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Dare to dream... these sparkling romances will make you laugh, cry and fall in love – again and again! An Imperfect Match Kimberly Van Meter Dean Halvorsen is concentrating on two things: his business and raising his son. Then Annabelle Nichols starts work for him and turns his world upside down. The more time he spends with Annabelle and her baby daughter, Honey, the more he realises what's missing in his life... Next Comes Love Helen Brenna Garrett Taylor takes one look at Erica and thinks, Trouble. The mysterious, sexy kind that disturbs a man's peace. Erica's on the run with her six-year-old nephew. The boy's abusive father will stop at nothing to get his son back. Can she trust chief of police Garrett to keep them safe?

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AN IMPERFECT MATCH

“I’m sorry about yesterday.

“I was rude,” Dean said gruffly. “Be at the office tomorrow at 8:00am and we’ll talk about the job.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Annabelle shifted and bit the inside of her cheek.

“You got family who could help you out?” he asked, wishing he hadn’t. It wasn’t a good idea to get too acquainted.

She chuckled wryly. “Nope. My mum died a few years ago and my daddy was a bit of a rambling man. I haven’t seen him since I was about seven. I have a younger brother, but the less I see of him the better off my pocketbook is.” She shrugged as if admitting that her family was less than desirable wasn’t a big deal. “I learned to rely on myself a long time ago.”

He believed her. Dressed in a denim skirt that was too short and a blouse that fitted too tightly across her breasts, she looked like a white trash prom queen, but there was a sense of dignity clinging to her that dared anyone to pass judgement.

Closing his eyes briefly to block out the image of her as she stood before him, he bit out a terse, “Don’t be late”, as his goodbye and walked – no, practically ran – from the restaurant.

NEXT COMES LOVE

“Never been married. Never plan to be.”

Erica took a step towards Garrett. “But if you think anything is going to happen between us, guess again. You are so not my type it isn’t even funny.”

They might as well have been alone in the apartment for the charge in the air. Flirting with her was dangerous. Still, Garrett couldn’t rein himself in. “So what is your type?”

“Not a cop, that’s for sure,” she said.

“What do you have against cops?”

“You wouldn’t get it.”

“Try me.”

“Don’t think so.” Erica’s dark brown eyes were laced with something he couldn’t put a finger on. Something that looked an awful lot like fear.

Someone had badly hurt her and the little boy. All Garrett wanted was to get his hands on the guy who had.

An Imperfect Match

By

Kimberly Van Meter
Next Comes Love

By

Helen Brenna



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An Imperfect Match

By

Kimberly Van Meter

An avid reader since before she can remember, **Kimberly Van Meter** started her writing career at the age of sixteen when she finished her first novel, typing late nights and early mornings on her mother's old portable typewriter. Although that first novel was nothing short of literary mud, with each successive piece of work her writing improved to the point of reaching that coveted published status. Kimberly, now a journalist, and her husband and three kids make their home in Oakdale. She enjoys writing, reading, photography and drinking hot chocolate by the windowsill when it rains.

Special thanks must go to RJ Murdoch

for taking time out of his tremendously

busy schedule to educate me on the big world of a

successful builder/contractor. Any deviations from

the way things are truly done are my own and no

reflection on what anyone has taken the time to

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a person could ask for and helping me brainstorm

when my own brain went on hiatus.

To Marg Jackson for the laughter, friendship and

overall good company from day one.

To the Leadin' Ladies for their unwavering support

that never fails to humble me and buoy my spirits

in one fell swoop. You ladies are the best!

CHAPTER ONE

DEAN HALVORSEN'S day soured just about the same time his breakfast burrito heartburn kicked in, and he realized as he fished around in his pocket that he'd left his antacids at home.

"Eagle came in with a lower bid. You know how it goes. Times are tough. The bottom line is tight and we had to go with the lowest bidder. You understand, right?"

Dean bit back what he wanted to say and gave a short nod to Petey Simonsini. No, he didn't understand. What he did understand was that Eagle Construction had snaked another job out from under his company by somehow coming under the Halvorsen Construction bid. Which was damn near impossible since Dean had cut the bid to the bone in an attempt to get the job.

"Aaron beat us fair and square, I suppose," Dean said, though it made his teeth grind just to say it. Aaron Eagle never did things the right way. He cut corners, hired unlicensed subcontractors and bought shoddy materials to punch holes in the budget. No. Dean didn't figure Aaron had beat him square at all, but there was no sense in whining about it. Except, as he rubbed at the spot on his chest where the acid pooled, he knew his temper was about to get the best of him.

Damn him. The man was on a personal quest to put Halvorsen Construction out of business. This was the third bid they'd lost to Eagle in six months. It seemed every time Dean put in a bid, Aaron was right behind him, even on the out-of-town jobs. The man had an agenda and it was starting to piss Dean off. Pretty soon he was going to have to start bidding on state jobs and that idea didn't appeal at all—not because he hated the unions, which wasn't entirely true, but because of all the red tape that came with those jobs.

By the time he arrived at the office, his heartburn had reached four-alarm status. As he burst through the door, intent on one thing—to find his antacids—he pulled up short and choked on what he saw.

His younger brother Sammy looked up and grinned broadly, daring Dean to yell, and then introduced the woman sitting behind the desk.

Beth's desk.

"Dean, meet our new office manager, Annabelle Nichols."

She stood and extended her hand, but Dean wasn't in the mood to play nice anymore. Too bad for her. And he was going to have one less brother in about two minutes.

"I don't remember hiring an office manager," Dean said stonily, and she withdrew her hand with a nervous glance at Sammy.

"Aw, c'mon now. Don't be a jerk in front of Annabelle. There's plenty of time to show her just how difficult and surly you can be. Why start with the first day?"

Sammy—ever the comedian. But Dean wasn't laughing. Sammy had broached the subject of hiring someone new last week, and Dean thought he'd communicated quite clearly his thoughts on the subject. They didn't need anyone new.

As he eyed the woman in front of him, Dean realized he must not have been clear enough.

Ignoring Sammy, he said to her, "Ma'am, I'm afraid there's been a miscommunication between me and my idiot brother. We're not hiring right now. I'll pay you a full day's wage for your trouble."

"Excuse us, Annabelle. This will just take a minute." Sammy lost his good-time grin and strode to Dean. "I own a stake in this company, and I say we *do* need someone. Beth's been gone two years and the business is slowly falling to crap because you've refused to hire a full-time office manager. The temp agencies were fine for the short haul, but the constant flow of people that have come and gone through here is killing us. We're losing too many jobs because of stupid mistakes that wouldn't have been an issue if we'd had someone like Beth in the office."

"There's no one like Beth," Dean all but growled, appalled that Sammy would even suggest such a thing. He avoided looking in the woman's direction but he could smell something fruity in

the air—melon, perhaps—probably coming from that long curly hair, he noted with a frown. It was making his nose itch. “Everything’s fine. You’re overreacting.”

“Bullshit,” Sammy said, his temper flaring. He gestured to the desk that was littered with Post-its, paperwork, bits and scraps of note pages and job sheets. “You couldn’t find a brick on that desk much less anything important, like contracts and subcontractor bids!”

“All you need is a good file system,” the woman interjected quickly, drawing Dean’s attention away from the need to place his fist squarely into his brother’s face. She swallowed and gestured, her hands moving like little birds as she gathered piles. “And I was just telling Sammy when you came in that I may have an idea that might work to organize your system.”

“The system’s fine the way it is,” he answered, giving her a hard look, which she—surprisingly—returned.

“Not from what I can see,” she said. “Your system is cataloged by job number, which makes it hard to find later for reference. If the files were alphabetical, it would be much more efficient and you wouldn’t have a Post-it forest growing on your desk, the surface of which, I might add, has completely disappeared. It’s no wonder you’re losing jobs.”

Dean sent a quick look to his brother. Sammy had told her about Gilly’s? That was low. Embarrassment at that incident made his heartburn feel like a mild tickle.

“Yes, I told her about Gilly’s,” Sammy said without a hint of apology, his gaze clear but concerned. “Beth’s gone. We all loved her but we can’t let the family business go down the tubes because you don’t want anyone else to sit at that desk.”

Dean caught the quick widening of Annabelle’s eyes and he felt terribly exposed. Beth used to keep the office running smoothly. They had been a team: a well-oiled machine that had helped take his father’s company to another level of business. She was not only his wife, but his best friend and business partner.

No one could replace her. Especially not a woman barely out of her teens. Dean assessed Annabelle with a quick, dismissive sweep. She wasn’t a day over twenty-five, he’d wager, though there was something about her—the way her dark eyes caught everything without missing a beat—that made her seem older.

“Sorry,” he said to her, as he pulled his wallet from his back pocket. “I said we don’t need anyone else.” Throwing a wad of cash to the desk, he turned on his heel, saying over his shoulder to his brother, “She’s gone by the time I get back.”

ANNABELLE felt the slam of the office door reverberate, and she exhaled heavily, pursing her lips against the awkward moment sitting between her and Sammy.

Sammy was married to Annabelle’s best friend, Dana, but Annabelle didn’t know him or his family very well, having only just moved to Emmett’s Mill. Obviously, he’d offered her the job without consulting his brother.

And now she was in a strange town without a job. If that wasn’t a continuation of the stream of bad luck she’d been cursed with, she didn’t know what else was.

“Let me talk to him,” Sammy said, his mouth grim. “He’ll come around.”

“It’s fine. Don’t push it. He seems pretty set in his mind. Besides, I’ve never been the type to stay when I’m wanted to go. Thanks for trying, though. I appreciate it.”

Sammy shook his head resolutely. “No. I’ll talk to my dad. He’ll get him to see reason.”

Annabelle shuddered at the thought of Sammy doing such a thing on her account. “God no. I don’t even know your brother, but I wouldn’t much like it if someone tattled on me like that. I’ll be fine. There’s gotta be something else available. Restaurants are always hiring, right?”

Sammy grimaced. “Maybe. But Emmett’s Mill is a tourist town. It practically shuts down in the winter. Hell, I’m sorry, Annabelle. Dana and I pretty much talked you into moving here on the promise that you’d have a job. I never figured on Dean being such an ass about the whole thing. I mean, I knew he’d be resistant but not this bad...”

She patted Sammy on the shoulder and scooped up the cash on the desk. “My rent’s paid for the month. I’ll find something else. Besides, I like it here. It’s a perfect town for a fresh start.”

Sammy smiled but there was worry in his expression. Pocketing the cash, she grinned without showing a hint of the true panic starting to blossom, and did what she could to allay his concern. Dana had married a good man. It wasn’t his fault things hadn’t worked out as they’d hoped.

If anyone was well acquainted with disappointment, it was Annabelle. But she never dwelled on the past. And as she closed the office door to Halvorsen Construction she considered the unfortunate incident with Dean Halvorsen well on its way to history.

She paused briefly at her car. For some reason, she’d thought this was going to be the place where she could put down roots. Talk about being way off.

Family, roots, stability. She snorted. An illusion. All of it. God, when was she ever going to learn?

CHAPTER TWO

DEAN HEARD her voice before he saw her. Returning to his double cheeseburger, he tried to ignore the flash of guilt but it had already ruined his lunch.

Annabelle was talking earnestly to Steve Gerke, the manager of The Grill, and by the look on Steve's face, whatever they were talking about didn't bode well for her. Dean pushed his plate away, ready to leave. He signaled for the waitress, but she motioned that she'd be a few minutes. *Great.* Annabelle drew his gaze despite his resolve to pretend he didn't see her trying to find a job.

"I learn fast," he heard her say. Her voice was husky yet melodic. A strange contradiction he hadn't noticed the other day. His ears pricked again. "Anything? Dishwasher, maybe? How about line cook? I can make a mean plate of hash browns."

"I'm sorry, Ms..."

"Nichols. Annabelle Nichols."

"Ms. Nichols. We've already hired all the staff we need at the moment. Good luck with your search. Leave your number with Maria up front and I'll let you know if anything changes."

Tough break. He tried not to see the sharp disappointment on her face but she kept forcing his attention toward her. She looked like one of those fine-boned porcelain dolls that cost so much you shouldn't touch them. He shook off the thought and motioned again to the waitress, ready to get back to the office, when Aaron walked in. *Ah hell.*

Dean must've racked up a serious deficit in a past life for all the karmic crap he'd been served lately.

He stiffened, determined to ignore the man, but Aaron had a knack for pissing people off—a talent Dean was sure he perfected in the privacy of his own home—and right now, Aaron was doing a bang-up job of rubbing Dean the wrong way.

Aaron's expression lit with a dark zeal when he saw Dean, and it was all Dean could do to remember his manners and not deck the guy right then and there. There was no love lost between them, and both men knew why.

Dean wasn't the smooth talker in the family. That was his younger brother Sammy's forte. And he left him to it for good reason. He'd never excelled at smiling and playing nice when he wanted to do the exact opposite. This was something Aaron knew and exploited whenever possible.

"Great job landing that new plaza contract, though I don't know how you managed to talk old man Tucker into selling that slice of land. I've been trying for years and the old sucker wouldn't budge. Mind sharing any tips?" Aaron asked with feigned casual interest.

"You seem to be doing fine on your own," Dean said tightly, his gaze returning to the woman giving Steve one last chance to decide that he couldn't live without her on the payroll. He had to give her points for tenacity. She didn't give up easily. "You don't need any help from me," he added, signaling an end—at least on his part—to the conversation.

Aaron tracked Dean's stare and noticed Annabelle, appreciation for her lush curves and ample breasts evident in his lingering look. "Who's that?"

"Dunno." That was mildly correct. Dean didn't actually know her. Didn't want to know her. Aaron continued to stare and Dean's patience slipped. "A little young for you, don't you think?"

"Not a crime to look." Aaron smiled. "I'd say a body like that was made to draw attention. Maybe someone ought to welcome her to the community. Seeing as you're heading out, I'll take care of it." He clapped Dean on the shoulder, which was at best annoying and made Dean want to growl at the liberty, and then headed in the young woman's direction.

Good sense told him to leave. But watching Aaron sidle up to Annabelle made his blood boil. Dean looked away, ready to leave, but there was no way he could walk out the door with Aaron sizing

her up. Biting off a silent string of curses, Dean followed Aaron, intending to warn the woman off whatever Aaron planned to offer, and, if it worked, he'd enjoy ruining Aaron's day as a bonus.

Aaron's smile faltered briefly when he realized Dean was standing beside him, but he didn't veer off course.

"What seems to be the problem, Steve?" Aaron asked the manager with a wide smile but his attention never left Annabelle. "You giving this beautiful woman trouble?"

To her credit, she didn't seem impressed with Aaron's chivalrous act and actually inched away to provide a wider buffer between them as she answered for Steve. "No problem. Just looking for a job. Thanks though."

"And I told her there aren't any openings right now," Steve said, shooting Annabelle a regretful look. "But, like I said, leave your name and number with Maria and we'll keep you in mind."

Steve left and Annabelle's expression showed her disappointment, which Aaron was quick to capitalize on.

"I'll bet I could find some work for you. What's your name, sweetheart?" Aaron asked. "Are you new in town?"

"Annabelle Nichols," she answered, glancing at Dean for a brief second. Her soft brown eyes seared into his with a force that threatened to knock him back, but she didn't acknowledge him otherwise. She had freckles, he noted with surprise. Faint dots of color sprinkled the bridge of her nose in a way that could only be described as terminally cute, but her long red hair fell in loose, inviting waves—

He jerked imperceptibly at the direction of his thoughts, deciding he was no better than Aaron, thinking things he shouldn't about someone who was young enough to be...well, a sister.

At forty-one, he didn't need to be lusting after a woman in her early twenties. That sort of thing begged for trouble, and trouble he didn't need.

"Where you from?" Aaron asked, looking the part of a politely interested passerby, but Dean didn't buy it. The man had no shame. "Can't be from around here. I'd remember someone like you," he said with a boyish smile, and Dean's desire to punch him intensified.

But, seeing as he couldn't deck the man in a restaurant, Dean skewered Aaron with a short look and asked, "How're Gina and the new baby?"

Aaron's gaze narrowed at being caught in his game and a dull stain colored his cheeks. "Doing fine. Thanks for asking," he answered with a tight smile but didn't take the opportunity to bow out with his tail between his legs. Instead, he recovered with a grin. "So, what can you do, sweetheart? I might have an opening."

"She already has a job," Dean blurted, ignoring Aaron's irritated stare and Annabelle's startled one. He was damn sure not going to let Aaron try to worm his way into Annabelle's pants under the guise of doing something nice. Yet even as his mouth moved he wondered what the hell he was doing. He'd made himself abundantly clear to Annabelle yesterday, yet here he was looking like an indecisive ass with a bad temper today. To hell with it. That was all before Aaron stuck his nose into it. He eyed her intently. "Don't you?"

"I...uh...yeah. I guess so," she answered. Though clearly confused, she was willing to play along.

Aaron shot Dean an accusatory look. "You said you didn't know her. Now she works for you?"

"I just met her yesterday. I forgot Sammy hired her." Again, mostly true. *So piss off, you philandering prick.* Dean looked at Annabelle. "If we're not paying you enough I'll see what we can do. No sense in you working two jobs if you don't have to."

"Thanks," she said, watching him curiously. "So, I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah."

Aaron's smile returned, not quite ready to call it quits. Adjusting quickly, he changed tactics. "Trust me, darlin', you don't want to work for this grouch. He's no fun. Come with me and I'll show

you how working for Eagle Construction is better. Besides, from what I've been hearing, Halvorsen Construction has had a run of bad luck. No such problems with Eagle. You'd never have to worry about your check clearing."

Dean caught Annabelle's look of alarm and it took everything in him not to clench his fists. Instead, he smiled thinly and said, "Well, it's true we've lost a few bids to an unscrupulous contractor, but at least with Halvorsen Construction you don't have to worry about the boss trying to look down your shirt or up your skirt."

Annabelle moved away from Aaron with a small smile and her next comment made Dean's respect level go up a notch. "Thanks, but I'm not looking for a good time. I'm just looking for something to pay the bills."

"Fair enough," Aaron said, tipping his baseball cap to her and spearing Dean with a black look. "Maybe I'll see you around." To Dean he said, "You ought to come by and see how Gilly's turned out. We managed to pick up the contract when the original contractor crapped out. See you around, Dean."

Dean didn't bother with a rebuttal. There was no sense in playing Aaron's game. Dean liked to think he was better than that, that his parents had raised him to be a better person, but the urge was strong to do something he'd regret later.

"I take it you're not buddies."

"No. Can't stand the man."

"Listen, I'd love to hear that story sometime, but right now I just hope you were serious about the job, because if not I need to track down that Steve guy again and try harder to convince him that he needs me here at the restaurant. I'm not quitting this day until I go home with a job."

It wasn't his style to butt his nose into other people's business, but the thought of Annabelle even considering working for Eagle Construction was worse than disobeying his own tenet to keep to his own affairs. Not that she was really in any danger—the woman was no pretty bimbo. Sharp intelligence flared behind her eyes and the longer he stared, the harder it was to tear himself away. That in itself should've been a big enough warning to back off, but his pride warred with his guilt until he raised his hands in surrender. He'd used her to win a small battle with Aaron; the least he could do was give her a job until she could find something else.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he said gruffly. "Sammy should've warned me. I reacted badly. Be at the office tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. and we'll talk about your duties."

"Sure. Thanks." She shifted and bit the inside of her cheek absently, the action reminding him that she was truly much younger than him. "I'll keep an eye out for something else though."

"You got family who could help you out?" he asked, wishing he hadn't. It wasn't a good idea to get too acquainted.

She chuckled wryly. "Nope. My mom died a few years ago and my daddy was a bit of a rambling man. I haven't seen him since I was about seven. I have a younger brother, but the less I see of him the better off my pocketbook is." She shrugged as if admitting that her family was less than desirable wasn't a big deal. "I learned to rely on myself a long time ago."

He believed her. Dressed in a denim skirt that was too short and a blouse that fit too tightly across her breasts, she looked like a white-trash prom queen looking for a date but there was a sense of dignity clinging to her that dared anyone to pass judgment.

Closing his eyes briefly to block out the image of her as she stood before him, he bit out a terse, "Don't be late," as his goodbye and walked—no, practically ran—from the restaurant.

CHAPTER THREE

DEAN GLANCED at the dusty wall clock and noted the time. Five past eight. She was officially late on her first day of work. That didn't bode well for her future with Halvorsen Construction. He sighed. So much for helping a person out. He grabbed the plans for the building site he was scheduled to survey today and had only just rolled them out the length of his conference table when the front door flew open. Annabelle came through carrying more things than she had hands.

Then he noticed the small bundle in her right arm was wearing tiny shoes and his mouth dropped open.

"I'm so sorry," she started, setting down a stuffed diaper bag and a long rectangle of a contraption that Dean had a sinking feeling was a playpen. "Dana was supposed to watch Honey, but she was called out on the ambulance and I didn't have time to find another babysitter. But I swear she'll be no trouble at all. I brought toys and snacks and her favorite blanket and...and...please don't fire me. I really need this job."

"Honey?" Dean stared at the little girl who was staring at him with the biggest blue eyes he'd ever seen. "Did you say her name was Honey?"

"That's right," she answered, smiling without a hint of bashfulness. "From the moment I first laid eyes on her I thought she was the sweetest thing I'd ever seen and immediately knew Honey was the right choice. Honey Faith Nichols. She's my girl."

"How old is she?" he asked.

"Sixteen months. Her birthday is in February. She's an Aquarius. I'm a Cancer. Do you know what your sign is?"

"Uh, no. I don't believe in that stuff."

"Oh, I do. I think it gives a lot of insight to your personality. When's your birthday? I know a bit about astrology. I could find out—"

"No, that's okay. So, Honey...Aren't you worried about what other kids might say about a name like that?"

She frowned. "No. Should I be?"

"Well, I don't know, it's just a little odd."

At that she chuckled. "It's only odd to those who like everything to fit in preordained little spaces. I want to encourage Honey to do whatever inspires her. I don't want anyone ever to tell her that she can't or shouldn't do something simply because she might not fit a stereotype."

He didn't know what to say. Annabelle didn't seem to notice. She smiled as she looked at her daughter. Love was evident in her expression and voice as she said, "Besides, it's who she's meant to be. Can you imagine her as a Christie or a Sarah?"

No. Actually, he couldn't. Naming a kid something like Honey was a little too hippy-dippy for his sensibilities, but the longer he stared at the child he realized the name fitted her well. The kid was downright cherubic. He couldn't remember if all kids that age were that cute or just this one. He glanced at the clock and his odd musing fled.

"Uh, well, as long as she stays in that playpen," he said, not quite sure of what else to do. "This place isn't baby-proof and it's not safe. I'm not even sure if we're insured for this sort of thing. God, I'm betting we're not. Just keep her contained, will you?"

"Absolutely," she agreed, bobbing her head. "You won't even notice she's here. I promise. She's the best baby. Thank you."

Dean eyed the baby and all the gear that came with her and was thrown off-kilter. His son, Brandon, was seventeen and self-sufficient. Dean hardly remembered what it was like to have a baby around. And that's just the way he wanted to keep it, he almost growled.

Grabbing his coat, he was stalking out, ready to get to the job site and back to something he understood and felt comfortable with, when he realized he hadn't told Annabelle her duties. Stopping at the door, he gestured toward the mess, saying, "Don't touch anything. I have a system and I don't want anyone messing with it."

She gave his cluttered desk a dubious look but nodded to indicate she wouldn't touch it. "So, what should I do?" she asked.

"You can make coffee, answer phones, take messages, scrub the bathroom, general office stuff."

"I don't consider scrubbing the bathroom general office stuff," she retorted, frowning. "I could file things for you. Type up whatever you need. I'm pretty handy with the computer, too. What computer programs are you running?"

"Uh." He glanced down at his watch and swore. "I don't know. Sammy does all that stuff. You'll have to ask him. Don't file anything. Like I said, you'll mess up my system. Just... just... I don't know, stay out of things. I'll be back in a while. I'm late!"

Dean got to the job site and although part of his brain was on work and he managed a coherent conversation with the foreman, another part of his brain was stuck on the woman sitting in his office with a toddler.

She should've mentioned she had a kid.

Why?

Because...well, there was no defensible answer because it was none of his business. Still, it became his business when that kid ended up in his office.

This wasn't something that could become a habit. He hadn't wanted to hire her in the first place and now he had a woman with daycare issues.

He glanced skyward at the clouds rolling in for an end-of-season storm and knew it would be raining before he returned to the office. It wouldn't be a cold rain, but rather a mild soak promising some muggy humidity afterward.

Sammy drove up, raucous music blaring from his truck loud enough to split an eardrum, and Dean was ready to take out his frustration on his youngest brother.

"What's up, big brother?" Sammy asked with typical good humor. Sammy had been born with an innate ability to find the lighter side in every situation. "I hear you hired Dana's friend? Good. Sounds like a win-win situation on both sides."

News traveled fast. Especially between women. "You know she has a kid?"

"Yeah? So? You like kids. You got one of your own, remember?"

Dean glowered. "I didn't expect her to show up for her first day of work with a baby on her hip. That's not professional by my standards."

"You need to loosen up. You're wound so tight if you were a clock you'd bust a spring. Listen, Dana told me a little about her story and she deserves a break."

"What do you mean?"

Sammy shrugged. "For being only twenty-six, she's had a hard life."

"How so?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

Dean backed off. "I don't want to get involved."

"Too late. She's your employee now. I'd say you're involved...at least a little." At Dean's sour look, Sammy chuckled. "So she's packing a kid around. Big deal. What counts is she's a good person looking for a fresh start, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Dean said, softening just a little. He admired people willing to work hard and earn what they wanted in life, but he also knew that sometimes luck played a part. By the sounds of it, she hadn't had much in that department. "All right. She can stay—for a while. We'll see how good an office manager she turns out to be. No promises, got it?"

“No problem. I’ve done my part by talking her up. The rest is on her. Dana understands that. I think,” he added with a slight frown.

Dean eyed Sammy speculatively. “Everything okay? With you and Dana?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sammy said, waving away Dean’s concern but then added, “You know, this marriage stuff isn’t as easy as you and Beth made it look. I guess I figured as long as you loved someone all the other stuff would fall into line. Besides, the other stuff is petty, right?”

“Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t. What’s going on with you two?”

Sammy shrugged. “Sometimes I don’t get Dana. I ask her ‘what’s wrong?’ and she says ‘nothing,’ but then glares at me for the rest of the day as if I haven’t asked. She’s got me so turned upside-down I don’t know which end is up anymore.”

“You love her, right?”

“More than I thought possible. It’s kinda scary, actually. I never thought I’d feel this way about anyone.”

Dean remembered those early days when he and Beth were two dumb kids playing house rather than two adults trying to foster a good marriage. “Then stick with it. It gets better with time. You get to know each other and then you fall into a rhythm. There were times when Beth and I could almost finish each other’s sentences we were so in tune with each other,” he said. “And then there were other times when it seemed we were talking different languages. It’s a dance, brother. When you have a good partner sometimes you lead, other times you follow, but it’s always a beautiful song.”

A moment of silence passed between the brothers as a wave of loss rippled between them. Inhaling slowly, Sammy clapped Dean on the shoulder. “Beth was one of a kind. No doubt about it.”

“That she was,” Dean agreed, his throat closing. He looked at Sammy. “Hey, enough of this serious stuff. We’re sitting here sniffing like two old ladies when we’ve got work to do.”

“Ever the hard-ass.” Sammy smiled. After a short pause, he sobered, saying, “Thanks for giving Annabelle a chance. She needs it. And I think she’ll be good for the office.”

Dean nodded grudgingly, not quite sure where he sat on that score. He hoped it went smoothly. He’d never been one to fire someone, which was why he preferred to work with family. He knew they wouldn’t let him down. All three Halvorsen men were dependable, even Sammy, despite his wild streak. In fact, he was really missing his brother Josh, but he couldn’t fault the man for wanting to spend time with his new wife, Tasha. He sighed, his thoughts returning to his new office manager, hoping he wouldn’t regret his decision.

Time would tell.

ANNABELLE sat behind the incredibly messy desk and wondered what she was supposed to do if she couldn’t actually do anything. Honey was playing quietly in her playpen, content for the moment with the plethora of toys and books Annabelle had brought, so Annabelle took the opportunity to walk around the small office space.

It was nothing fancy and it was plainly evident men were the primary occupants. The bathroom was, for lack of a better word, gross. The seat on the toilet was up and if she hadn’t noticed before trying to use it she’d have been swimming in the toilet bowl.

She was returning to the desk when the front door opened and a tall, good-looking teen walked in, then did a double take.

“Who are you?” he asked without preamble, a scowl deepening on his face. “Where’s my dad?”

Annabelle jumped from the chair and extended a hand toward the boy, but he chose to ignore the gesture and ask again, “Who are you and why are you sitting in my mom’s chair?”

“Oh, uh, I didn’t realize someone...Uh, well, Mr. Halvorsen didn’t actually specify where I should sit, I just assumed I should sit here. My name’s Annabelle Nichols. It’s my first day. And you are?”

“Brandon Halvorsen. My dad owns this place,” he answered, plainly still ticked but doing his teenage best to keep it under control. Too bad for her he wasn’t doing a great job. She felt like a first-rate interloper. “When’s he coming back?” he demanded, and she managed a shrug.

“He didn’t say.” Great. The kid hated her for some reason. For the sake of keeping her job, she tried making amends for whatever he thought she’d done. “I’m sorry I caught you off guard. Your dad offered me the job yesterday and it’s my first day.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry about your mom,” she offered—Dana had told her Dean’s wife had died in a car accident—but the boy was plainly not in the mood to receive condolences.

He grunted. “Yeah, well, that’s life, right?”

“Sometimes. My mom died a few years ago. I know what it feels like to lose someone special. If you ever need someone to talk to...I can relate.”

He looked at her as if she was crazy, and she wished she could rescind the offer. This kid was determined to be pissed at her no matter what she said. Fine. She wasn’t one to push against a brick wall. She sighed. “Well, nice to meet you. I’d better get back to work. Do you want to leave a message for your dad that you came by?”

“Don’t bother. I’ll call his cell,” the boy said and abruptly left, slamming the door behind him.

She glared at the door and wondered if taking this job was more trouble than it was worth. Surely, there had to be something else in this town that she could do. Obviously, Dean had forgotten to mention a few key points about this job. Such as a bad-tempered teenager who didn’t approve of anyone taking over where his mom left off. She glanced around the office, noting the disarray, and wondered how long the office had been running without a rudder. She knew how lost she’d felt when her mom died. She couldn’t imagine losing a spouse and a business partner at once.

She turned to Honey, who was watching with an owl-like stare that was her signature. Annabelle often wondered if her daughter was an old soul. Sometimes, it seemed the girl knew more than she should at such a tender age. Her mouth twitched with a confused smile as she asked, “What are we going to do, kiddo? Stick it out with these people or just call it a day?”

Honey blinked and then returned to her toys, seemingly content with what she had been doing.

“All right,” Annabelle said, pursing her lips slightly as she decided to stick it out and see where things went. “We stay. But don’t get too comfortable. I have a feeling this just isn’t the place for us.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“IT’S JUST temporary,” Dean said to Brandon’s sullen, accusatory glare from across the dinner table. “Your uncle Sammy seems to think we need a little help around the office. And Annabelle is a friend of Dana’s so it seemed like a good deal for both of us.”

“We don’t need anyone messing around with the office,” Brandon said. “She’ll screw up Mom’s system. Besides, what happened to the temp service you were using?”

“The temps weren’t working out as we’d hoped. There was too much turnover. Besides, there wasn’t one I felt was a good enough fit. As much as I hate to admit it, we’re in bad shape. And we can’t afford to lose any more business. But don’t worry, she’s not going to change anything. And, if things don’t work out, we don’t have an obligation to keep her. I made that clear.”

Dean pushed away from his plate, his appetite disappearing at the direction of the conversation. He drew a deep breath. “Like I said, it’s temporary and there’s nothing wrong with helping a person who’s down on their luck. Your mom would’ve wanted us to lend a hand. You know she would.”

Brandon softened imperceptibly at the mention of Beth, but Dean could still see the storm raging behind his son’s eyes. “I don’t want her there,” he said. “It feels wrong seeing her sit in Mom’s chair. Doing Mom’s job. It’s just not right.”

“You didn’t have a problem with the temps.”

“She’s different. The temps were usually old ladies looking for a supplement to their retirement. This woman is no old lady.”

Dean leveled his gaze at Brandon and hoped his son never found cause to doubt his word as he said, “No one is going to replace your mother. Ever. She’s always here in our hearts and no one can ever take that away. But, as much as I’ve tried to ignore it, the office is falling apart. We lost two bids last week to Eagle Construction, and as far as I can tell Aaron’s hot on the trail of any unsecured contract. We can’t keep taking hits like this for much longer if we want to stay in business.”

A long pause sat between them until Brandon relented with a slow nod of his head. His boy was headstrong but not stupid. “So, you’re saying she’s only staying until we get things organized, right?” Brandon asked.

“Well, that’s the plan,” Dean answered with complete conviction, but Brandon still seemed troubled. “What?” he asked, wanting to do whatever he could to allay his son’s fears.

Brandon shifted in his chair, plainly uncomfortable with whatever else was rattling around his head. “She’s pretty,” he finally blurted, but the way he said it didn’t make that sound like a good thing and Dean knew what his son was afraid of.

“She’s attractive,” Dean acknowledged, shutting out the image of Annabelle as she’d been dressed the other day. All legs and breasts. “But I’m not looking, if you know what I mean.”

Brandon sighed with obvious relief and he grinned for the first time since the evening began. “Thanks, Dad. I needed to hear that. I got a little freaked out when I saw her. A lot of guys would think she’s hot or something, but I should’ve known you’re too old for her anyway.”

Dean forced a chuckle, trying not to let his son’s innocent statement sting. Hadn’t he told himself the very same thing? “Glad we got that out of the way,” he said a bit wryly, signaling the end of the conversation.

Brandon smiled. “Me, too. I guess she can stay until you can find something else for her. You’re right. Mom would’ve wanted us to help if we could. She was always looking out for everyone but herself.”

Dean nodded and swallowed the sudden lump in his throat that never failed to choke him when he thought of Beth. God, he missed her. It didn’t seem fair that she’d been taken from them so young, but since it never brought her back, he’d long ago stopped railing against the injustice of God’s plan.

Some things just weren’t fair and that was that.

His thoughts wandered to Annabelle and what little he knew of her. Sammy had implied that life hadn't been particularly fair to her, either, but she didn't seem the type to cry about it. He had to admit he admired that in a person. Anyone could sit and bawl. It took guts and a strong character to pull themselves up and move when all they wanted to do was quit.

Where was Honey's father? Was he in the picture at all? Sighing, he realized it wasn't his place to wonder such things. No good was going to come from him poking his nose into Annabelle's business, especially after promising his son that she wouldn't be around long.

ANNABELLE ARRIVED on time the following morning, earning a curt nod of approval from Dean as she entered the office. He also didn't hide his relief that Honey was not with her. She withheld a sigh for his obvious dislike of her baby and tried not to take it personally. It was his loss. Honey was an amazing kid.

Dean gestured toward a ridiculously small desk and she looked at him quizzically. "That's where I'm supposed to sit? Which sixth-grade classroom is missing a desk?"

"I know it's on the small side, but I wanted you to have a space to work from while we get things figured out. It's all I could find on such short notice."

"What's wrong with that desk?" she pointed at the large and still cluttered desk he was behind.

"It's not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not."

She inhaled a short yet frustrated breath. "Listen, this is a little crazy. You can't possibly expect me to sit at that baby desk when there's a perfectly good, adult-size desk right here."

"My wife used to sit there," he said bluntly.

She tried to tread carefully, but his odd territorial stance on the furniture was wearing on her patience. If she'd had anything else to go to, she'd ditch this job in a second. But she didn't and therefore was stuck with the need to make a go of it. With as much delicacy as her annoyance would allow, she said, "I'm sorry for your loss. Dana told me your wife died. But I can't really do the job you've hired me to do without a proper place to sit. I promise I won't change anything. I won't move pictures around or kill her plants—although, you seem to be doing a pretty good job of that yourself—and I'll even do my damndest to learn your kooky system, but you have to loosen up, too."

He stared and she held her breath, knowing the next words out of his stern mouth were going to be something along the lines of *Don't let the door hit your ass on the way out*, and resigned herself to another serious job hunt.

But he didn't.

"You've got a point," he slowly agreed, though it looked like the admission was painful. "All right, I'll haul that kiddie desk out of here."

"Thank you," she said, thinking privately it seemed an odd thing to be grateful for, but she accepted the victory just the same. "Now, show me how to run this office."

An hour later, Annabelle had a headache.

"But why don't you just file the jobs alphabetically?" she asked, not quite understanding the inefficient way they were doing things. "This number system is bound to screw things up. No wonder you're losing stuff. Look here, this job and this job—" she gestured to two different slips of paper "—have the same number but they're different contracts. If you used an alphabetical system by company or client name you'd have less slipping through the cracks."

"Beth devised this number system and it worked before so it'll work again. Now, instead of fighting me on it, just listen and learn."

Annabelle bristled. It wasn't in her nature to allow someone to talk to her as though she was an idiot. And it didn't matter that Dean was the kind of man who could make her look twice on a crowded street—he was seriously pissing her off with his dogged refusal to see what was plain in front of his face.

“I’m sure this system worked peachy for the woman who conjured it out of her head but for us mere mortals, it’s a bit confusing. Even you can’t seem to figure it out.”

Dean’s face flushed a dull red and she knew she’d crossed the line. Damn it all to hell. But even as Annabelle prepared for the roar of indignation she was sure was heading her way, he seemed to choke down whatever had been dancing on his tongue and uttered a grunt of some sort that may have been an agreement.

But he didn’t look happy about it. “Well, she made it look easy. And all the files are numbered in this way. To start over would take an inordinate amount of time that I don’t have.”

At this Annabelle brightened. Finally something she could work with. “No problem. That’s what I’m here for. I’ll get this system turned around so that anyone coming in after me could easily figure it out, and you can concentrate on getting the jobs.”

He shifted uneasily, but there was a glimmer of interest in his brown eyes that Annabelle had to admit made her insides flip-flop oddly. “You think you could do that?”

She smiled. “Of course. I wouldn’t have made the offer if I couldn’t deliver. I’ve worked in an office before and I have an eye for efficiency. I guess you could call it my gift.”

He grunted, but she couldn’t tell if it was a noise that qualified as approval or disapproval and so she said, “You know, if we’re going to work together we need a better communication style.”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the grunting has to stop. I know guys have their own language, but for the purposes of ensuring that I don’t misunderstand you, let’s try for a mutually agreed-upon language. Like English.”

Dean scowled, but Annabelle wasn’t deterred or intimidated. She’d been around men more coarse and meaner than Dean Halvorsen could ever manage to be, and she wasn’t going to back down. Besides, her mom had always said, men needed to be reminded every now and again of the rules, otherwise they ran amuck. Much like dogs.

Although, now that she thought about it, her mom might not have been the best for advice about men—she never seemed to be able to hold on to one or find one worth keeping.

She sighed privately, pushing that particular thought as far away as she could manage, and returned her attention to Dean.

“So, what’s it going to be?”

He sighed with annoyance but answered quite clearly, “Fine. Can we get back to work?”

“Absolutely.” She graced him with a wide smile that wasn’t the least bit coy or suggestive but suddenly he seemed caught, and when he tore his gaze away from hers, she wondered whether she was imagining things or Dean might actually find her attractive.

Did she want that? Good God, no. But...a lonely voice protested softly, Dean was one of the good guys. She could feel it in her bones. Her intuition was usually spot-on—having had to dodge creeps and toads on a regular basis growing up—but she’d let her guard down and Thad had somehow gotten past her defenses. She thought of Honey and she couldn’t regret her choice in that regard, but she’d be a liar if she didn’t say that she wished she’d found a decent man to father her child.

But messing around with the boss was a giant no-no.

“I see you found a babysitter.”

Dean’s voice broke into her thoughts, a welcome distraction. She nodded. “Dana is watching her for me on the days that she isn’t working.”

“You and Dana grew up together, right?”

“Yeah,” she answered, moving away from Dean and grabbing a handful of files. She wasn’t in the mood to share her dismal upbringing. Besides, he probably already knew all the highlights. No sense in sharing the lowlights as well. “Well, I’d better get started redoing this system or else it’ll take all day.”

DEAN MOVED to one side of the office and tried to ignore the way Annabelle’s skirt swished around her legs as she went about her business, filing and lightly humming as she went. There was

something earthy and comforting about her confidence, in spite of her wardrobe choices. It wasn't her skirt that was the problem, he thought, averting his eyes, searching for anything that might be more appropriate than what kept drawing his gaze.

Autumn was in the air but it was still warm enough to cause beads of sweat to coat his brow if he stood in the direct sunlight, which was probably why she had chosen the strappy number clinging to her breasts like a second skin, molding to the firm, plump flesh as if it were painted on, but it was damn distracting and not exactly professional, he groused. Jamming his baseball cap on his head—intent on getting out of there to meet a client at the job site—it took a moment for him to realize that his groin was reacting in a most inappropriate manner, reminding him painfully that he was a man with needs he'd been ignoring for far too long. He'd been sure after Beth's death that that part of him was pretty much down for the count, too. Apparently, that was not the case.

Shame at his bodily reaction caused him to inhale sharply, and guilt for thinking of another woman in a sexual manner made him feel that he was no better than Aaron Eagle.

Echoes of Brandon's concerns floated into his panicked brain and he spun on his heel toward the door, only to slam his shin into the leg of a chair.

She turned at the sound to ask, "You okay?" Her eyebrows arched in concern, causing the tiniest wrinkles to mar her otherwise perfect face.

"Fine," he answered, biting back the swear words he wanted to yell because his shin was throbbing in time with the blood rushing to his cheeks...and other places. He managed to say, "I'll be back later," and then slammed out the door.

ANNABELLE STARED after Dean as he walked—no, limped—stiffly from the office, and she shook her head. Men. Would she ever understand them?

Probably not. Annabelle shrugged her shoulders, and said, "I don't think that man likes me." Then she turned to the file cabinet and focused on finishing her filing.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANNABELLE didn't mean it to, but a wistful sigh escaped her as she caught a private moment between Dana and Sammy in their kitchen.

Sammy, his eyes shining with love and desire, feasted on Dana as if she was a rack of lamb and he was a starving man.

Thad had never looked at her like that. Not truly.

Sure, she'd seen lust in men's eyes, but it had never gone further than that, and young as Annabelle was, she'd always known the difference. She'd had no use for men with mouths full of pretty words aimed at only one thing.

But even as she was slightly envious of the fairy-tale romance Dana seemed to be enjoying, she couldn't really remain that way. Dana deserved a good man. She'd had a rough childhood, too. That's probably what bonded the two of them so tightly. She'd do anything for Dana, and vice versa.

She forced a smile and cleared her throat as she lifted their dirty plates. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Just trying to help out."

Sammy grinned and pinched Dana's behind as she tried to move past him. She jumped a little and her cheeks colored, but there was a high flush to her features that made her simply glow. Annabelle's eyes threatened to water. "You guys have to stop that. I think I'm still hormonal," she teased, allowing Dana to take the plates from her hand. "Isn't there some medical text that says a woman's hormones can go haywire as far as a year and a half after the birth of a baby?"

Sammy eyed Dana as if he were mentally undressing her and said, "Dunno. But we'll let you know once I manage to get this girl to squeeze a few out."

"Samuel!" Dana exclaimed, whirling long enough to snap him with a dish towel. "Get out of here before you scare my best friend away and she never comes back for dinner."

"Whatever you say," he said, as he sauntered out of the kitchen and went straight for Honey's makeshift high chair, pulling her out to gobble her little tummy with loud smacking noises. Honey's delighted giggles faded as the two disappeared to make mischief in the living room.

Dana's gaze softened and Annabelle felt her nose stuff up from the tears that weren't far behind. Damn, where'd all the waterworks come from? She rubbed at her eyes. It hurt knowing Dana wanted a baby so badly yet hadn't conceived. "Soon," Annabelle promised, meeting Dana's stare with absolute conviction. "Just give it time."

"I know," Dana said. "It's just hard. I see you with Honey and she's such a wonderful baby and you're a great mom...I want that, too."

"And you will. I'm sure that Halvorsen sperm is pretty industrious. Just give it a little more time. You've only been married six months. I mean, you guys should be spending more time getting busy than worrying if you're ovulating. Takes all the fun out of it, I hear."

Not that Annabelle would know about anything like that. She'd gotten pregnant distressingly easily.

"You got that right," Dana agreed. Eyes clearing, she linked her arm through Annabelle's and led her away from the dishes that needed washing and the remains of dinner that still needed to be put away, ignoring Annabelle's protests to the contrary, saying, "Tell me about working with Dean. I'm dying to know how you two are getting along."

"I'd rather wash the dishes," Annabelle said under her breath. At Dana's troubled look, Annabelle brightened with a customary grin. "Just kidding. He's...well, gruff and can't seem to stand the sight of me, but at least he changed his mind about giving me a job. That's all that counts in my book."

"So practical." Dana sighed, then gave her a subtle look that bordered on sly if Annabelle was to wager a guess and Annabelle stared her down.

“Don’t even go there,” Annabelle warned, knowing that look well enough to fear it. “I mean it, Dana. Do not try and play matchmaker.”

“What?”

“Drop the innocent act, Collins. I know you too well.”

Dana’s nose wrinkled at the use of her maiden name but she didn’t deny that something had been percolating in her brain. Yet she couldn’t help but add in a rush, “He’s single, very available, not to mention good-looking. Doesn’t get better than a Halvorsen. They’re good, honest—”

“Not interested,” Annabelle stated firmly, interrupting Dana’s Halvorsen PR spiel. “He’s my boss. In other words—”

“Off-limits,” Dana finished for her. “I know.”

“I knew you’d understand. I just can’t go there. I’m over my quota for stupid moves and I’m not about to start adding the mistakes of my mother to my own.”

“You’re not your mother,” Dana said. “You know I loved her even more than mine but she was terrible when it came to guys. It’s a wonder there weren’t more like Buddy in and out of her life.”

And, by proxy, mine. Annabelle shuddered at the thought of her mother’s last boyfriend.

Evil, drunken bastard. That about summed it up. *Trailer trash*, Annabelle added, unable to help herself even in the privacy of her own head.

“He’s still in prison, right?” Dana peered at Annabelle anxiously and Annabelle gave a short affirmative jerk of her head.

“Yeah, but he’s up for parole in a year,” Annabelle answered, adding with as much humor as she could muster in light of the subject matter, “I’m hoping he’ll meet the business end of a pointy object before that happens. Prison, I hear, can be a dangerous place.”

“Are you worried he’ll come after you?”

Annabelle scoffed, but her insides quivered. “Of course not. He’d be the biggest idiot on the planet even to come near me. I wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him.”

“You don’t own a gun.”

Annabelle sent Dana a short look. “I’d buy one.”

Dana chuckled. “I bet you would.”

Shaking off the memory with visible effort, Annabelle returned the conversation to Dana and Sammy and their plans to remodel the little house they’d bought.

As Annabelle knew she would, Dana quickly warmed to the subject and soon her own troubles were forgotten as she simply enjoyed the company of her good friend and the quiet satisfaction that she’d secured a job without having to resort to cocktail waitressing, as she’d feared.

And she pushed all thoughts of Buddy King far from her mind.

THE NEXT DAY Dean got to the office early in hopes of being gone by the time Annabelle arrived, but, as often happened, the minute he stepped into the small building, he got distracted and wasn’t able to get out before she arrived.

He grimaced as the door swung wide and Annabelle, carrying Honey, walked inside loaded down with various baby items. The look on her face was vaguely apologetic, but there was a hint of defiance as well.

“Let me guess. Dana was called into work unexpectedly,” Dean said as he removed what he’d learned earlier was the playpen apparatus from her shoulder. She smiled briefly in thanks and he tried not to enjoy the feelings it sparked. “Do you need some help finding a babysitter?” he asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable letting just anyone watch my baby,” she said and he jerked against the subtle rebuke. “She’s no trouble. Besides, Dana is coming at lunch to pick her up for me.”

Dean thought of Beth and how protective she’d been of Brandon. In fact, he remembered Beth setting up a playpen for Brandon in nearly the same spot Annabelle was setting up a space for Honey. He sighed, realizing his argument was petty and if Beth were here, she’d agree that Honey, as young as she was, needed to be with her mother.

“She can stay,” Dean said. “But since I’m guessing this could become a habit, I might as well child-proof the office.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she protested softly, distress in her expression. “I don’t want to inconvenience anyone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s not safe. You don’t want to keep her in that pen all day, do you?”

“No, I suppose not.” Her face broke out in a surprised yet gentle smile. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He resisted her attempt to take the playpen from him and made quick work of setting it up for her. Seemed these kinds of things hadn’t changed all that much since Brandon was a baby. “Beth was the same way. Never felt comfortable leaving Brandon with anyone.”

She gave him a smile, uncertainty hovering at its edges, and placed her daughter inside the playpen. “So, you have just the one son?”

Dean nodded. “One seemed like enough. Beth had troubles. We didn’t want to risk it.”

“What kind of troubles?”

Dean shifted, hating the memory of those longago scary days when he worried that he might have to choose between his wife and his unborn child. “Ah, a bad case of placenta previa. Brandon was sitting right over Beth’s...” His cheeks colored a little. “Um, cervix. It never got better like in some cases and we didn’t know it because back then they didn’t do scans routinely like doctors do now. They both almost died during the birth.”

“That’s awful. I can understand your reluctance to try again.”

“Yeah.” He almost said that Beth had been willing, but he figured he’d shared enough on that score. He gestured to Honey. “The dad in the picture?” he asked bluntly, needing to know for some reason.

Annabelle met his gaze and answered without flinching. “No. Being a daddy didn’t appeal to Thad beyond the novelty. It’s just me and my girl. And we like it that way.”

The way her chin tilted up, as if daring him to say something, made him want to smile, but he controlled the impulse. The woman had pride. He understood that. “So, he’s not bound to show up in Emmett’s Mill wanting to play house again, right?”

She shook her head. “No. Thad was relieved when I told him we were leaving.”

If Annabelle felt a flicker of sadness at her failed relationship, she hid it well. Dean wondered what kind of partner she’d been. He sensed she’d put everything she had into it, giving up only when she felt the relationship was a lost cause. She was a trouper, he could feel it.

But there was more to Annabelle Nichols than just her steel backbone and it was that other aspect of her that bothered Dean the most.

Without conscious effort, she exuded a sultry sensuality that echoed in her husky voice, making him shudder in a most uncomfortable manner. Everything about her was lush—from her sweet-smelling hair to the firm, wish-you-could-touch-them breasts barely contained by her too-tight tops.

Today she wore a sundress, faded by many washings, but still pretty. Honey wore a newer outfit in a matching sunny yellow with a floppy hat that she was now examining with quiet diligence, and Dean realized that Annabelle probably spent most of her money on her daughter, leaving little for herself.

“It’s none of my business, but I’m curious just the same,” Annabelle broke into his thoughts, peering at him with complete candor as she organized paperwork. “What’s the deal between you and that other construction guy I met in the restaurant?”

SHE TOLD herself she was making conversation but she really wanted to know why Dean’s eyes had glittered with anger despite his obvious effort at control. He’d nearly vibrated with violent energy he’d not acted on. Since she was new in town, she didn’t know people’s histories and felt at a distinct disadvantage.

Dean didn’t seem compelled to answer at first, but, after a pregnant pause, he shrugged. “I don’t care for his business practices or the way he conducts his personal life.”

Annabelle nodded and resumed her task, but she kept a watch on Dean through lowered lashes. He was a big man, with broad shoulders—not surprising for someone who’d been raised in the construction business—fit and lean, hard with muscle.

One would never guess he spent most of his time on administrative tasks. Dana hadn’t lied the other night. Dean Halvorsen wasn’t hard on the eyes. Thick brown hair threaded with silver and in need of a quick snip framed a handsome face that didn’t smile nearly enough and showcased a stubborn jaw that Annabelle had learned spent too much time clenching when he was trying to hold back something he shouldn’t say or do.

Annabelle’s gaze strayed to the framed photo of Beth on the desk and she swallowed instinctively as a strange lump bobbed in her throat. Beth Halvorsen had been pretty but not classically beautiful. Her blond hair hung to her shoulders and lines framed her blue eyes from a lifetime of laughter, with smaller ones around the firm mouth tipped in a smile at whoever was taking the picture. From the confident, slightly conspiratorial expression on her face, Dean had probably taken the photo. The light shining from Beth’s eyes spoke of countless private conversations whispered in hushed tones meant only for a lover to hear.

Unable to look any longer, Annabelle glanced away. She knew from Dana that a car accident had claimed Beth too young and the entire Halvorsen family felt her loss. She considered briefly her own family and how when her mother had died, no one but she and Dana had gone to the funeral. No one had mourned the loss of Sadie Nichols. No one had even noticed. It had made Annabelle stiffen in fear that that would be her fate as well. Alone, used up, forgotten and thrown away.

“You okay?” Dean asked, drawing her attention from the paperwork in her hand that she had actually ceased to see. She shook her head and refocused on her job with a mumbled affirmative but Dean persisted. “You look a little pale. Do you need something? Coffee? Water? A soda?”

She risked a brief smile at his concern, but her heart ached for something she’d never known and probably never would. She knew deep down that Beth Halvorsen had experienced a true and abiding love, and it seemed downright shameful that Annabelle could even for a split second yearn for something similar with the woman’s husband.

Disgrace flooded her cheeks, and she waved away Dean’s offer on the pretense of needing to use the restroom. With a quick glance at Honey, who was playing quietly in her pen, Annabelle closed the door behind her and leaned against it. Drawing deep breaths, she willed away the despicable show of tears that crowded her sinuses, reminding her that she was a mess on the inside no matter how hard she tried to prove otherwise. She vowed she wouldn’t dare leave this dirty, disgusting bathroom until she could emerge the happy, secure and strong person she desperately wanted to be.

A self-deprecating smile tinged with hysterical panic twisted her lips as she realized she could be in here awhile.

CHAPTER SIX

DEAN TRIED not to notice how Annabelle had practically run from the room to disappear into the bathroom, but it was pretty hard. His eyes seemed to find her no matter where she went and no matter how hard he tried to ignore her.

Tried to ignore was about the right choice of words, too. Removing her from his mind was the only thing that kept him focused. But of course the more you try to avoid something, the more your mind makes you ultrasensitive to it. All this failed avoidance strategy was giving him a headache.

Honey made a distressed sound and he turned to regard her with apprehension. “Yeah?” he asked, as if she could answer him.

She toddled to her feet and pressed her little body against the side of the playpen, raising her chubby arms. She wanted him to pick her up. Dean glanced at the closed door and willed Annabelle to return, but she didn’t, and he wondered if everything was all right.

Honey’s big blue eyes widened and she shook her hands at him with an expression that couldn’t get any clearer.

“Your mama should be out in just a minute,” he said and tried focusing on the paperwork in his hand, but when he glanced back at the kid he could’ve sworn he saw her lip tremble in disappointment. His heart did a little uncharacteristic stutter.

“I get it, you’re tired of being in that pen. I don’t blame you. Brandon never did like these things, either,” he said, reaching down to pick her up. He expected the baby to stiffen in alarm since he was a stranger, but she snuggled up to him, quite content in the crook of his arm. “Haven’t you ever heard of stranger-danger?” he asked with a chuckle as Honey cooed up at him and offered a grin full of tiny white teeth. “Yeah, you’re pretty cute and you know it.”

He didn’t remember babies smelling this good, he noted in surprise. Maybe it was true that boys and girls were made of different stuff because he remembered Brandon smelling...less sweet.

He bent down and sniffed at Honey’s crown, and his suspicion was confirmed. This baby smelled like powder, sunshine and rain on a summer day all wrapped up in one. “No wonder women go nuts over babies,” he murmured, taking Honey with him to the file cabinet where he’d left off.

There was something nice about holding Honey. She watched as he searched through the cabinet with his one free hand and seemed content just to hang out while he did whatever he needed to do.

He shifted her to the other side and fell into a rhythm, a part of him starting to worry about Annabelle and the other wishing he and Beth had been able to have more kids, when the main door opened and Brandon walked in.

“What are you doing?” Brandon asked, gesturing to Honey. “Why are you holding her kid?”

Her—as in Annabelle. Dean shifted Honey again and she offered a sweet smile to Brandon, which his son ignored. “Annabelle is in the restroom. There’s no reason for you to be rude to Honey.”

“Honey? What a stupid name. Is your new office manager a hippie or something? Is this kid her love child?”

Dean stiffened at the ugliness in Brandon’s tone, and he pinned him with a short look that communicated how much he appreciated his attitude. “You were born in the wrong era even to know what a love child is. She’s a cute kid. Once you get to know her, the name actually fits. What are you doing out of school?” he asked, redirecting the conversation.

“It’s a pro day. I told you that yesterday,” Brandon answered, his scowl still firmly on his face. “I guess you had other things on your mind.”

“You got something you need to say?” Dean asked, getting straight to the point of Brandon’s attitude. “Because your mom and I didn’t raise you to be so ugly to an innocent child.”

Instantly chastised, Brandon made a visible effort to shake off whatever feelings were rioting in his brain, and Dean let up.

"I need a couple of bucks," Brandon said, still eyeing Honey with faint distrust. "Me and Jessie want to go down to Merced and catch a movie. I'm short a few until payday. Can you front me?"

Dean nodded and grabbed his wallet from his back pocket. Tossing it to Brandon, Dean instructed him to pull out two twenties. "Home before ten, right?"

"Yeah."

Brandon was doing a better job of hiding his feelings but Dean knew his son well. "Brandon, I'm not adopting her. Relax."

Brandon swallowed but nodded. "Sorry, Dad. It just freaked me out for a minute. You're right. She is kinda cute. For a baby."

Dean smiled, his chest loosening from the pent-up tension between them. "Hey, why don't you and Jessie sign up for D-Day? You know your nana could use a couple of young hands to help out."

"Sure, Dad. I'll see what Jessie says and I'll get back to you."

Brandon left, and Dean turned to see Annabelle standing by the bathroom door, watching with a slightly frozen expression on her face.

"She was fussing," he said by way of explanation but he moved to return Honey to the pen, feeling distinctly as if he'd trespassed. "I waited for you to come out, but she seemed pretty upset..."

"That's fine. Thank you." Annabelle flashed a bright smile and settled behind the desk, once again the model of efficiency, yet Dean sensed something was off-kilter. "Don't forget you have a subcontractor meeting at 3:00 p.m.," she said, adeptly avoiding meeting his gaze. She double-checked the calendar. "Dayton Plumbing. They're going to meet you at the job site."

"I haven't forgotten. What's wrong? Are you sick?"

Beth had always accused him of being Neander-thalishly blunt when it came to some things, and he could almost hear his wife's annoyed sigh as the words tripped out of his mouth.

Annabelle pinned him with a short look. "I'm fine. Please stop asking. I don't like to be badgered, especially when there's nothing wrong." She added stiffly, "Thanks for your concern."

Case closed. Dean shrugged. Plainly, there was something bothering her, but out of the two of them she was being the smart one by not inviting him into her business. He knew when to stop pushing his nose where it didn't belong.

"Good. I'm heading out after my meeting with Dayton. I probably won't return to the office. I'll come in tomorrow before you get here to baby-proof everything."

She offered him another smile by way of gratitude and he accepted it at face value.

Women were too complex for the likes of him. Beth hadn't been high-maintenance and he'd loved that about her. For a fleeting moment he wondered what kind of woman Annabelle was. There was an air of mystery about her, so different from Beth, who'd been completely down-to-earth and practically an open book. An odd tickle at the base of his spine warned him away from delving too deep into Annabelle's secrets. Something told him he might not like what he found.

THAT NIGHT Annabelle sat staring into the darkness of her rundown duplex and sipped a glass of wine. It wasn't like her to be so maudlin, allowing her thoughts to wander into dangerous territory, but seeing Dean holding Honey as if it were the most natural thing in the world had made her sad in a way that was too close to self-pity for Annabelle's comfort.

Dean was not hers. Nor would he ever be. Annabelle would no sooner wish for the moon to fall into her hands than wonder what could be between them.

That had been Sadie's problem. She was always looking for love in the wrong places. Her mother's romance track record—God love her—was as clichéd as a country song.

Fatigue pulled at her body and Annabelle couldn't keep her thoughts straight. She'd lied to Dana, but only because she didn't want her to worry. Buddy King was up for parole much sooner than a year. It had been just another reason to leave Hinkley behind. She doubted he'd try and track her down. Annabelle didn't suppose he enjoyed prison so much he'd want to return to it.

The night air had the scent of rain, though Annabelle hadn't heard that a storm was coming. Emmett's Mill was so different from the dustbowl nothingness of Hinkley. Sadie Nichols would've called it God's Country, a scenic place with wondrously wild smells, its Sierra Nevada greenery broken only by the vibrant fall colors of changing leaves on the trees and spots of dry earth as it hungered for moisture.

It was a place anyone would love to call home. She glanced at her half-empty glass and wondered if such a place existed for her. As a child she'd prayed for a fresh start for her and her mom but it had never come. Now Annabelle had found that perfect place, but she still felt like an outsider looking in—a beggar child pressed against the windowpanes of a cozy house belonging to someone else.

She drained her glass and reached for the bottle sitting on the scarred coffee table, but, as her fingers curled around the neck, she decided against a refill. One glass was enough.

A twig snapped outside and Annabelle jumped as she peered nervously into the dark. The sound of a tomcat yowling echoed in the night. Heartbeat thundering in her ears, she forced a light laugh at herself for acting like the heroine in a scary movie. There were no boogeymen in Emmett's Mill.

Not even ones named Buddy.

WHATEVER had been bothering Annabelle the day before was gone today and Dean was thankful. She wore another sundress, only this one she wore with a light cardigan that covered her most bountiful assets and Dean told himself that was a blessing. Except, when she smiled she brought the sunshine with her and he momentarily forgot what he'd been saying or doing. Flustered, he returned to his calendar, ready to hit the job site. He noted Annabelle glancing in puzzled amazement at the various baby-proofing items throughout the office: latches on drawers, doorknob protectors, plastic covers for electrical outlets, a gate blocking off the bathroom. Granted, he might've overdone it.

"You really didn't need to go that far," Annabelle said, although her eyes were shining. "Clients are going to think you run a daycare on the side."

He chuckled. "I just don't want Honey stuck in that pen all the time. Babies need to stretch their legs, too."

Annabelle nodded, appreciation evident in the way her mouth played with a subtle smile. "I'm sure she'll love it."

For a split second a violent hunger to taste those full lips ripped through him and stole the air from his chest. He cleared his throat with difficulty on the pretense of having something caught, and made a concentrated effort to get the hell out of there before he did something stupid—like give in to his baser needs—but he was met at the door by his mother.

"Dean, sweetheart, just the person I wanted to see," Mary exclaimed, moving around him with the ease of a woman who knew what she was doing. She approached Annabelle with a warm smile. "You must be Annabelle. Sammy and Dana have told me very good things about you."

Annabelle looked clearly nervous and Dean could understand why. Mary Halvorsen was a woman to be reckoned with. After raising three boisterous sons, each of whom had grown to over six feet tall, she didn't scare easily or get sidetracked from her purpose. And right now, she had her sights set on Annabelle for some reason.

"Mom, don't be wrangling Annabelle into one of your committees. I doubt she wants to spend her time in a quilting circle with a bunch of old biddies."

"Watch your tongue, Dean Emmett Halvorsen," Mary said in a dulcet tone threaded with steel. "Besides, I didn't come to invite Annabelle to the Quilters Brigade, unless, that is, you would like to join..." Mary pinned Annabelle with an expectant stare until Annabelle shook her head. "Right. I didn't think so. Although it's a stereotype that only old women quilt. Dean knows this. He used to quilt himself."

Dean bit back a groan, unable to believe his own mother had outed him like that. His cheeks flooded with warmth. "Not to rush you, Mom, but what did you come by for?"

“Well, I came by to see if Annabelle would like to volunteer on D-Day. We still need volunteers and I haven’t heard from Brandon and his girl, Jessie. We need some young, strong backs to carry supplies and run refreshments to the crews.”

Bewildered, Annabelle asked, “D-Day? As in the battle of Normandy?”

Mary chuckled, her stout body jiggling with mirth. “Goodness no, child, but kudos to you for knowing your history. No, D-Day in Emmett’s Mill is Restoration Day. We’re restoring the mill next month.”

Annabelle stared blankly. “What mill? And why do you call it D-Day? Shouldn’t it be R-Day or something like that?”

Mary gave Dean a look that said he was falling down on the job if Annabelle didn’t even know about the town’s namesake and why they were restoring it. “My dear, Emmett’s Mill was named after our very own Waldon Emmett. The Halvorsen family is directly descended from the original Emmetts who settled here, which is why Dean’s father and I chose Emmett as Dean’s middle name. As for why we call it D-Day, the committee wanted something grand to commemorate this auspicious day in our local history, and since Waldon Emmett was of French descent, well, we thought calling it D-Day would give it a sense of importance.”

“I see.” Annabelle looked a little lost and Dean didn’t blame her. The committee’s logic was tenuous at best. “Well, it certainly does sound grand,” she agreed, looking to Dean as if for a sign that she hadn’t somehow offended his mother. It was endearing but unnecessary. Mary Halvorsen had skin thicker than a rhino.

“Mom, don’t bore Annabelle with our family history,” Dean said, smothering a chuckle. “Not everyone is fascinated with other people’s history. It’s like watching home movies of total strangers. Those kinds of things are barely tolerable for the people who are in them.”

“Oh hush. No one asked you,” Mary retorted, eyes dancing as she returned to Annabelle. “Am I boring you, dear?”

“No, I think it’s fascinating. Please do continue.” Annabelle reached down to pick up Honey, who had begun to fuss a little. “I think it’s great that you know so much about your family and that your history isn’t something you’d rather hide.”

Mary turned a triumphant smile Dean’s way before continuing. “Thank you. So, as I was saying, Waldon Emmett built the flour mill in 1832 and made his fortune selling freshly milled flour to the neighboring cities, except by the time he died his son, Waldon, Jr., wasn’t much of a miller and quickly drove the business into the ground. Wallie, as he was called, spent most of the family’s fortune on a host of get-rich schemes that inevitably failed. All that remains is the mill. It was finally donated to the historical society and we’ve formed the nonprofit organization heading the Emmett’s Mill Restoration project.”

“Aren’t you sorry you asked?” Dean asked Annabelle wryly, but she looked taken in by the story. “Are you a history buff?” he asked.

“Not particularly, but I enjoy hearing about local history. It must feel wonderful to have such deep roots here in Emmett’s Mill,” she murmured.

His mother jumped in, loving her captive audience. “You should come to dinner tonight—”

“Mom,” Dean interjected, alarmed at where the conversation was headed. Mary blinked at him in annoyance for interrupting her, but he wasn’t about to let his mom drag Annabelle to a family dinner. A Halvorsen dinner wasn’t for the faint of heart. It was loud, chaotic and usually there were at least three conversations happening at once. He couldn’t see Annabelle feeling comfortable at all. Not to mention he was having enough trouble dealing with his inappropriate mental wanderings, he didn’t need to complicate matters. “Leave Annabelle with a flyer. I have to get going.”

“So go.” Mary dismissed him, alighting on Honey without missing a beat. “Who is this angel?”

Annabelle smiled with genuine joy. “This is my daughter, Honey. She’s sixteen months old.”

Mary sighed with longing. “A granddaughter. That’s what I’m missing. I adore my grandsons but I’ve never had anyone to pamper. I’m holding out hope that one of my sons will deliver. Your mom must be thrilled to have a granddaughter.”

Annabelle shot Dean a quick look, which he wasn’t sure was one of distress or one of annoyance for his mother’s questions but she answered just the same. “My mother died before Honey was born.”

Mary’s expression lost some of its happiness. “Oh dear. That settles it. You have to come to Sunday dinner this weekend. I won’t take no for an answer.” She turned to Dean with instructions. “You’ll bring her? I don’t want her driving that road at night with a baby. You know how those twists and turns can be tricky for people not used to them.”

She pulled a flyer from her purse and placed it in front of Annabelle with a warm smile. “I have to go. Here’s the information about the project. Please give it some thought. It’s a wonderful way to get to know your new community and it’s a worthwhile project.”

And then she was gone.

Dean expelled a heavy breath and suddenly felt the all-over body fatigue that always happened when he got caught in the maelstrom that was his mother.

He turned to Annabelle, hands spread in apology. “She’s pretty passionate about some things,” he said by way of explanation, but he realized Annabelle hadn’t minded.

“You’re so lucky,” she said with a catch to her voice. “Tell your mom I’d be honored to be a part of the restoration project, but I’ll have to pass on dinner. I don’t think it’s a good idea to cross the lines,” she said, shocking him with her refusal. He’d thought he might have to somehow dissuade her, but she’d beat him to it.

He couldn’t agree more. So why did he feel so disappointed?

“Are you sure?” he heard himself blurt. “There’s plenty of food. My mom cooks enough to feed a platoon. It’s a miracle none of us grew up to be fat. It’s probably a good thing we all work in jobs that are fairly physical, otherwise all that good eating might’ve gone straight to our waistlines.”

“I didn’t think guys cared about stuff like that,” she teased lightly.

“Are you kidding? We care. We just hide it better. No guy likes to see his gut hanging over his belt. And that’s the truth even if we don’t want to admit it.”

“Really? Well, from where I’m standing, you don’t have anything to worry about.”

The innocent comment made his mouth dry up. Had she been checking him out? Noticing him in the same ways that he couldn’t help but notice her? He started to stammer a response with all the eloquence of a prepubescent boy but Annabelle unwittingly saved him from himself when she sighed wistfully.

“I really like your mom and I’m betting dinner would be great, but it’s just not a good idea, you know?”

He did. Thank God, one of them was thinking clearly. “Don’t worry, I’ll let my mom down easily.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

No problem—except for the part where he wanted her to come to dinner. Wanted to ignore that blinking caution light in his brain. And wanted to get to know Annabelle in a way that was more than professional.

Dean wanted everything he’d told his son he absolutely didn’t want from Annabelle.

And that didn’t feel so good.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“WHERE’S your friend?” Mary Halvorsen asked as Dean stepped into the dining room for Sunday dinner. Her disappointed tone spoke volumes. “I set an extra place setting.”

“She’s not my friend, Mom. She’s my office manager. *An employee*. You don’t invite George or Paulo over for Sunday dinner. I don’t see why you felt the need to invite Annabelle.”

“George and Paulo have their own families to go home to,” Mary answered with a slight clip, making him feel like a kid again. How did mothers manage to hold on to that tone even after their kids were grown? “It’s obvious that young woman needs a family. She’s alone and needs someone to take her under their wing. Besides, she’s a friend of Dana’s so she’s practically family anyway.”

Dana smiled at Mary. “That’s so sweet but I know Annabelle and she’d never cross the line between employee and employer. It’s something she’s a bit of a stickler for.”

“Oh? How come?” Mary asked, intrigued by this bit of information. Truth be told, Dean was curious, too.

Dana must’ve realized she’d divulged too much for she looked to Sammy for help.

“Anyone hear from Josh and Tasha?” Sammy asked, giving Dana a subtle wink.

A shrewd light entered Mary’s eyes but she allowed the subject change, answering with good cheer. “I did this morning. They’re still in Punta Gorda but they’ll be leaving soon.”

“Why can’t they go to a normal place for a vacation?” Dean grumbled, mostly because Josh was his best welder. “What’s wrong with Hawaii? Or Oregon? South America is nothing but a jungle.”

“You know why. Tasha loves Punta Gorda and this was the first time she’s been able to get back since the wedding. She may have quit the Peace Corps to marry Josh and raise a family here but I think a part of her heart is still with those jungle people.”

Dana giggled at Mary’s use of *jungle people* but Dean was surly and didn’t find the humor in anything. He gestured to Sammy. “You get that cement guy to come down on his price?”

Brian, the Halvorsen patriarch, came in from his study and after clapping each of his sons on the shoulder, took his place at the head of the table. “Who are you using for cement?” he asked, his ears perking at the construction business talk, but Mary put her foot down.

“No shop talk at the table. You know that. Where’s Brandon? I expected to see him tonight. With Christopher gone to visit his mother for a few weeks I feel deserted by my only grandsons.”

Dean smiled. “Brandon is having dinner over at Jessie’s house tonight. He told me to tell you he promises not to enjoy anyone else’s mashed potatoes as much as yours.”

“Smart boy,” Mary said with no small amount of pride. “I like that Jessie. She’s a sweet girl, though watch that those hormones don’t go and get him into trouble.”

“Brandon’s a good kid. He won’t do anything stupid,” Dean said, though a frisson of alarm followed. Maybe he needed to have a talk with Brandon, make sure that they were using protection if they were sexually active. Ugh. The thought made him feel old. For some reason he’d always assumed Beth would be the one to tackle that conversation. She’d been good at handling the things that made Dean squirm.

Dinner conversation flowed around him and he participated with one-word answers, wishing he’d called off dinner with his parents. He wasn’t good company tonight. And it came down to one simple reason. He’d wanted Annabelle there. And that made him angry with himself.

The woman became more beautiful the more time he spent with her, which should’ve been impossible as she was already prettier than anyone had a right to be. Moments went by when he lost track of his thoughts simply because he’d caught a whiff of her skin or hair and an irrational desire to bury his nose in it always followed. He wondered how she got her skin to sparkle as if it had been dusted with sunshine, or how her brown eyes could appear softer than warm chocolate. Worse, he wanted to know what memory left that haunted look behind when it visited.

Heaving a private sigh, he returned to his mostly untouched plate and swore at his dilemma.

He had no business being attracted to Annabelle. The reasons were many and varied but the biggest reason had to do with his heart. When Beth had died, his heart died with her.

Annabelle deserved more than he could offer.

ANNABELLE, with Honey at her hip, walked into the small deli, and quickly found Dana in the back already sipping an iced tea.

“Starting without me?” Annabelle joked as she settled Honey into a baby chair.

“Sorry. I was parched.” Dana assessed Annabelle openly. “You look good. I see working with Dean agrees with you.”

“Having a steady paycheck agrees with me,” Annabelle corrected her but smiled, knowing Dana was just giving her a hard time. “So, I’ve joined the D-Day committee. Tell me, have I made a huge mistake or what?”

“Depends. I think it’s a good way to connect with the community. The whole town seems to be involved, but on the other hand, do you want to be *that* involved? I mean, no offense, AnnaB, but you’ve never been what anyone would call a joiner.”

“I’ve never been somewhere I felt welcome to join,” Annabelle answered. “It’s not like Hinkley was a wealth of open arms. When was the last time anyone cared what happened to the people living on Bleeter Street?”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Dana muttered. “God, I hate that place.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Annabelle’s thoughts went immediately to the single-wide mobile home of her childhood that smelled perpetually of stale beer and musty carpet no matter how many times she’d tried sweeping it out. Dana’s mobile had been two trailers down. Sometimes Annabelle could hear the muffled shouts that came from Dana’s family as they brawled within the claustrophobic space. The next day, Dana had often had bruises.

Dana broke the silence first, saying, “Well, good for you for joining. So, what has Mary put you in charge of?”

“Refreshments.” Annabelle shifted in her chair with a frown. “But I’m not quite sure what that entails. I was going to ask but the meeting got a little chaotic and I forgot. Those quilters are a wild bunch.”

“You’ll be in charge of bringing drinks to the construction crew. Lemonade, water, stuff like that. But don’t worry, you’ll have a bunch of kid volunteers at your disposal. It’s going to be like an old-fashioned barn-raising, except we’re not raising a barn, we’re relocating a mill.”

“I still can’t believe they’re going to do that,” Annabelle said. “Makes me nervous just thinking about it.”

“I wouldn’t worry. A company from out of town is going to do the actual moving and then once the mill is on the museum property, that’s when everyone else will get involved.”

“It’s hard to believe so many people care,” Annabelle said.

The two women caught each other’s stare. Dana reached over and grasped Annabelle’s free hand. “No place is perfect but Emmett’s Mill comes close. This is a town where people care about their neighbors. If I hadn’t seen it myself I wouldn’t have believed it. This town takes care of their own pretty well. It feels good.”

Annabelle was wary of anything that sounded too good to be true even if she wanted to believe. She tried pulling away but Dana wouldn’t let her.

“You’re so used to being on the defensive that you don’t know how to feel when no one is trying to attack you. I know. I felt the same way until I met Sammy. He showed me that not everyone has an agenda.”

Annabelle forced a laugh and pressed a kiss to Honey’s head as she gestured for Dana to stop. “I surrender. This talk is too serious for lunch. C’mon, I don’t want to spend my lunch hour arguing

the merits of Emmett's Mill. I agree with you, it's a great town, otherwise I wouldn't have moved here. Although," she said, pausing with pursed lips, "I think I got a prank call last night."

"What do you mean? Did they say anything?"

"No. But I could hear them breathing. It was probably just some kids playing a joke but it was a little creepy. I was weirded out for a while afterward but now that I think about it, it's probably nothing."

"Maybe you should tell Dean."

Annabelle rolled her eyes. "And why should I do that?"

"Because maybe he could look into it for you."

"Dana, I don't need a man to chase away bad-mannered teenagers. That's all it was. I almost didn't mention it."

Dana looked worried. "Well, I'm glad you did. If it happens again, please tell me you'll let Dean know. I don't like it."

"Fine," Annabelle grudgingly agreed, though only for Dana's benefit. A prank call was nothing to get worked up over. She felt silly for even mentioning it. And the fact that Dana wanted Dean to be her champion was transparent.

All this baby business had given Dana a one-track mind, it seemed. Annabelle would have to be an idiot not to see where this was going. She didn't need Dana's help in the matchmaking department. Annabelle could screw up her own love life, thank you very much. And as much as she ached to be a part of a wonderful family like the Halvorsens, it wasn't right to try to insert herself into a picture where she didn't belong.

Besides, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Dean was still nursing a broken heart. Annabelle wasn't about to sign up to be Dean's rebound woman. God, the thought gave her chills. Rebound women always got the shaft in the love department because people who never should've been together in the first place inevitably realize this fact and that's when everything falls apart. In that situation, someone ends up the loser. And that wasn't going to be Annabelle.

"In case I haven't told you, I'm so glad you moved here."

Annabelle looked up at the catch in her friend's voice. Dana blinked back tears but the sincerity in her eyes nearly bowled Annabelle over. They were each other's closest family and didn't need blood to bind them. Despite how she might mature and change, a part of Annabelle always felt like the kid living in the trailer park with next to nothing to call her own. Dana understood this because she struggled with it, too. "You don't have to tell me. I already know. And I'm glad, too. But I don't want you to be disappointed if my happy ending isn't the same as yours. I don't want you to worry about me, either. I'm a survivor and I'll always land on my feet. With or without a man to help me."

HE'D TRIED to be understanding, but each time Brandon saw Annabelle sitting at his mom's old desk he saw red. She was trespassing. And her kid was a nuisance, too. Brandon's dad had baby-proofed the entire office until it took a degree in engineering just to open a drawer. Brandon wanted things to go back to the way they were before *she* got there.

"Hi, Brandon," Annabelle said with a smile as if she wasn't aware that he could barely tolerate her. That baby actually smiled at him, too. Like they were working together to mock him with their nice routine. Annabelle looked around him to gesture toward Jessie. "This your girlfriend?"

He gritted his teeth, hating even to answer, but his dad kept getting after him for being rude so he jerked his head in the affirmative, but turned his attention to his dad. "Me and the guys are heading over to Buckley's for a few hours. That okay with you? I'll be home by curfew."

Dean paused to regard his son but then returned to his paperwork. "As long as your homework is done and you're home by ten o'clock. What did Coach say about your shoulder?"

Brandon rotated the muscle and shrugged. "It's nothing. Just a strain. The PT guy said there's nothing ripped or torn. Everything should be fine for the game tomorrow."

“That’s good but I don’t want you playing if you’re hurt,” his dad warned him. “One game isn’t going to kill you.”

“Dad, I’m not stupid. Don’t worry about it. Everything is fine.” He looked to Jessie, who had been quietly chatting with Annabelle, and gestured that it was time to leave. “See you later. Thanks, Dad,” he added over his shoulder as he left, Jessie right behind him. Once they were out of earshot, he nearly snarled at Jessie, who blinked in surprise at his tone. “Don’t get chummy with her. She’s not sticking around,” he said. “She’s just a charity case that my dad’s taken on because he felt bad.”

“That’s a crappy thing to say,” Jessie said, frowning. “What’s gotten into you?”

He drew a deep breath and apologized for snapping, but inside he felt no different. The sooner Annabelle Nichols was out of their lives, the less chance Brandon had of getting a stepmom. The thought made him queasy.

The only thing that kept him from totally freaking out was that his dad had promised him there was nothing going on between him and Annabelle. If only she wasn’t so pretty...and nice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANNABELLE had just snapped Honey into her car seat and slipped the key into the ignition when her old Ford Escort made a horrible racket that ended in a guttural wheeze.

“No, you will not do this to me,” Annabelle muttered, trying to turn the ignition again despite the ominous clicking it was making. “You were just given a clean bill of health last week after the oil change. There’s no reason for you to be acting like this,” she said, talking to the car as if it were a recalcitrant child rather than a machine that had just expired. She clenched her teeth and leaned into the steering wheel. “I do not accept this. You *will* turn over and we *will* drive home!”

Dean appeared beside her window with a puzzled expression. “Everything okay?”

“Yep. Just great,” she lied with a bright smile. “Just having a difference of opinion with my vehicle.”

“Come again?”

She shook her head and waved him on. “No worries. I’ll get this figured out. Go on home.”

But just as she feared, Dean wasn’t about to leave her without knowing she had reliable transportation, and, while that chivalrous routine was endearing, she really didn’t want him to feel obligated to stay. She glanced at her watch. Dana was working tonight. It was a five-mile walk from the office to her craptastic duplex and it was already getting dark. She considered her meager checking account balance and immediately discarded the thought of calling a tow truck.

“Annabelle, pop your hood.”

“No, it’s okay, really,” Annabelle called out, but Dean refused to budge and gestured impatiently. “Well, uh, okay. But I’m sure it’s nothing.”

The latch snapped and Dean propped the hood. Needing to feel useful, she grabbed the flashlight from her glove compartment and climbed out of the car to stand beside Dean as he inspected the engine. She peered into the coiled machinery and wondered if he knew what the heck he was doing. Thad hadn’t been much of a mechanic but he had always liked to pretend he was.

“Fan’s not broken and your battery cables are fine. But we’ll have it towed to Mountain Motors and see what Jonas can make of it.” He carefully closed the hood. “I’ll take you home. Go ahead and grab your stuff and I’ll get Honey.”

She wanted to decline politely, but that would really be stupid. There was no way she was going to walk five miles with a toddler who was a half hour away from becoming really cranky, not to mention, Annabelle wouldn’t be able to see two feet in front of her once she headed out of town. She might end up in a ditch or something. “Thanks,” Annabelle said, though it came out not at all grateful sounding. He didn’t call her on it and she was at least glad for that.

Honey gurgled with pleasure as Dean strapped her into the back of his king-cab monster diesel truck and then Annabelle hopped in, trying not to notice how comfortable his ride was in comparison to her own. Of course it was comfortable. It was practically brand-new, while hers was...not.

There was nothing wrong with her little Escort. It was her first car and she’d bought it with her own money. It probably just needed a tune-up. Everything would look better in the morning. The thought was very Scarlett O’Hara-esque of her, but sometimes that Southern belle had had the right of things.

“Where do you live?” Dean asked, pulling out of the driveway and onto the highway.

“Uh, just on the outskirts of town, in those duplexes off Morning Glory Road.”

He appeared troubled but didn’t comment. The first time she’d seen the duplex she’d nearly cried. But she’d lived in worse and with a little elbow grease, she’d rationalized that it could be very cozy.

As they pulled up to the duplex, Annabelle grimaced. Well, it was safe to say the duplex—despite her efforts—had never quite reached her aspirations.

She opened the passenger door and dropped to the ground from the dizzying height of the truck, then went to her front door to unlock it while Dean unbuckled Honey from her car seat. She accepted Honey from his arms while he unlatched the car seat from the truck. She tried taking the car seat, too, but he wouldn't let her and simply followed her into the house.

She tried not to cringe when she caught him openly assessing her unit with a critical eye.

"Who's your landlord?" he asked, his hands going to his hips as he stared at a crack in the ceiling. "Is this structurally sound?"

She laughed nervously, but she'd wondered that herself. "It's fine. You're paranoid. Thanks for the lift. I'm sure Dana can take us tomorrow."

"No need. I'll come get you. I have to come by this way anyway."

"No, you don't. You're being ridiculous. I don't need you to be my taxi. Dana can get us or maybe Sammy."

There was a loud bang and Annabelle jumped. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have reacted like that, but having Dean in her space put her on edge. She felt him judging her and her humble home. This place was a palace compared to where she'd grown up. If he thought so poorly of her duplex what would he think of her background if he knew? She tried not to let it bother her, for who really cared what others thought? But knowing that Dean might harbor the slightest amount of pity toward her was enough to make her defensive.

"What was that?" he growled, moving past her to peer out the small kitchen window. "Are your neighbors rowdy? Have they given you any trouble?"

Annabelle sighed. It was sweet, really, that he was worried. But her neighbors were nothing compared to the riff-raff she was used to putting up with. Hell, she could handle those yahoos next door with her eyes closed. "Dean, everything's fine. Thank you. I appreciate your concern but it's unnecessary."

He paused and for a wild moment Annabelle wondered if he was going to grab Honey and her, toss them both back into the truck and burn rubber out of there. No doubt that's what he wanted to do. Dana had all but said the same thing when she'd first seen the place, but Annabelle was determined to make things better on her own.

He must've read that in her eyes for he backed down—grudgingly. With one caveat. "I'm picking you up. Be ready at 8:00 a.m."

And then he closed the door behind him with instructions to use the dead bolt when he was gone.

She slid the dead bolt into place and shut the thin drapes across the kitchen window to create some semblance of privacy before making Honey and herself a quick bite to eat.

After a shower, she put Honey to bed, doublechecking the window latches before she turned off the light, and then she took a seat by the window to stare into the night.

The duplex was squalid—not even three passes with a rented steam cleaner could get the carpets completely clean—but the view was beautiful. From the ridge above Emmett's Mill, the lights of downtown twinkled like stars and the moon illuminated the dark sky with a soft glow.

A sigh escaped her as her thoughts returned to Dean. He wasn't a man of many words, but that was okay. Sammy seemed to do most of the talking for everyone. But Annabelle appreciated a man who spent less time talking and more time working. Her mom had been a sucker for sweet talkers. Poor Mom. Always looking for a knight in shining armor to rescue her from the way her life had turned out.

Stop it. Shaking off her melancholy, Annabelle reached for her mail and started to sift through it. She was still receiving the previous tenant's mail but the landlord hadn't much cared. They had left in the middle of the night, skipping out on the last month's rent. So Annabelle had had to pay two months in advance. Tossing the misdirected mail in a growing pile to return to the post office, she got to the last envelope in her small stack and slid it open, barely registering the label from the district attorney's office in Hinkley.

Unfolding the letter, she scanned the contents and her heart began to thunder uncomfortably in her chest as three simple words scared the living hell out of her.

Out on parole.

The phone rang, jangling her nerves. She rose on unsteady feet to answer it.

“Hello?”

Nothing. But Annabelle could hear someone breathing. Damn kids. She gripped the phone tighter and said, “This is juvenile. Do your parents know—”

“Bitch!” And then the line went dead.

Annabelle drew back in startled silence. Swallowing, she glanced out the front window before hanging up the receiver. Kids, she thought shakily. With a mean streak.

Suppressing a shiver, she double-checked the flimsy lock on the front door but still felt exposed. Forcing a short laugh, she told herself she was overreacting, but her gaze strayed to the letter on the coffee table and her heart beat painfully against everything she was trying to convince herself of.

A prank call. No big deal. She could handle it.

DEAN ARRIVED at Annabelle’s place a little early, but he hadn’t slept well the night before and found himself up earlier than usual. Downing a quick cup of coffee and burning his taste buds in the process, he made the short drive to Annabelle’s and then wondered if he should wait outside or knock on the door.

After a minute of arguing with himself on the merits of waiting or knocking, in the end, he went to the front door and tapped on it hesitantly.

A few moments later, Annabelle peered around the door frame clutching a towel, and he cursed his impatience. He should’ve waited in the truck.

“Are you early?” Annabelle asked, biting her lip. “Or am I late?”

“I’m sorry, Annabelle. I’m early. I’ll just wait in the truck until you’re ready.” He turned to leave, positive he felt the tips of his ears reddening when she called after him.

“It’s okay. I was running a bit behind anyway. I overslept. Why don’t you come in and keep an eye on Honey for me while I take a quick shower? It’ll be much faster if I don’t have to take her with me. She likes to play with the shampoo when I’m not looking.”

“Uh...okay,” he said, though his Adam’s apple bobbed uncomfortably in his throat as he dutifully tried to avoid the imagery jumping to his overactive imagination. Annabelle with her lush curves and creamy skin—naked. The blood rushed from his ears to his groin and he almost did an about-face. But then he saw Annabelle grab Honey from her crib as the toddler rubbed at her eyes, smiling sleepily when she spotted him, and his heart warmed in a pleasant way. The kid was too darn cute. A person would have to be made of stone not to like Honey Nichols.

“Look who’s here,” Annabelle said, pressing a kiss to Honey’s wild hair. “Mama’s going to take a quick shower. Can you sit with Dean for a minute? I won’t be long. I promise.”

Honey didn’t even hesitate but went straight into Dean’s arms. Annabelle’s expression faltered, surprise at Honey’s reaction evident in her eyes. She met Dean’s gaze with a puzzled smile. “She must really like you. I’ve never seen her so open with anyone. Not even her da—” Annabelle stopped, plainly disturbed by how much information she was sharing. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“Take your time,” Dean said, holding Honey against his chest and walking the perimeter of the small duplex as Annabelle disappeared. The bathroom door closed and Dean busied himself with studying her unit.

Despite Annabelle’s attempts at livening up the place with a few pictures here and there and a vibrant handmade afghan draped across the top of the faded sofa, the duplex maintained a stale atmosphere that spoke of the countless inhabitants before her who hadn’t cared as much as she did for their living conditions. Apparently, upkeep wasn’t the landlord’s top priority. Peering out the window, he realized it didn’t have a screen. Drawing away, his mouth formed a tight line as his blood pressure rose. Window screens were required in residential rentals. He wondered who owned the property and

how hard it might be to find out. His cell phone was in his hand before he realized what he was doing. Seconds before he got more involved than he wanted to be, he came to his senses and snapped the phone shut. He glanced at Honey with a light smile. "Let's get your seat in the truck, kiddo. We can wait for your mom there."

It was only a few minutes later that Annabelle appeared at the front door, locking it before making her way to the truck gingerly on spindly heels, wearing another of her short skirts that showed off a lean pair of smooth pale legs. Dean groaned and looked away. He didn't know how he was supposed to keep his mind in neutral when she kept shoving it into overdrive. She had to know that she was driving him crazy with those flashes of cleavage peeking out from behind that flimsy V-necked blouse and those impossibly short skirts that rode up her legs.

Dean swallowed with difficulty but managed to keep his attention on the road with ruthless determination.

"You need screens on those windows," he said, startling her with his gruff tone. "It's dangerous with a baby in the house."

"I know. That's why I keep the windows closed on that side."

"That's no solution. Who's your landlord?"

Annabelle sighed. "I don't know. I go through a property management company, Grafton Realty. Besides, I've called the manager and he told me that the owner isn't interested in replacing the screens because the tenants keep ripping them out. He said if I want screens I have to buy them."

Dean balked. "That's bullshit."

She shrugged as if she was used to this sort of thing. "It's not that big a deal. We just work around it."

"Honey could fall. This isn't something that can be ignored, Annabelle." He earned a sharp look, but he didn't care. He already hated the idea of Honey and Annabelle living in that place because of the neighbors on the other side. They looked a little rough.

"It's not your concern. Thank you, anyway," Annabelle replied curtly, sending him the clear message that she didn't like to be treated like a pet project. "Besides, with the weather turning soon, I won't have much need for open windows anyway."

"There are liability issues," he argued. "It's not as simple as you just choosing not to open your windows. And then there's also the issue of the landlord refusing to provide the basics of his responsibilities to his tenant. My dad used to own plenty of rental properties. Trust me, I know all the work that goes into owning them. When I was growing up, my brothers and I spent many of our weekends helping Dad do repairs. Your landlord is a bad one," he finished.

"Be that as it may, I don't need you poking your nose into my business. Bad landlords have a tendency to kick out their troublemaker tenants, if you catch my drift."

"That would be a blessing," Dean muttered.

"Not for Honey and me. In case you haven't noticed, there's a shortage of rentals in Emmett's Mill. We were lucky to find this place."

Dean opened his mouth, ready to argue some more just for the sake of keeping his mind occupied, but she had a valid point. He thought of his expansive home and the two spare bedrooms gathering dust, but before he could continue in that direction, he shook himself loose of that particular brand of crazy. Annabelle and Honey could not move in with him and Brandon. For one, Brandon would declare a mutiny and two, it was just plain stupid.

Focus on what you can fix, Dean told himself. Like window screens and broken cars.

Yeah, Halvorsen...stick to those.

CHAPTER NINE

“SUGAR?” Annabelle exclaimed, staring in dismay at Jonas, the head mechanic at Mountain Motors as he wiped the grease and motor oil from his fingers. “How does sugar get into the gas tank? Is that something that happens naturally?” she asked, knowing she was teetering on the edge of desperate with her questioning. Deep down she knew the answer but she was praying she was wrong. She wasn’t.

“Uh, no.” Jonas shook the dirty mop he called a head of hair regretfully. “Someone put it there. Screwed up your fuel intake valve, too. Possibly even your fuel pump.”

Annabelle groaned but didn’t have time to cry. Her lunch was only an hour and she had to get back to the office. “Let’s get down to brass tacks. Two questions. What’s this going to cost me and how long will it take to fix it?”

Jonas sucked his front teeth as he mentally counted the beans in his head and answered, “About \$800, give or take a few.”

“A few what?”

“Hunnerd.”

It might as well be a million. She didn’t have it. “Right.” She drew a deep breath, her brain whirring fast. If it weren’t for bad luck she wouldn’t have any. “I don’t have that kind of cash right now,” she said, going straight to the point. “But, uh, we could work out a deal, like trade for something?”

Jonas’s eyes widened and he shook his head in alarm. “You’re pretty and all but I’m a married man. I don’t reckon my wife would take too kindly to any sort of *arrangement*, Miss Annabelle. I’m sorry.”

Annabelle’s cheeks burned as she grasped what Jonas thought she was offering. “God, no, Jonas. I didn’t mean *that*. I just meant if you had some office work you needed some help with, computer work, or, hell, I don’t know, maybe someone to clean up a bit, then I could help out in that way in exchange for the repair.”

Jonas relaxed but he shook his head again. “Sorry, no computer. We do everything by hand, and, well, we already have a cleaning lady who comes once a month to scrub the toilets and such. We aren’t that picky and she does a good enough job. I’m right sorry, Miss Annabelle.” He paused, then added with a grin that showed off the gap in his front teeth, “I won’t charge you for the diagnostic or the tow. It’s on the house. I’ll even take it back to your place for you. I heard you don’t live too far out of town.”

She swallowed around the lump in her throat even as she fought to keep her voice strong and bright. “Don’t be silly. You performed a service. You should be paid for it. You’re not running a charity, Jonas. It’s a business. How much do I owe you?”

Jonas sighed heavily as if he hated to tell her. “Seventy-five.”

She winced privately but grabbed her checkbook. “Check okay?”

“Of course. I know you’re good for it. Dean Halvorsen wouldn’t have hired you if he didn’t think you were good folk.” She smiled tightly and handed him the check. He gave it a cursory glance before saying, “Listen, when you get the money, you bring the car back and I’ll give you the newcomer ten percent discount off the total repair. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you, Jonas. Just leave the keys in the car when you drop it off.”

“Sure thing, Miss Annabelle. Take care.”

DEAN WAS packing up the last of his work tools when Sammy walked over to him, his expression puzzled. “You know anything about what went wrong with Annabelle’s car?”

Dean shook his head. “No. Why?”

“Dana just told me that Annabelle said someone put sugar in her gas tank.”

Dean stopped to stare at his brother. “Sugar?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty deliberate. Who’d want to do that?”

“I don’t know.” But he agreed with Sammy. Whoever did it meant to do something mean.

“Dana already took Annabelle and Honey home for the night so you don’t need to take them,” Sammy said, his expression still worried. “I gotta tell you, brother. This bothers me.”

“Me, too,” Dean admitted, glancing at Sammy. “You said something about Annabelle and Dana coming from troubled backgrounds. Anything I should know about?” Sammy’s silence was telling. Dean sighed. “Sammy, if she’s in some kind of trouble...”

“You gotta ask her, man. Dana swore me to secrecy and it’s nothing that’s Annabelle’s fault, but she should be the one to tell people if she wants them to know. Understand?”

“Yeah. I do.”

Sammy nodded, his relief evident. But as Dean went to climb into his truck, Sammy stopped him, his grave expression distinctly at odds with his usual jocular attitude. “No matter what, she’s a good person. Loyal to a fault I’d say. In some ways, she’s a lot like Beth.”

At the mention of his dead wife’s name, Dean tried not to stiffen. He knew Sammy was just trying to draw a parallel, but Dean was like a wounded bear inside when it came to the memory of his wife. Sometimes he couldn’t help but lash out at the people trying to reach out to him. “They’re nothing alike,” he said, pushing away the ache he felt inside. “And never will be.”

KNEES TUCKED into her chest, Annabelle willed the panic away. Someone had deliberately sabotaged her car. No one knew her here, which led her to surmise that someone from Hinkley had done this. And there was only one person she could imagine who hated her so much that they’d do such a thing.

Buddy. Her gaze strayed to the slip of paper lying on her coffee table. He was out on parole after serving eight years of his sixteen-year sentence. The prison system’s reward for good behavior.

And if it had been Buddy, this little stunt was simply a calling card. An ominous reminder that they had a score to settle, and he was ready to collect.

Shivering, she drew her knees tighter and squeezed her eyes shut to block out the fear that when she least expected it, his face would pop into view. Snarling, or worse, grinning with his jackal smile as he stalked her with revenge in his heart.

A knock at the front door nearly sent her hurtling to the floor in one startled movement as her heartbeat thundered in her ears. It was too late for visitors and it wasn’t like her neighbors were the sort to borrow a cube of butter. Her eyes watered and she wiped at them angrily. *Get hold of yourself!* It was highly unlikely Buddy was on the other side of that door, she told herself as she walked on wobbly legs to answer. “Who is it?” she asked, her voice still a bit high-pitched to sound normal.

“Dean.”

Relief was instant, but it served to make her knees even less stable. “What are you doing here so late?” she asked, opening the door and letting him in.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?” Annabelle asked, sincerely puzzled. “Is this about the new phone directory? I know I didn’t ask but your Rolodex is outdated. It’s a pain to go through and try to update those little cards when everything today is done digitally. The computer program I downloaded can be hot synced with your PDA—”

“I’m not talking about the damn phone directory. I want to know who would want to hurt you and Honey.”

She swallowed, stunned at his blunt question and how easily he managed to zero in on her biggest fear. Her eyes widened and she shook her head. “I don’t know,” she lied. The less Dean knew about her childhood in Hinkley, the better off he’d be. It was her burden to bear. No one else’s.

Crossing into the living room, she curled into a ball on the sofa. “It was probably some dumb kid playing a prank,” she said, trying to throw him off the true reason for her fear. “I admit, it’s a

pretty nasty prank.” And an expensive one, she almost added, but didn’t want him to offer to pay for it because she could almost sense that’s where he was going. “And here I thought small towns were full of nothing but nice people. Hmm, guess not.”

Dean exhaled, regarding her with that steady gaze, seeming to pierce right through her flimsy excuse until she fought the urge to squirm. “Are you in trouble?” he asked quietly.

She laughed, but the sound was ragged even to her own ears. “No more than anyone else who just found out someone had tried to mix baking ingredients in her gas tank. This is more of a nuisance than anything else. It really puts a cramp in my travel plans.” She tried joking but, damn the man, he wasn’t laughing. Suddenly tired of her own game, Annabelle dropped the act. “Dean...I don’t know who might’ve done this. All I know is I’m without a vehicle in a town without public transit. That’s what I’m focusing on right now. Okay?”

“I’ll help you.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Why not?”

She sighed, wishing for a millisecond that her principles weren’t so ironclad, that she could just allow herself to sink into his strong arms, even for a moment, to let someone else shoulder the weight crushing her. But it was a foolish wish because Annabelle could never do that. She’d never allow herself to depend on someone else so completely. “Because I’m not the kind of woman who looks for someone to save her. I will save myself. I’ve been doing it for years and I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“I have a car you can borrow while yours is in the shop,” Dean said as if she hadn’t just spoken. “It’s in good shape and you need a reliable car.”

“What did I just say? Stop trying to save me! I can’t borrow one of your vehicles. What would people think?”

He looked at her incredulously. “Who cares?”

“I do.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that you worry about all the wrong things?”

She drew back. “Excuse me?”

“If you’re so worried about what people think why do you dress like you do?”

“I beg your pardon?” She could feel her cheeks pinkening as a wave of mortification rolled over her. Suddenly, she was back in high school and the popular girls were criticizing her wardrobe. It was stupid to draw the parallel—she was not in high school any longer—but the feeling his statement evoked was pretty much the same. “Who are you to criticize my clothes?”

“Your boss,” he answered bluntly and she could only stare. Her momentary silence prompted him to continue though Annabelle was quite certain she didn’t want to hear any more of what Dean Halvorsen had to say.

“If you don’t want men to stare at your breasts don’t put them on a platter. If you don’t want people to think that you’re less than who you are, don’t give them an opportunity. You come to work decked out in hooker heels and tight tanks that leave nothing to the imagination and then act all indignant when men like Aaron Eagle come sniffing around.”

“I never encouraged that man’s attention. If you recall I was quite clear on how I stood in regards to his advances.” Stung, she blinked back angry tears. “And, excuse me, but I didn’t realize my wardrobe was so offensive. I thought I was dressed nicely,” she added, the starch in her tone disintegrating with a watery hiccup that made her cheeks burn that much more hotly for the pitiful sound. Grinding the moisture from her eyes, she pulled the afghan her mother had knitted from the top of the sofa and tucked it around herself as if the soft yarn could protect her from further insult, hoping the gesture was enough to communicate that he was no longer welcome.

But he didn’t leave. Damn the man. She sent a nasty look his way. “Anything else you have a problem with? My hair perhaps? Or my eyes? Maybe those aren’t to your liking, either.” Too bad.

There was nothing she could do about those. Not that she could change her wardrobe, either. It wasn't as if she had room in her budget for new clothes.

A long enough moment passed between them that Annabelle started to feel the silence as if it were a living, breathing thing and she wasn't happy with its presence. She risked another glance his way, this time not as angry but still hurt, and she caught the open chagrin in his expression. She softened, knowing without having to hear the words that he felt bad, but she wasn't ready to make the first move. Luckily, she didn't have to.

Dean drew a deep breath. "You were dressed nicely. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that. Hell, I suck when it comes to saying things the right way."

"You got that right," Annabelle agreed softly, not quite ready to let him off the hook. She eyed him curiously. "So, what did you mean? Do you really hate the way I dress?"

"That answer is complicated."

"Try simplifying."

"It's like this..." He drifted toward her, but she remained rooted where she stood. Soon, she was staring into a pair of eyes that were far too extraordinary to be called brown as they flared with brilliant flecks of hazel. She forgot herself and why she needed to keep her distance as he spoke again. "Annabelle, you have to know that you're a beautiful woman with a stunning figure, but that's just what's on the surface and I know that's probably all a lot of people see. I strive to keep things professional between us, but some days when you're dressed like that...hell, woman, I'm just a man and all I can think of is you and it kills me. I shouldn't be thinking of you in that way. I'm your boss."

His eyes had the look of a man tortured by his admission, ashamed even by his perceived weakness, and Annabelle had a startling revelation. He was fighting as hard as she was to keep the lines drawn, but there seemed a current flowing between them that kept pulling them near to one another.

Annabelle was falling even though she was standing still, which was patently ridiculous. She realized with a breathy start that her gaze feasted on the promise of his lips, aching to know what it felt like to have them pressed against her own. Valid points. He made valid points, a voice in her head reminded her even as her feet seemed to move in the same direction, pulled on an invisible current toward one inevitable course.

"I like my clothes," she said in a soft voice, looking up into Dean's gorgeous eyes and wondering how she had never noticed their unusual color before this moment. "And I'm not going to change."

"Yes, you will," he murmured with a low growl that excited her in a way that defied explanation. His arms closed around her in a perfect fit, their bodies molding against one another until Annabelle struggled to remember why this was a bad idea. This was safety, a different voice whispered. This was home. No, this was a man who was off-limits and dangerous.

But it was too late. She was a goner. Probably hadn't even had a chance from the moment he came toward her. Her fate had been sealed. But as far as fates go, she thought weakly, as his lips touched hers in a firm exploration that sparked little tingles up and down her body, this isn't half-bad.

Shoot, if she was going to send her life to hell in a handbag, having Dean ride shotgun wasn't a terrible idea.

What did she have to lose?

CHAPTER TEN

DEAN WAS a bundle of nerves. He wasn't accustomed to acting like an idiot. Usually, he was the responsible one. The one who shouldered the family load without complaint.

And yet, here he was, itching from nervous apprehension over one stupid move.

What the hell was he thinking? That was an easy one to answer. He hadn't been thinking. He didn't know what came over him. It was as if he were under a spell or something. Yeah. That was it. A spell of stupidity. A wave of disgust rolled over him and he wondered if this was what happened to middle-aged men when they hit a midlife crisis. First comes the motorcycle, then the younger woman. Except, he'd skipped the wheels and gone straight to the hot babe.

Scrubbing his hands down his face, he tried focusing on the day ahead. Dana was bringing Annabelle and for that he was grateful. He needed a little time to get hold of himself. He'd spun away from Annabelle the moment his brain reengaged with a resounding *What the hell are you doing?* and after stammering some kind of lame excuse he'd practically run out of the house.

Judging by the stunned expression on her face, he doubted that was the reaction she'd expected. It probably made her feel like dirt, but he couldn't help it. His feet had gone on autopilot and his body had had no choice but to follow. He'd screwed up. Dropped the ball. And now he had the aftermath to deal with, which would be awkward as hell as soon as she got here.

His heart pounded as the sound of Dana's car in the driveway told him Annabelle had arrived. Under normal circumstances, he would've gone out to help with Honey, but he wanted to postpone this face-to-face as long as possible. *Coward*. He forced his attention to the bid sheet and not to the sound of footsteps coming toward the building.

But as the moment he'd been dreading arrived, Annabelle shocked the hell out of him when she did the exact opposite of what he expected.

She smiled as if nothing had happened.

"Good morning," she said, placing Honey's diaper bag in the corner and Honey on the floor while she constructed the playpen. "Don't forget you have that lunch meeting with that new concrete guy over at The Grill and Brandon is going to be late tonight. He's going over to Jessie's after school."

Startled by the ease with which she pretended nothing had happened between them, Dean could only stare for a moment until Honey climbed into his lap and his arms went around the toddler as she grabbed at the items scattered across his desk. So, was this how they should address the issue? Pretend?

It should've been the answer to his dilemma. Obviously, they were on the same page. Neither thought what they did was appropriate, and it was better just to let it go. So, why did he suddenly want to talk about it?

It didn't feel right to act as though nothing had changed. Or maybe it hadn't for her, which left him feeling like the complete sap for letting it affect him in such a visceral manner.

Jerking his gaze away from Annabelle, his mouth softened as he looked at Honey. She smelled of baby shampoo and powder. Her silky blond curls hung in lazy ringlets against rosebud cheeks and he was reminded of something far more pressing than his momentary lapse in judgment.

"You should file a police report," he said to Annabelle as she finished with the playpen. She straightened and offered a brittle smile but little else, which told him that despite her seemingly sunny disposition, she was rattled as well. "I don't feel comfortable knowing someone deliberately sabotaged your car."

Annabelle laughed and brushed past him accidentally, sending his whole body on alert, as she traveled to the file cabinet. "You worry too much. I told you it was probably just a prank. I'm not going to bother the authorities over something like this. Besides, it's not your problem, okay?"

Polite but firm, the message was loud and clear. Back off.

Honey voiced her opinion with a string of nonsensical babble and he renewed his efforts. “What if it hadn’t been sugar in your tank but your brake line cut, or your tires? What if you were driving down the road with Honey and you careened down a cliff? There’re bigger things at stake here, don’t you think?” Annabelle blanched and Dean knew he’d made his point. “What’s it going to hurt to talk with a deputy? Besides, you might need a police report for your insurance company to cover the damages.”

“Insurance covers stuff like this?”

“Some. Depends on your policy. Did you get full coverage or just liability?”

“Full.”

“Well, then, I’d say it’s probably covered under comprehensive. I’d bet you have a \$500 deductible, though.”

She chewed her lip. “Well, that’s a little better than the \$800 Jonas quoted me,” she said, thinking out loud. “All right. I’ll make a report but not because I’m worried or anything. Just for the insurance. No one is out to get me or Honey,” she assured him, but the subtle quiver told him differently. Since she’d agreed to make the report, he decided to stop pressing the issue. The end result was to his liking so he figured he’d let the rest go. For now.

“Good.” He checked his watch. Time to go. He had appointments one on top of another and he was glad. Annabelle might be able to pretend that they hadn’t locked lips, but he was having a hard time doing the same. Now that he’d tasted those plump, pouting lips, it was all he could do not to lean in for another. She smelled like a sexy fruit salad—if there was such a thing—and it was hard to ignore the sensory overload.

He stood and gently handed Honey over to Annabelle, swallowing the impulse to babble all sorts of ridiculous stuff about last night, and headed for the door.

Her voice—oddly forlorn and at odds with the strong woman he knew her as—stopped him.

“I know you didn’t mean to kiss me.”

He wished that were true.

“It was probably just one of those spur-of-the-moment, high-emotion kind of things. I know it didn’t mean anything.”

A part of him desperately wished he’d felt nothing but uncomplicated desire as their lips touched. It would simplify the situation by half. But he knew the truth. He’d never been the kind of man who could be intimate without involving his heart. Sex for the sake of physical release never felt right.

Closing his eyes for a split second, he opened them as he turned to face her. She stood, cradling Honey on her hip, backlit by the sun coming in from the far window, and his throat closed at the sheer beauty of the picture she made. He couldn’t lie. “Kissing you was my choice.” *And given half a chance I’d do it again.*

ANNABELLE stared, not quite sure she’d heard that right. But the tight set of Dean’s jaw and the piercing look in his brown eyes told her differently.

“So why do you look as if you just admitted to something awful?” she asked, putting Honey into her playpen for the time being.

“It *is* awful,” he said simply, his gaze tracking her movements, sliding over her like a caress. “It’s inappropriate given our working relationship, but it wasn’t an accident. There’s no sense in lying. I wanted to kiss you.”

Heat curled deep in her belly and pooled in her pelvis but she managed to nod. She’d wanted to kiss him, too. But where did that leave them? The question must’ve flashed in her eyes.

“We go back to the way things were. It shouldn’t be that hard. We hardly know each other, right?”

“Right.”

“So, we just tuck this incident away in our private thoughts and leave it there. We both know it can’t go any further and there’s no sense in chasing after something that’s doomed to fail.”

Very sensible. But her chest felt leaden. Had she hoped for more? Flustered by her own reaction, she offered a breezy smile that she certainly didn’t feel, and nodded. “Absolutely, that’s the best idea. I’m completely on board with that. Much less complicated. Good thinking.”

He eyed her with suspicion and she wondered if she was smiling too brightly to be taken at face value. What did it matter what he thought? They’d agreed to a course of action and it seemed the most logical given their circumstances, so whatever else she was feeling—disappointment, chagrin, frustration—would just have to dissipate on its own.

“Glad we agree,” he said slowly, though he didn’t make a move to leave as she’d expected. In fact, the air between them felt heavy with unfinished business and Annabelle knew what was missing.

“Just one question,” she started, her heart rate kicking a tango in her chest as she closed the short distance. He regarded her with wary interest, his whole body tense. She swallowed, wondering what the hell had gotten into her.

“Yeah?”

The tight scratch of his voice rubbed against her raw nerves and sent heat curling through her body.

“What if I didn’t want to pretend that nothing happened? What if...I wanted to try it again?”

Dean’s eyes darkened, and she could tell he fought a war against himself. She sensed the battle between propriety and desire, and the fact that he struggled made her want him all the more. It was insane and went against every principle that she stood for. Don’t lust after your boss. The rule was very simple. Sticking to it was not so easy.

“Annabelle...”

“I know.” She lifted on her tiptoes and did the very thing she knew she should never do. But as her lips touched his, she wondered if being good was overrated.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“ANNABELLE? Did you hear me, dear?”

Annabelle started, embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming during a committee meeting by none other than Dean’s mother, Mary. She adjusted Honey on her lap in an attempt to look as though the baby had needed her attention. Shameful to use her own daughter that way, she thought ruefully and pressed a quick kiss on Honey’s head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that,” she admitted, feeling her cheeks heat. She couldn’t very well tell Dean’s mother that the reason she wasn’t paying attention was because she was replaying that day’s activities in her head. Repeatedly. Well, mostly only a few select moments. But they were really good moments.

“Would you like us to bring the lemonade canisters to Dean’s office or to your house?”

“The office would be fine,” she murmured.

“They’re heavy once you fill them,” Mary said, then looked to Dean. “You can help her, right, son?”

Dean caught Annabelle’s gaze and she felt the power of his stare all the way down to her toes. Before she knew it, a smile was curving her lips and all but announcing to the room that something was going on between them.

“No need,” Annabelle said quickly, dropping the smile in favor of something more businesslike. “I’m sure I can manage on my own. I’m stronger than I look.”

A wave of light laughter filled the room but all Annabelle could see was Dean as he told his mother that he’d help in any way the committee might need him.

He was an incredible kisser. Sweet, yet firm; gentle yet demanding. He’d possessed her mouth with nothing less than mastery and Annabelle had had to fight to keep her expression carefully schooled lest it drift into something akin to blissfully dreamy.

“You look like you have something juicy to share,” Dana whispered out of the corner of her mouth. “Tell now? Or later?”

“What are you talking about?” Annabelle said, trying to bluff, but Dana wasn’t buying. She tried harder to throw her best friend off the scent. “I’m just happy to be involved. Feels good, you know?”

Dana nodded but a shrewd light shone from her eyes. “Mmm-hmm” was all she said, but Annabelle breathed a secret sigh of relief that Dana didn’t seem inclined to press just yet. The operative word being *yet*. That was okay. By the time Dana got around to squeezing something out of Annabelle, whatever was going on between her and Dean would likely be over. Annabelle wasn’t a fool. Well, at the moment she was certainly acting like one, mooning over her boss, but in the long run, she knew where things really stood. This was a fling. Plain and simple. Ordinarily, Annabelle wasn’t one to play that game, but there was something about Dean that robbed her of the ability to think straight. Especially when he hit her with those smoldering glances that all but screamed he was thinking of one thing.

And that should piss her off. She hated being objectified. But coming from Dean it didn’t feel like something cheap and tawdry, though a part of her was petrified that it was exactly that, but she was too googly-eyed to notice it for what it truly was. *Ugh*. She rubbed her temple as her own dizzying logic sent a stabbing pain straight to her brain.

Somehow the meeting ended and she managed to make all the appropriate head bobs and agreements though she couldn’t for the life of her recall what had been the topic of discussion. Something about refreshments? Cucumber sandwiches? Who eats those? Sounded dreadful. Hope she’d heard that wrong.

They filed out of the community hall, which was really a glorified barn that had been retrofitted for the town’s purpose of a meeting center, and Annabelle said her goodbyes to everyone, hoisting

Honey higher on her hip as she awaited Dean. She hated being dependent on him, but they'd arrived together, and he had the car seat in the truck. It didn't seem right to arrive and leave together. She didn't want people to talk.

"Maybe Dana could give us a ride home," Annabelle suggested, hating the nervous quality of her voice. When he looked at her oddly, she explained with a fair amount of awkwardness. "Well, you know, I don't want you to think that I expect you to drive us around all the time. Dana and Sammy would surely take us home if I asked. And, I don't want people to think..." She blushed. "You know. In the absence of facts, people make up stories."

Instead of answering, Dean gently took Honey from her arms and said, "Are you hungry, monkey? I am. Let's get something to eat. All that talk of cucumber and aram sandwiches has made me hungry for some real food." He turned to Annabelle with a twitching grin. "You coming? Or would you rather stand out here in the dark discussing the merits of the Emmett's Mill gossip grapevine? Which, I might add, started talking the moment Sammy hired you. Since there's nothing we can do about it, let's eat."

Smart. And utterly frustrating because he was right.

"I'm uncomfortable with everyone knowing my business," she said quietly when she caught up to him. "I'd rather whatever is happening between us—if anything—is kept between you and me. People might not look at me very kindly if they thought I was trying to move in on Emmett's Mill's favorite widower."

"No one would think that."

"Yes, they would. I know how people think about strangers in small towns. Guilty until proven innocent and I don't want anyone to judge me or Honey."

He shot her a quick look that was incredibly protective and warmed her heart in a silly way. "No one is going to say a word about either of you. I wouldn't allow it."

Dean buckled Honey into her seat and Annabelle climbed into the truck, struck by how comfortable this moment was. They felt like a family. Shaking off that ridiculous—and dangerous—thought, she strapped on her seat belt and exhaled a short breath. "Well, thanks, but you can just take us home. I'll just throw in a pot pie for me and Honey to share."

"How about you let me take you and Honey to dinner?"

Annabelle balked. "Out? In public? That's just begging for tongues to wag at my expense. No thanks. Are you ready to answer questions about... *this*?" Not that she knew what *this* was herself.

His mouth compressed into a tight line and she had her answer, though it poked her in a vulnerable spot. She straightened. "See? Home is best."

"Right." He sighed and put the truck in gear.

DEAN COULD smell whatever fragrance Annabelle always wore, whether it was simply her shampoo or perfume, and it made him want to bury his nose in the waves that fell down her back in an inviting tumble. He'd gone and screwed things up royally, but he couldn't say he regretted it. No, he could admit it hadn't been smart, but he couldn't say he wouldn't want to do it again if given the chance. Annabelle was under his skin in the worst way and he hungered to know more.

But she was right. He wasn't ready to answer questions. Not even his own.

Honey was already asleep by the time they reached Annabelle's house. Frowning because Honey hadn't eaten before she conked out, he wondered if they should wake her. He followed Annabelle inside, casting a wary eye around at the premises, then went straight to Honey's crib to put her down.

"Shouldn't she eat first?" he asked softly, moving aside so Annabelle could put the baby into her pajamas. He watched as she maneuvered Honey deftly into a sleeper without waking her. Beth had been able to do that, too. He'd always managed to wake Brandon every time he tried to do the same. He smiled. Must be a woman thing. Annabelle gestured for them to leave the room.

"I fed her before the meeting because I knew it might get late," she answered with a smile that was far too fleeting for his liking.

“Something’s bothering you.”

She avoided his stare and moved past him into the kitchen. “I’m just a little hungry. Do you want something? I have some pot pies that are pretty good for microwave food.”

He shook his head, catching her hand and gently pulling her to him. He ought to leave. Stop complicating an already messed-up situation, but he wasn’t going to. The breath hitched in her chest and the subtle movement created a cascading response in his body. He swallowed, feeling as if he was standing at the deep end of the pool and he’d suddenly forgotten how to swim. “I can’t think straight when you’re around,” he said softly, dipping to inhale the sweet skin at her neck. “Why is that?”

She shivered and angled her head, glancing at him through thick lashes. “I don’t know but it seems to be contagious,” she said, her voice husky and warm.

He chuckled, loving the fact that even though they were both practically burning up, she still managed to hold on to her sharp wit. He could barely handle a coherent sentence at this point.

“We should stop.”

He heard the regret in her voice. “You’re right,” he said, swallowing around the feel of his heartbeat banging in his throat. God, he felt like a damn kid again. “One kiss and we’ll call it a night,” he suggested and she nodded eagerly.

“One kiss. One kiss isn’t going to hurt anything.”

“One kiss...”

But Dean should’ve known that one kiss would never be enough. It didn’t sate his appetite the way it should have; it increased it tenfold.

Slanting his mouth over hers as his arms wrapped around her body, he drew her flush against him until the ripe fullness of her breasts pressed against his chest, igniting the skin.

Her tongue slid along his, playing and teasing as much as tasting and devouring, and he spiraled in a heady dance of desire that made his eyes cross. She sucked his bottom lip between pearly white teeth, hinting at the way she liked to play, and the blood flow immediately stopped elsewhere in his body to reroute south. Feeling himself straining against the unforgiving fabric of his jeans, he grabbed her behind and hoisted her into his arms, loathe to break contact even as he took them out of the room and straight to her bedroom. Of all the crazy things he’d ever done in his life, this ranked in the top three, but he’d lost any chance of listening to reason. He wanted—no, needed her—the way a man on the edge had to have someone to talk him down before he jumped.

They fell to the small bed, sending pillows bouncing to the floor and he climbed her body until he was back at her mouth. Her lips, swollen and red from his attention, were sexy as hell, beckoning as she twisted and gasped in his hold to better feel him against her. The spaghetti straps on her sunshine-yellow top were little match for him as he easily divested her of the flimsy fabric, tossing it over her head to join the discarded pillows. A peach lacy bra with scalloped edges flirted with her creamy skin and he groaned at the beauty of the sight before him. Damn near perfection. Cupping both breasts, reveling in their full weight, he gently squeezed and nearly lost it when she arched and moaned, gripping his shoulders and digging her nails in with a breathy demand for more.

“Annabelle, you’re amazing,” he murmured, running the tip of his tongue along the shallow valley of her breasts, while he sent one hand sliding down her belly to the tops of her Capri pants. Her legs scissored languorously and she sighed with pleasure as he made short work of the buttons so he could work his fingers beneath the matching peach froth caressing her hips and hiding from view what he ached to see. He worked the pants down slowly, and she helped him by kicking them free until they fell to the floor. Gazing down at her body, her skin heated and flushed, he drank in the sight. As the moment cooled between them, Dean watched as uncertainty clouded her gaze. She tried shifting, but Dean held her still, going down to lightly kiss the faint spidery lines marking her belly, where Honey had grown safe and healthy in her womb. She trembled as his lips grazed the soft skin. “You have nothing to be ashamed of,” he said, meaning every word. She was stunning and deserved no less than to believe it in her heart. “You’re perfect.”

She closed her eyes, but not before he caught the shine that betrayed her tender feelings.
“Dean...”

Returning to her mouth, he gently explored her lips, needing to banish whatever had made her question, until she became pliant and yielding at his touch. Taking a brief moment to pull a condom from his wallet, he spent the next hour showing Annabelle in the most reverent way possible how much he enjoyed making love to a woman.

And judging by the scratches she left on his back, she appreciated his efforts.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BRANDON HEARD his father's truck pull into the driveway and he didn't need to see the time on his digital clock to know it was late.

His stomach churned as angry tears stung his eyes. His dad never went out late without telling him where he was going to be. He was a stickler for those kinds of things. So that led Brandon to believe that his dad hadn't wanted him to know where he was. And there was only one place Brandon wanted his dad to steer clear of.

The woman had finally wormed her way into his dad's pants. Brandon had known it would only be a matter of time. He wasn't stupid. His dad was probably lonely and Annabelle was hot. Half his friends were already panting after her, gazing in her direction as if she were a Greek goddess or some such shit, making up excuses to go with him when he had to go to the office. But Brandon saw through her game. She needed a man to take care of her. She already had a kid with some other loser, and now she was eyeing his dad like the top prize at a carnival booth.

It wasn't fair. Wasn't it enough that they'd lost Mom? She'd been the love of Dad's life—he was sure of it. He couldn't understand why Dad was forgetting that fact. Annabelle didn't hold a candle to Mom, he thought. Mom had been the kind of woman people could trust, the one everyone turned to when they needed help. A PTA mom, a woman who brought brownies for his class to share on his birthday. Annabelle was the kind of woman who was more likely to seduce the teacher than volunteer for lunch duty.

Jessie's voice broke into his angry thoughts as the echo of their earlier conversation came to mind.

"What's gotten into you?" she'd asked, irritation warring with concern in her hazel eyes. "You're going all mental over your dad's new office manager. I think she's nice."

"That's because you can't see her for what she truly is," he'd retorted in annoyance.

"Which is?" She crossed her arms and glared.

"A gold digger."

Jessie snorted and scoffed at the idea and his ears burned, but he didn't back down. "Oh, c'mon. You don't seriously think that, do you?"

He answered with a testy stare.

She shook her head. "You're way off base. Maybe you need to stop freaking out about stupid things and deal with your issues. You're creeping me out with all the ugly crap you've been saying about Annabelle."

"Can't help what's true."

She pinned him with a short look. "Yeah? Well, if you keep it up, you'll be spouting off to someone else because I don't want to hear it anymore."

And then she'd left. Brandon didn't blame her for leaving the way she did. He didn't much like himself the way he was feeling but he couldn't stop. It was as if Annabelle had burrowed under his skin like a parasite and was eating away at his ability to be a nice person. A flash of shame followed at the knowledge that his mom would have been very disappointed with him.

He countered by saying that if his mom knew how this woman had designs on his dad she'd want Brandon to protect the family however possible.

Which is exactly what he planned to do.

ANNABELLE couldn't seem to catch her breath. She suspected it had something to do with the fact that each time Dean came into the building her heart rate tripled and the urge to lick him like a giant piece of man-candy nearly overwhelmed her.

He glanced her way and her mouth curved.

This could be a problem. She allowed her smile to fade and busied herself with work. A fling was transient, fleeting and brief. Annabelle tried to focus but Dean was in her peripheral vision and her attention wandered.

When he looked up from his PDA, their gazes locked. A slow grin spread across his lips and she knew their thoughts mirrored each other's. She dropped her stare first. They couldn't keep doing this all day. For one thing, they wouldn't get any work done and for another, it was incredibly suspect. People were bound to notice.

"Have dinner with me tonight."

She started at his sudden proposition. "No."

"Why not?"

"You know why. We already covered that."

"At my house."

"Your house?"

He chuckled as if he'd surprised himself with the suggestion but immediately warmed to it. "Yeah. Let me cook you and Honey dinner. Brandon is staying at a friend's tonight and it'd be nice."

Tempting. Wildly tempting. Which is why she must decline but she wavered. "What's on the menu?"

"I can only do one thing well."

She blushed as her imagination provided a range of possibilities. Clearing her throat, she said, "Which is?"

"Barbecue."

"Barbecue? Chicken? Fish? Steak?"

"Anything that tastes good charbroiled," he answered. "Interested?"

Lord help me, yes. "Mildly."

Dean pocketed his PDA and grabbed his keys. "See you at five. Bring your appetite," he added with a wink.

Her breath hitched in her chest as she stared after him, trying not to gawk so hard that his jeans caught fire.

A woman could get used to a man like that. It was a full moment before her good sense returned and a regretful sigh followed. It seemed she had inherited her mother's deplorable compass when it came to steering clear of trouble after all. Only she hadn't gravitated toward a loser—quite the opposite. But it spelled trouble for Annabelle just the same.

So, what are you going to do about it? She worried her bottom lip and glanced toward Honey, who was playing with a set of toy keys Dean had picked up for her at the hardware store.

End it?

Yeah, how about trying that with a little conviction next time.

BY THE TIME Dean returned to the office he was humming. He entered the building with a smile and went straight to Honey, picking up the toddler as if it were perfectly natural to do so at the end of a long day, and fought the urge to kiss Annabelle. Instead, he grabbed Honey's diaper bag and gestured for the door. "Shall we?"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked, hesitating as she followed. "I mean, this is going a bit fast. I don't want you to think that I expect anything from you just because..."

He glanced back at her, drank in the sight of her standing there backlit by the sun, her hair a fiery halo around her head, and his heart stuttered a beat. He transferred Honey to his other side and pulled Annabelle to him. She gasped, making an adorably feminine sound, and looked up at him with wide brown eyes. He lowered his head to hers and took her mouth firmly, leaving no doubt as to how he felt about her statement. "You worry too much," he said against her mouth. "It's just dinner, right?"

“One dinner, one kiss...I think we know how these things end up,” she said wryly, though the corners of her mouth turned up playfully. She pushed away from him. “Fine. Dinner it is, but don’t get used to this. I’m not your girlfriend.”

“What are you then?”

Her mouth quirked as if she didn’t quite know what to call herself and in the absence of knowing, simply shouldered the diaper bag and moved past Dean with a mumble under her breath that sounded a lot like, “office manager with benefits,” and he felt laughter rumble in his chest. He liked her—more than he should—and he knew the consequences would likely make his heartburn feel like a mild flicker.

ANNABELLE, wineglass in hand, studied the pictures on the wall while Dean made all sorts of racket in the kitchen that didn’t sound promising.

“You sure you know what you’re doing in there?” she asked, pausing to glance at a photo of Brandon as a little boy. Judging by the missing tooth, he was probably around seven. Cute. Although, that wasn’t surprising. Despite his crappy attitude toward her, he was a good-looking kid. He favored Beth, it seemed, with his facial features, but he’d got Dean’s wide shoulders. Honey giggled as Dean’s cat wound his way around her small body, twitching his ringed tail next to her face until she sneezed.

“Bless you, Honey-pie,” she murmured, then sighed. Honey looked like Thad, down to her blue eyes and flaxen hair, but somehow a feminine version of Thad had turned out quite lovely. She walked to Honey and picked her up. “Let’s see what culinary treat Dean is subjecting us to. Let’s hope it’s edible.”

Annabelle needn’t have worried, she realized, for, as she rounded the corner to the dining room, Dean had laid a cozy setting for three, though he had wisely left the candles that graced the oak table unlit. A steaming pot of green beans and another of garlic mashed potatoes sat beside a plate of roasted boneless chicken and Annabelle’s mouth watered. “I’d say you can barbecue for me anytime,” she said, taking a seat with Honey, wondering if she’d ever smelled anything so good. “If I ate like this every night I’d be fatter than a deer tick,” she admitted with a rueful smile.

“I’m not one to complain about a little meat on a woman’s bones,” Dean said with a grin that made her feel naked. “Women are supposed to be soft and full of curves. You’re just about perfect in that area,” he added, and she blushed.

Dean disappeared, saying he’d be right back. Annabelle was grateful for the short reprieve so that she could get her head back on straight. How was a woman supposed to stay focused when the guy said things designed to make her melt? Dean returned with a beautiful wooden high chair and she lost whatever resistance she was trying to wage against falling for him.

“This was Brandon’s.” He plucked Honey from her lap before Annabelle could offer a weak protest, and slipped her into the old chair as easily as if he were accustomed to doing so every night. “Still works. Beth’s father made this chair for Brandon before he was born. It’s an heirloom we figured we could give to Brandon when he had kids but it’s just gathering dust for now.”

“Are you sure Brandon won’t mind?”

“Well, until I give it to him for his family, technically, it’s mine. I’d say he has no say in the matter,” he said firmly, signifying an end to that particular conversation, but Annabelle was a little uncomfortable. She had enough issues with the teenager; she didn’t need to compound them.

“Dean...”

“Annabelle,” he said softly, stopping her from continuing. “Let’s just enjoy dinner.”

She nodded. He was right. Brandon wasn’t here tonight, and it wasn’t likely she’d make a habit of coming over for meals, so she’d just enjoy dinner, as Dean said. She smiled. “Pass the potatoes, please. Honey likes the kind that come out of a box, but I think she’ll love these.”

“Potatoes should never come out of a box,” Dean said. “My mom would die before she put something out of a box on her table.”

“Well, not everyone was raised with the Bradys,” Annabelle said, placing a dollop of potatoes on her own plate. “My mom did the best that she could with what she had. And sometimes all we had came from a box.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean said. “I didn’t mean to be offensive.”

She shrugged. “No harm, no foul. But not everyone grew up like you did.”

“Tell me about what it was like to grow up in your home,” he said, and she immediately regretted her candid comments.

She waved away his request. “It’s nothing worth talking about.” True to a point. Her childhood was something right out of a Lifetime TV movie of the week. But who wanted to share that? Certainly not her. “Why do you ask?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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