan had fallen apart when he’d realized the woman he loved was dying. Unable to deal with the ravages of her illness, he’d looked for solace in whiskey—and other women. Mason had never figured out if it was denial or some kind of coping mechanism. He only knew that his father’s abandonment had hurt his mother more than the disease that had eaten away at her body.

Four years after they’d lowered Elaine’s coffin into the ground, her husband was laid to rest beside her. The doctors blamed his death on cirrhosis of the liver. Mason knew his father had really died of a broken heart.

It was a hard but unforgettable lesson, and when he’d buried his father, Mason had promised himself he wouldn’t ever let himself love that deeply or be that vulnerable. He refused to risk that kind of loss again.

And yet, when he looked at Nick and Jess and their new baby, the obvious love they felt for one another evident in every look that passed between them, he found himself wanting to believe that happy endings were possible. He wanted to believe his friends would be luckier than his parents.

One of the drawbacks of buying the house and its contents, Zoe realized, was having to clean the house and its contents. After Beatrice Hadfield died, her grandson hadn’t removed anything from the house, which meant there was a lot of cleaning up to do before she could even begin to tackle the dust and cobwebs that had taken up residence in the vacant house over the past couple of years.

She took down all the curtains and stripped the beds, then spent half a day and a couple rolls of quarters at The Laundry Basket in town. She emptied out closets and dressers and shelves and cupboards and packed up dozens of boxes for charity. She sorted through cabinets full of china and stemware, tossing out anything that was cracked or chipped. When she was done, she still had enough pieces left to serve a five-course meal to twenty guests.

It took her three days to get through the rooms on the first two floors, then three more days to sort through everything in the attic. There were trunks of old clothes, shelves of old books and boxes and boxes of papers and photos. She was tempted to just toss everything—it would certainly be the quickest and easiest solution—but her conscience wouldn’t let her throw out anything without first knowing what it was.

She found letters and journals and lost a whole day reading through them. She felt guilty when she opened the cover of what she quickly realized was a personal journal of Beatrice Hadfield’s from some fifty years back, but the remorse was eclipsed by curiosity as the woman’s bold writing style and recitation of details quickly drew Zoe into the world in which she’d lived back then—and the passionate affair the woman had had with a writer who had rented a room in the house for several months one summer. A writer who had gone on to win several awards for plays, more than one of which Zoe had seen on Broadway.

On the morning of the seventh day in her new home, there was still cleaning to be done and she’d run out of supplies. So she grabbed her keys and purse and headed into town for what was intended as a quick stop at Anderson’s Hardware. She didn’t anticipate that being a newcomer in a town where almost everyone knew everyone else would make her a curiosity.

She'd barely managed to put the first items—a bucket and mop—in her cart when a tall, white-haired man approached.

"I'm Harry Anderson," he said. "You must be the young lady who bought the Hadfield place."

She nodded. "Zoe Kozlowski."

"Welcome to Pinehurst, Zoe." He smiled. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

"I just needed to pick up a few cleaning supplies."

She thought she was capable of browsing and making her own selections, but Harry Anderson clearly had other ideas. Instead of leaving her to her shopping, he guided her around the store, asking questions and making suggestions along the way.

Other customers came and went, each one exchanging greetings with the store owner who, in turn, insisted on introducing her. While he was occupied with Sue Walton—"her family owns the ice-cream parlor down the street"—she steered her cart toward the checkout.

She wasn't sure she had everything she'd need, but she had at least enough to get started and she really wanted to get back home and do just that. She was paying for her purchases when Tina Stilwell, her real estate agent, came into the store.

"I thought that was your car outside," Tina said to Zoe, then she stood on tiptoes to kiss the cheek of the man beside her, "Hello, Uncle Harry."

"Hello, darling."

"Did you forget about our lunch plans?" she asked Zoe.

Zoe glanced at her watch, as surprised to see that it was almost lunchtime as she was by the other woman's reference to plans she knew they'd never made. "I guess I did."

"Well, you girls go on, then," Harry said. "I don't want to keep you any longer."

"Thanks for your help, Mr. Anderson," Zoe said.

The old man smiled at her. "It was real nice meeting you, Zoe. Good luck with that house."

"Thanks," she said.

Then, to Tina, as they walked out of the store, "And thank you."

Tina smiled. "My uncle Harry is a darling man with far too much time on his hands."

"I can't believe I was in there an hour," Zoe said. "I've never spent an hour in a hardware store in my entire life."

"You've never lived in Pinehurst before. This town operates on a whole different schedule than the rest of the world."

"I miss Manhattan already," she muttered, unlocking the trunk of her car to deposit her purchases inside.

The other woman chuckled. "What do you miss? The crowds, the noise or the chaos?"

"All of the above." She closed the trunk. "But I think what I miss most is the anonymity."

"I felt the same way when I first moved here from Boston."

Zoe smiled. "Is there anyone living in this town who actually grew up here?"

"Of course," Tina said. "I'll fill you in on all the local characters over lunch."

She glanced at her watch again. "I really have a ton of things to do at the house."

"Have you eaten?"

"No," she admitted, belatedly realizing that she also needed to restock her dwindling food supply.

"Then let's go," Tina said. "Because if we don't show up at Freda's, Uncle Harry will know before the end of the day that I lied to him."

And so she ended up having lunch with Tina at the popular little café. And she enjoyed it, far more than she expected to. It had been a long time since she'd shared a simple meal and easy conversation with a friend. And though she didn't know Tina very well, she already considered her a friend—one of the first she'd made in Pinehurst.

Then she thought of Mason, and wondered whether he might be another. She'd been thinking about him a lot since their initial meeting a week earlier—probably too much—so she put those thoughts aside and dug into her spinach salad.

When Zoe finally got home after lunch and grocery shopping, she felt as though she'd already put in a full day and hadn't even begun to tackle the dust and dirt. She shoved a bucket under the kitchen tap and turned on the water, thinking that it would have been nice to hire a cleaning service to come in and scrub the place from top to bottom. But that was a luxury she couldn't afford—especially not when she had time on her hands and nothing else to do.

Still, it was almost nine o'clock before she decided to hang up her mop for the night. Although she was physically exhausted, her mind was unsettled, her thoughts preoccupied with everything yet to be done. She decided a nice cup of tea would help her relax and get some sleep.

After the kettle had boiled, she carried her mug out to the porch and settled into an old weathered Adirondack chair. She lifted her feet to prop them on the railing, then dropped them quickly when the wood creaked and swayed. Instead, she folded her legs beneath her on the chair and cradled her mug between her palms.

The darkness of the nights still surprised her, with no streetlights or neon signs to illuminate the blackness of night. There was only the moon, about three-quarters full tonight, and an array of stars unlike anything she'd ever seen. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the cool, fresh air, and smiled. It was beautiful, peaceful, and exactly what she needed.

At least until she heard a thump on the porch and registered the bump against her arm half a second before she felt the shock of hot tea spilling down the front of her shirt and a disgustingly familiar wet tongue sweeping across her mouth.

She sputtered and pushed the hairy beast aside.

“Rosie, down.”

He sat, panting happily beside her chair.

Zoe resisted the urge to scream, asking instead, in a carefully controlled voice, “Where is your master?”

The beast tilted his head, as if trying to understand the question, but—of course—made no response to it.

“Maybe you're smarter than he is,” she said. “Do you understand the word by-law?”

The beast merely cocked his head from one side to the next.

“Or dog pound?”

He barked, but then he licked her hand, clearly proving his ignorance.

“How about leash?” she asked in a deliberately friendly tone.

The beast dropped to his belly on the porch, covered his ears with his paws and whimpered.

Zoe exhaled a frustrated breath and untangled her legs. She set the now half-empty cup of tea on the arm of the chair and stood up. “Let's go,” she said.

Rosie danced in ecstatic circles around her, nearly tripping her on the stairs.

It was the start of the ninth inning in a tie game when Mason heard knocking. He scowled at the door, his eyes still glued to the television. It was early in the season, but his commitment to his Yankees was resolute. Unfortunately, so was the pounding.

He swore under his breath as he pushed himself off the couch. The lead-off batter singled to right field and Mason pulled open the door. The sight of the woman on the other side was so unexpected—and so unexpectedly appealing in a pair of yoga-style pants that sat low on her hips and a skimpy white tank top—he actually forgot about the ballgame playing out on the fifty-two-inch screen behind him.

“This beast is a menace,” Zoe said tightly.

He winced and glanced at the animal sitting obediently at her side. “What did he do now?”

“What did he do?” she echoed indignantly. “Look at me.”

He took her words as an invitation, allowing his eyes to move over her—from the slightly lopsided ponytail on top of her head to the pink-painted toenails on her feet—lingering momentarily at some of the more interesting places in between.

“This—” she gestured to the stain on the front of her shirt that he’d thought was a flower “—was a cup of very hot tea.”

“It’s...pink.”

Her cheeks seemed to take on the same color.

“It’s herbal tea,” she said. “Raspberry. But that’s not the point.”

“Of course not,” he agreed solemnly.

Her eyes narrowed. “The point is that you were going to keep him on a leash.”

Rosie tucked her paws over her ears and whimpered.

Zoe rolled her eyes in disbelief. “You’ve obviously taught him to react whenever he hears that word. Why can’t you teach him to stay off my property?”

“I think he has a crush on you.”

She sent him a look of patent disbelief.

“I’m not kidding,” he told her. “He’s never wandered away from the backyard without me before.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. And I really am sorry about—” his gaze fell to the pink stain on the front of her shirt and the tempting feminine curves beneath it “—your tea.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m hopeful it will wash out.”

“Then will we be forgiven?”

“Maybe the dog,” she said. “Not you. You should know better than to let him roam free.”

He scratched the top of Rosie’s head. “He’s just very affectionate.”

“His affection is wreaking havoc on my wardrobe.”

“You’re welcome to come over anytime to use my washer and dryer, if you want.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But I’ll stick with The Laundry Basket.”

“That’s right,” he said. “You don’t like to be on top of your neighbors.”

Her eyes narrowed on him.

He grinned. “Or was it that you didn’t like your neighbors on top?”

“Maybe it’s just some neighbors in particular that I have a problem with.”

“You’ll get over it,” he said confidently. “Pinehurst is too small a town to hold a grudge against anyone for long.”

“I’ll give it my best shot,” she told him.

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I think I’m going to enjoy getting to know you, Zoe Kozlowski.”

“Maybe another time,” she said. “Right now, I want to get home. I have a ton of things to do in the morning.”

“Wait,” he said, as she turned away.

She hesitated with obvious reluctance.

“Let me walk you back.”

“I don’t need an escort.”

“I know you don’t,” he agreed, sliding his feet into his shoes. “But it’s a nice night for a walk and I don’t want you going home mad.”

“I wouldn’t count on your company changing my disposition,” she warned him.

He grinned. “I’ll chance it.”

“What about the beast?”

He glanced regretfully at the animal by his feet. Rosie was looking up at him and thumping his tail in eager anticipation. As much as Mason regretted having to punish him, the dog had to learn that there were consequences to his actions. “Stay.”

The bundle of fur immediately sprawled on the floor, settling his chin on his front paws and looking up at his master with sorrow-filled eyes.

Mason ignored the guilt that tugged at him as he closed the door.

“Why do you call him that?” he asked.

“What?”

“The beast.”

“Because he is one.”

“You’re going to hurt his feelings,” he warned.

She turned, a reluctant smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “His or yours?”

“You have a beautiful smile, Zoe.”

He was disappointed, although not surprised, that his comment succeeded in erasing any trace of it.

“Flattery is not going to get you or your dog off the hook.”

“Why are you assuming that I have an ulterior motive?”

“Because everyone does.”

He took her hand, rubbed his thumb over the back of her knuckles. She didn’t tug away, but he could tell by the wariness in her eyes that she wanted to.

“Have dinner with me,” he said impulsively.

“I already ate.”

“I didn’t mean tonight.”

She hesitated. “I’m going to be busy with the house for quite a while.”

“You still have to eat,” he pointed out.

“I know but—”

“Tomorrow night,” he interrupted what he was sure would be a refusal. “We’ll barbecue some steaks, open a bottle of wine—”

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