

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

New York Times Bestselling Author

LINDA GOODNIGHT

The Christmas Family

A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a white dress and a white headband with a bow, is seen from the side. She has large white angel wings on her back and is smiling as she hangs a red and white striped ornament on a Christmas tree. The tree is decorated with gold, red, and white ornaments and lights. In the background, there is a window with a view of a snowy landscape and some wrapped gifts on the windowsill.

THE
BUCHANONS

Linda Goodnight
The Christmas Family

«HarperCollins»

Goodnight L.

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The Greatest Christmas Gift Contractor Brady Buchanon can't wait to surprise single mom Abby Webster with his company's Christmas home makeover prize. But once he does, the struggling waitress turns him down flat! Raised in foster care, Abby won't accept charity. Yet when her dilapidated porch almost injures her daughter, Abby finally agrees to Brady's offer. As the hardworking bachelor pushes to finish the house in time for Christmas, he starts falling for Abby and her little girl. With the holidays in sight, Brady wonders if Abby will not only accept her beautiful new home, but also his wish to make her his wife...

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"Which house model do you like best?" Brady asked.

He glanced at Abby. "Come on. Stop worrying and get happy. This is supposed to be the part where you get all excited and make me feel like a hero."

Her mouth lifted slightly at his silliness, and he felt better.

"I love that one," she said, pointing at the plans.

"The country cottage?" He'd chosen that one for her the minute he'd seen it. It was simple and charming. Like her. "Look at the interior plan, too. We can change it if you like, but it's perfect for your daughter's needs."

She looked up at him with those soft brown eyes. His chest expanded. She liked it. She liked it a lot. He realized then that he'd been overanxious about this home makeover, afraid she'd regret letting him barge into her life and turn it upside down.

"You think of everything, don't you?" she said, smiling.

That was the reaction he'd been looking for.

LINDA GOODNIGHT, a New York Times bestselling author and winner of a RITA® Award in inspirational fiction, has appeared on the Christian bestseller list. Her novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Active in orphan ministry, Linda enjoys writing fiction that carries a message of hope in a sometimes dark world. She and her husband live in Oklahoma. Visit her website, lindagoodnight.com, for more information.

The Christmas

Family

New York Times Bestselling Author

Linda Goodnight



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For everyone to whom much is given,
from him much will be required...

—Luke 12:48

For my Aunt Edith, last of the Porter dynasty. Ninety looks good on you! Thank you for always being proud of me. Love you, dear lady.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Bible Verse](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Brady Buchanon had planned his escape well. Three more minutes and he was out of here for the day.

He hurriedly tossed his tools into the back of the work truck, eager to be gone. Man, he loved this time of year! Cool, crisp and clear weather, and Christmas practically dripped from the trees.

He clicked the locks on his royal blue F-350, waited for Dawg, his faithful mutt to leap into the seat and was about to climb inside himself when his father, owner of Buchanon Built Construction Company and, by all rights, Brady's boss, stepped out into the late November day.

"Brady, hold up."

Not fast enough. Brady blew out a resigned breath. He leaned a hand on the truck top and waited, though not at all patiently.

"Been meaning to talk to you about something."

"Sure. What's up?"

"This makeover thing you do every Christmas, better cancel this year."

The request sailed right over Brady's head. "Too late. I already have the recipient lined up."

Dan Buchanon, his salt-and-pepper hair hidden under a Buchanon Built ball cap, scratched at the side of his neck. "You've made the announcement?"

"On my way there now. Dad, you should see this house. It's bad, but Buchanon Built can make it shine." Donating a home makeover for one needy family each Christmas was Brady's favorite event of the year, and the publicity was great for business, an important consideration to his father.

"I appreciate the sentiment, son, and in years past didn't mind the lost time and expense but not this year. We need all hands on deck."

"I can work it out. Don't worry. Buchanon projects won't suffer. The guys who volunteer can work on the makeover on their downtime or when things are slow."

But Dan was shaking his head. “With all the work on the schedule and the slowdowns we’ve encountered, you don’t have time for charity. *We* don’t have time for charity. Jaylee just told me you still don’t have a plumber lined up for the Edwards project.”

“I’m working on it.”

Irritation flashed on Dan’s face. “And you want to pull off six paying jobs for a freebie? Forget it, Brady. Forget it. And fix the plumber problem today. No more delays. No more excuses.”

Brady’s blood heated. He held his temper in check better these days, but no one worked him up like his dad. And vice versa. “I’m doing my best.”

His father’s thick jaw clenched. “I don’t want your best. I want the problem solved.”

“It’s not as if I haven’t tried.” Leaving the truck door open and the dog in the seat, Brady pushed away from the vehicle to face his father. He spread his hands in a plea. “Be reasonable, Dad.” Like that was going to happen in this lifetime. “Jack Taylor had a heart attack. The man can’t work.” And the plumbing problem had nothing to do with Brady’s home makeover.

“Then get someone else.”

Brady didn’t believe in kicking a man when he was down. “Jack’s business needs the work. And he’s the best plumber around.”

“And *we* need to bring this project in on time or lose a boatload of money. The vandals have thrown us behind on everything and now subcontractors decide not to show up. Buchanan Construction was built on dependability and speed. If Jack can’t work, find someone who can. Spend your time on business, not on some feel-good Christmas project.”

Brady stifled an angry retort. He had places to go and much more enjoyable things to do tonight than get into another fight with his father. A plumber who’d had a heart attack didn’t “decide” not to work. The choice was out of the man’s hands.

“I’ll talk to Jack’s wife first thing in the morning.” Mary Taylor was busting tail trying to keep the small plumbing business going while taking care of her ailing husband. Good plumbing temps were hard to come by. He should know. He’d called plenty, though telling that to his father was a waste of good clean Texas air.

“Tomorrow isn’t good enough.” Dan stacked his hands on his hips for emphasis. “I want plumbers on the job site by six in the morning to fix the problem.” He jabbed a finger toward Brady. “See her now. Tonight. And don’t take no for an answer. Understood?”

Brady took a step back, fuming, his back teeth tight enough to crack.

“Right. Sure. The job will get done.” Brady always did the job, but his father seldom noticed progress. He only noticed the problems.

As if his demands were law—which they sort of were—Dan spun away and slammed the office door behind him. The sound reverberated in the formerly pleasant evening.

Adrenaline jacked to ninety, Brady dragged a frustrated hand down his face. Another minute and he would have been gone. Another minute and he could have gone through an entire work shift without letting his father get under his skin.

He was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than Dan Buchanan and had been the foreman at Buchanan Built since graduating Texas Tech eight years ago, but his father still managed to make him feel as insignificant as sawdust.

Brady turned back to the truck, where Dawg sat behind the wheel as if he was about to drive away. The comical picture erased some of Brady’s frustration. “You driving?”

“Can’t. He doesn’t have a license.”

Brady pivoted toward the voice. Dawson, one of Brady’s three brothers and the dimpled twin to Sawyer, ambled around the end of the warehouse, tool belt bouncing against his hip like a gunslinger.

“Don’t let Dad ruin your day. He’s been in a meeting with Marilyn Tenbears for the last hour and a half.”

“That explains it.”

Marilyn Tenbears owned a strip of woods along Gratitude Creek that Dad was determined to purchase. Marilyn was just as determined to either get rich from the sale or keep the land.

“He thinks I should shelve the makeover.”

Dawson unhooked his tool belt. “I heard. But weren’t you planning to tell the recipient tonight that her home had been chosen for the remodel?”

“Still am. In fact, I’m heading over there now. Want to come along?”

“You’re still going to do it?”

“That’s the plan.”

Dawson cast a concerned glance toward the office door. “What about Dad? How will you get this past him?”

“I’ll think of something. He’ll come around.”

“He doesn’t like his orders to be ignored.”

“Dad never likes anything I do, but I get the work done.”

“That’s because Buchanan Built has flourished with you as foreman in a way it never could with Dad in the role. He was too harsh with subcontractors.”

Brady huffed. “No kidding? Dad? Harsh?”

The brothers exchanged a chuckle.

“Hop in, Dawson, my man.” Brady popped a palm against the roof of his truck and slid into the driver’s seat. “Santa Claus is about to do his thing.”

“What about the plumber?”

“I’ll worry about him later.”

With an amused shake of his head, Dawson shucked his tool belt and climbed into the big Ford with his brother, relegated Dawg to the backseat, and slammed the door. “No wonder you and Dad butt heads. Who is this year’s beneficiary of a Buchanan Built makeover?”

“Abby Webster. You know who she is. She works at the Buttered Biscuit.”

“Yeah.” Dawson turned an interested face toward Brady. “I know who you mean. Good waitress, all business and not too smiley or talkative but remembers exactly how I like my eggs and coffee.” He put the edge of his hand at nose level. “Up to here, pretty tall with long brown hair she wears in a ponytail over her shoulder. Right?”

Brady glanced from the road to his brother. “Tall? She’s not tall.”

“Compared to you she’s not tall. Compared to other women she is.”

Brady conceded a truth he had to live with and really didn’t mind all that much. He was some kind of genetic throwback to his giant Celtic ancestors, both in looks and size. Even his rust-brown hair, which he clipped short, was out of sync with the rest of the family. Dawson, on the other hand, was so black-hair-and-blue-eyed pretty, he belonged on the cover of a magazine. Not that Brady would tell his manly little brother he thought he was pretty.

“Did you know she has a little girl with some kind of handicap?”

“Like I said, Abby Webster’s not much of a talker. Brings my food and skitters away.” From the backseat, the dog poked a cold nose in Dawson’s neck. Dawson gave him a gentle shove. “Stay in the back, fella.”

“Wait until you see this place, Dawson.” The enthusiasm Brady had for the Christmas project bubbled up inside him. “Abby and her little girl need this makeover badly. The house is run-down, shingles missing, windows cracked, no handicap accessibility. She’s going to be thrilled.”

“How do you find out this stuff?”

“I ask. I look.” Truth was, he drove all over town looking at houses. “People tell me.”

“That’s because they know you’re a soft touch like Mom.”

“To whom much is given, much is required.”

“That’s Mom’s favorite verse.”

“Yeah, well, she’s right. Giving back is the right thing to do, and it feels pretty good, too, especially at Christmas.” And nothing made him feel as worthwhile and as necessary to the planet, especially after a run-in with his critical father. “I’m not backing out no matter what Dad thinks.”

“What if he pulls the powerful Buchanon rug out from under the project? You need the company to make this happen.”

Brady hadn’t had time to think that far, but he couldn’t deny the possibility. When Dad was crossed, he could be a tough customer.

But Brady had made up his mind. One way or the other, Abby Webster was getting a home makeover. And he couldn’t wait to see how happy she was when she heard the news.

* * *

Gabriel’s Crossing, Texas, was the kind of place where few people crossed the railroad tracks into “that” part of town unless they lived there.

Abby Webster and her daughter lived there.

Legs aching from the twelve-hour shift at the Buttered Biscuit and delighted to be heading home, Abby encouraged her exhausted old CR-V to travel the distance from the Huckleberry Play School to the sagging house on Cedar Corner. Anyone could find her house without the number—something that had been missing far longer than Abby had lived there. Hers was the house with duct tape over a crack in the front window and the cheery crayon drawings of blue and red angels hanging next to the crack. Her four-year-old had a thing for colorful angels.

Abby parked in the driveway, a strip of blacktop with dead grass poking through the cracks. “Out you go, jelly fingers.”

Her daughter, the joy of her life, giggled from her car seat. “I’m hungry.”

“Imagine that, Lila Webster is hungry.” Abby hopped out of the car and went around to the other side. She opened the door and unbuckled her daughter’s seat belt. “How about a peanut butter and broccoli sandwich?”

“Ew, Mommy.”

Smiling into her child’s chocolate-colored eyes, Abby lifted the four-year-old into her arms, thankful Lila was still small. Hopefully, by the time Lila was too big to carry, they could afford a house with the space for her special equipment. Or just maybe Lila would be walking on her own without a walker or wheelchair. Such possibilities existed and Abby would never give up hope that the mild function in her child’s spinal cord would continue to develop.

“Okay, then, maybe macaroni and raisins?”

Lila cocked her head, a tiny frown between dark eyebrows as she considered the combination. Then, her face lit with enthusiasm, she said, “Okay!”

Marveling at the precious gift of her child, Abby juggled Lila and her keys to unlock the front door and bump it open with her hip. Raising a child with special needs wasn’t easy, but Lila’s undaunted spirit and joy in living made everything worthwhile. What other child would react with such pleasure to a meal of macaroni and raisins?

“Were you a good girl at school today?”

“Yeth.”

“Did Gerry say mean things to you?”

“He was nice.”

Abby breathed a sigh of relief. Some kids didn’t understand why Lila was different. While most didn’t seem to mind that Lila wore braces and didn’t walk normally, some were downright cruel at times.

Dropping her keys on the table, Abby set her daughter on the love seat with the ever-present crayons and paper and went to the kitchen to create another macaroni masterpiece.

The pasta was on to boil when Lila called, “Somebody’s here, Mom. In a big, big car.”

Abby heard the rumble of an engine and identified the big, big car as most likely a truck. Hmm. She hadn't ordered anything through UPS.

"Not expecting guests." She went to the side window and peeked out at the graying evening. A bright blue pickup had pulled into the driveway behind her Honda. "Who in the world is that?"

Lila, busy with another of her art projects, didn't look up. "I don't know. Maybe Santa Claus."

Abby smiled, though the statement squeezed her chest. This year was the first time Lila was old enough to really get into the idea of Santa Claus, but Lila's medical expenses kept their small budget strained to the breaking point. Lila wouldn't notice the small size of the Christmas gifts under the tree, but her mother would.

"Too early for Santa, so I don't know who..." Her voice dwindled away as two gorgeous males exited the gleaming blue truck and sauntered up her drive. They looked familiar and they had to be brothers. Though one was half a foot taller than the other, their strides matched and they swung their arms with identical confidence as though the world was their oyster. With looks like those, it probably was.

"Oh, my." As they came closer, she recognized them. Buchanons, two of the four sear-your-eyeballs-gorgeous brothers.

Abby opened the front door as the men stepped upon her wooden porch. A weak board groaned and she held her breath, hoping they wouldn't fall through.

"I don't have home owners' insurance," she blurted.

The taller one with swimming-pool eyes tilted his head. She wished she could remember his name. "Ma'am?"

"The porch," she managed, feeling stupider by the minute as her brain refused to work but her mouth kept going. "Some of the boards are weak. You're big. Don't fall through."

Both men dipped their heads to stare at the porch and then exchanged glances. "Needs work."

"Don't I know it," Abby said.

She stood in the doorway, blocking the entrance and wishing they'd state their business. Buchanons didn't exactly hang out on this side of town and they were letting out expensive heat.

"That's what we want to talk to you about."

"My porch?" Abby poked a finger into her breastbone and then flung out her hand. "Sorry, I can't afford to hire anyone right now."

"Oh, no, that's not why we're here," said Mr. Swimming-Pool Eyes. "I'm Brady Buchanon and this is my brother, Dawson. Buchanon Built Construction."

Brady and Dawson. She could never remember one brother from the other, only that all four were heartthrobs. She did, however, remember their routine orders at the diner.

Two gorgeous men on her doorstep was not the norm and she was pedaling fast to figure out why they were here. She pointed to Dawson. "Eggs over easy. And you—" Her finger went to Brady. "French toast and large milk but occasionally the house special."

A killer smile split Brady Buchanon's face. "You're making me hungry."

"Hazard of the job. I equate everyone in Gabriel's Crossing with their most common order at the café." Which, now that she thought about it, wasn't too flattering.

"May we come in for a minute?" Brady asked. "We'd like to talk to you about something."

"Oh. Well, sure, I guess so." She stepped to one side. "Come on in. Just be careful—"

Brady gave her another of those swoon-worthy grins. "We'll try not to break the floor."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that as insult. It's just this house is—"

He waved her off. "Don't worry about it. I'm a big boy."

"You certainly are." A hot blush raced up her neck and heated her cheeks. Her mouth was out of control tonight. At five-nine, she was unused to having men tower over her. And Brady Buchanon definitely towered. "Have a seat. That little sprite on the couch is Lila."

Lila had been staring at the men with the wide-eyed curiosity of a preschooler.

“Pretty picture,” Brady said as he lowered his oversize frame onto the faded blue sofa next to Lila. Dawson took the only chair in the room, leaving Abby to perch on the other side of Lila. The couch was fuller than it had ever been.

“I’m making a kiss-mas twee. See? That’s an angel.”

Brady studied the crayon drawing earnestly. “Almost as pretty as you.”

“Want to color with me?”

If the man had a heart, those brown eyes would melt it.

“Maybe next time, okay? Do you mind if I talk to your mommy for a few minutes?”

Lila shrugged and scribbled a little harder on her kiss-mas tree. “Okay.”

Brady gazed over the top of Lila’s head at Abby. “I don’t know if you’re familiar with my family’s business, Buchanon Built Construction—”

“I am.” Was he joking? The Buchanons practically owned Gabriel’s Crossing. You couldn’t live in this town without seeing one of their white trucks with the big blue logo or passing a sign that announced a Buchanon Built home.

“Great. Every year our company offers a home makeover to someone in town.”

“I’ve heard about that. Last year, you remodeled Ted Bickford’s house and built an addition to make room for all their children.”

Ted and Teresa were kid magnets who had adopted six and fostered as many more on any given day. The people were saints.

Brady beamed as though she’d awarded him the jackpot prize. “That’s right. We did. Nice family.”

But what did that have to do with her? “Excuse me a sec, will you? I have macaroni on the stove.” And she hoped it hadn’t boiled to mush.

“I like macaroni,” Lila said, looking up. “With raisins.”

Abby laughed a little as she hurried the few steps to the kitchen to drain the pasta. The kitchen-dining area was small, a throwback to the days when microwaves and dishwashers were unheard-of. “Lila would eat rocks if I added macaroni.”

She turned to reenter the living room only to discover that Brady had followed and now blocked the narrow doorway, as large and intimidating and every bit as beautiful as some mythological warrior. Her pulse did a double step.

Whoa, what was that all about?

“My niece and nephew are the same way.” He stepped aside, letting her pass, a movement that brought them in very close contact. Her shoulder brushed his arm. He smelled good, like new wood and Eternity cologne. “Mom cooks T-bone steaks and the kids want macaroni.”

Disconcerted by the highly unusual skitter of pulse and the hum of blood in her veins, Abby hurried back to the couch. Brady followed, but not before he’d casually leaned in to the kitchen and had a look around.

What was he doing? If she didn’t know him by reputation, she’d think he was casing the place for robbery. Or worse.

“Macaroni rocks the world, right, Lila?” said Dawson, whom she’d dubbed the thoughtful one long ago at the café.

“Uh-huh.” Lila went right back to coloring. This time the angel was yellow.

“Now, as I was saying,” Brady said, retaking his place at the end of the couch. He leaned forward, startling blue eyes holding hers and his big hands clasped in front of him. “We offer a home makeover every Christmas. This year, we’d like to remodel *your* house. Merry Christmas, Abby.”

His big white smile was dazzling, and she understood he expected her to be thrilled.

She wasn’t. She was embarrassed. Mortified. Humiliation heated her cheeks to chili-pepper status.

She had flashbacks to pitying teachers dragging used shoes and coats from school closets.

Her back stiffened. “That’s very nice of you, but no. I couldn’t accept.”

Brady’s smile disappeared. “No?”

“No. But thank you for the offer.” She stood, expecting him to leave.

The brothers exchanged looks. They were good at that. Must be some kind of sibling symbiosis, although she wouldn’t know. Being a street kid who had never even known her mother, Abby had grown up alone, mostly in group homes. Not that she minded so much now that she was an independent adult. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. She was happy on her own. Truly, she was. She had Lila and a job and this house. She most definitely was not a charity case.

And the fact that she’d all but swooned over the handsome Buchanon brothers humiliated her even more. Men like them didn’t look twice at a girl like her.

Even her ears were burning now. She wanted to dissolve right into the floor of her run-down, makeover-worthy old house.

“If you’re worried we would interfere with your everyday living, we won’t. We’ll work out a schedule that fits yours.”

Abby swallowed, her pride throbbing like an ingrown toenail. The house needed repairs but she’d get to them eventually without becoming the object of someone’s pity. “Lila and I are doing fine the way we are.”

“If you’re worried about the money, this is a gift. No charge.”

Which made it even worse. “I pay my own way, Mr. Buchanon.”

Brady stared at her as if her brain was as loose as the boards on her porch. Finally, he nodded and slowly rose.

“Sorry to have bothered you.” He looked so disappointed she almost caved and said yes. In fact, if her pride wasn’t so insulted, she would agree anyway, just to see him smile again.

“No bother. I’m sure there are others far needier than Lila and I.”

The brothers did that glancing thing again. Brady took a business card from his pocket and handed it to her. “In case you change your mind, my number is on here. Call me anytime.”

“Thanks.” Her smile was brittle. “See you at the Buttered Biscuit.”

“Mister,” Lila said, though it sounded more like “miser.”

“I drew this for you.” She offered the yellow angel to him. “Hang it on your window.”

His face softened. “It’s beautiful. Thank you, Lila.”

Lila beamed at him, pleased with herself and proud of her scrawling, four-year-old jumble of lines, circles and color.

Some of the starch went out of Abby’s spine at the exchange between her small child and the giant man who accepted the drawing as if it was as valuable as a van Gogh.

Brady Buchanon was a nice guy. A guy who could easily get to her.

All the more reason to refuse his offer.

[Chapter Two](#)

“That was different,” Dawson said as the brothers joined Dawg back inside the pickup.

Different didn’t even come close to explaining the past ten minutes.

Stunned to numbness, Brady leaned over the steering wheel and stared at Abby Webster’s house. The paint was peeling, the porch sagged—at least to his expert eye—and a dozen or more shingles were missing from the roof. The inside was as retro as any he’d seen in a while. A child like Lila would never be able to maneuver a wheelchair or a walker through those narrow doors and hallways.

“No one’s ever turned us down before.”

“Kind of painful, wasn’t it?” Dawson gave an exaggerated shudder.

“Why? I don’t get it?” Brady flopped back against the seat cushion. “The house is in sad repair and she needs us. She *needs* us.”

“Getting a little overwrought, aren’t you, brother? Wounded pride, maybe?”

“Yeah!” Brady cranked the engine, listened to the rumble and put the shifter in gear. “She’s supposed to be thrilled.”

“Wonder why she refused. Do you think she actually doesn’t see the problems?”

“Nah, it’s not that. She was upset, not oblivious. The problem is, I don’t know what button we pushed to fix it, but she was offended.”

“The little girl was cute, huh?”

“Adorable.” The truck bumped across the railroad tracks. The sun was in midset, shooting orange fingers through a purple sky. “Did you notice her artwork all over the walls?”

“Couldn’t miss it. The mom’s not too bad, either.”

Brady gave him a hard look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They need this remodel. Maybe you could turn on the Buchanon charm.”

Brady snorted. “No.”

“You haven’t dated anyone since Kiley and that was months ago.”

“Not interested. I’m a builder, not a Romeo.” Never mind the strange sensation that had tingled up his arms when Abby brushed past him in the kitchen. Or the weird, *weird* heat in his chest when Lila gave him her angel drawing. “You’re the man about town. You ask her out.”

“The Christmas makeover is your project.” Dawson’s wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. “We can always find another recipient. That side of town has plenty of candidates.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Plan B.” But Abby and her little girl needed the remodel more than anyone else he’d considered. Lila, especially, according to his sources at the day care, suffered from the lack of special-needs accessories in her home. He wanted to do *that* makeover.

* * *

The next morning Brady awakened hungry. Nothing unusual about that, but this morning he decided to eat breakfast at the Buttered Biscuit. Call him stubborn or perverse, but he wasn’t ready to give up on Miss Abby Webster. If a little of his presence reminded her of how much she needed him and what a good guy he was, all the better.

The drive to the café took a few minutes. He’d built his house, or rather half of it, on the edge of town not far from the river in a copse of bald cypress and red oak. As he liked to say, his home was a work in progress. The lower floor was finished and the rest evolved in squeezed-out hours and minutes. All of the Buchanon kids except Quinn had, over time, acquired a Buchanon Built home.

Older brother Quinn was, himself, a work in progress, still trying to pull his act together after a life-altering accident, though most of the family thought ten years was enough time for anyone. Forgiving Jake Hamilton, the cause of the accident, had made a difference, but Quinn had a ways to go.

Brady turned the lock on his front door and whistled his way out into the cool morning with Dawg at his heel.

As he drove into town and down First Street to the café, gray fog crawled along the ground in mysterious wisps and wiggles.

“Sit tight, pal, and I’ll bring you a sausage patty.” Brady gave Dawg a pat and rolled the window down enough for the animal to stick his nose out if the mood struck. Dawg, accustomed to waiting for his master, put his chin on his paws and went to sleep.

Breakfast smells hit Brady full in the olfactory glands the minute he entered the café. His stomach reacted with wild abandon.

As usual this early in the morning, the café was jammed and the clatter of conversations mixed with the clink of plates and the cook’s voice calling “order up!”

An old-time diner-style café that served up home cooking and comfort food, the Buttered Biscuit was the place to be for good eats and all the latest and greatest in Gabriel’s Crossing news.

Brady greeted friends and acquaintances as he made his way to a table still cluttered with someone else’s empty plates and took a seat.

Jan, the owner and baker of the fluffiest biscuits in Texas, whipped past. “Get that in a sec, Brady.”

“No rush.” Which wasn’t technically true. He was always in a rush these days.

Two other waitresses were on duty, all of them moving at Mach speed to fill cups and deliver plates. Abby Webster, pad in hand, took orders two tables away. She looked up, spotted Brady and hesitated as if she didn’t want to see him.

Too bad.

She had kept him up late trying to figure out why anyone would refuse a free home makeover from the best builders in the area. The least she could do was bring him a cup of coffee.

She whipped toward him and he noticed her as he never had before, though he ate at the diner fairly often. Probably because, as Dawson said, she was all business. The other waitresses smiled and bantered with the customers—he noticed *them*—but Abby simply worked. He wondered, randomly, if she did anything for fun.

“French toast and milk?” she asked. Her cheekbones were tipped in pink.

“Sure. And the strongest cup of coffee you have.” Coffee, like her eyes. Dark and shiny and able to deliver a jolt.

She didn’t offer a joke, as Jan would have, by asking him if he’d been out all night partying or some other sass-mouthed comment she was known for. Abby simply scribbled his order, grabbed a pile of plates and sailed away.

He watched her move through the customers, topping off coffee and delivering checks as she made her way to the kitchen with his order.

She was actually kind of pretty, a truth that surprised him this morning. Mink-colored hair that gleamed over one shoulder, huge dark eyes framed by thick, arching eyebrows and a wide, full mouth. On anyone else, the large features would be too much, but they looked good on her.

“What are you staring at, big brother?” Dawson pulled out the chair opposite him. Sawyer, the other twin, joined him on the right.

Brady ignored the question. “What are you two doing here?”

“Same as you. Too lazy to cook breakfast. Have you been able to locate a plumber for the Edwards job?”

Brady slapped the heel of one hand to his forehead. “Ah, man, I forgot.”

He’d been so keyed up after the strange meeting with Abby he’d not given the plumber another thought until this moment.

“Dad’s not going to be happy.”

“I’ll find someone.” But not before the already-passed deadline of six o’clock. “Any ideas.”

“A couple. You might call Richie Clonts up in Idabel.”

“Good idea.”

“Give Charity a call. She’ll know his number.”

Charity was their oldest sister, a powerhouse real estate agent with a steel-trap mind and a list of contacts a mile long.

He fished his cell phone from his hip pocket, got the number from his sister and called the plumber. Five minutes later, he hung up a happier man. “Richie can send someone tomorrow. Dad wanted someone today, but tomorrow is better than nothing.”

Abby appeared with his coffee in a thick white mug and took orders from the twins.

“You’re pretty busy,” Sawyer said, saying the obvious with a toothy smile. Brady’s younger brothers, especially Sawyer, were always scoping the field for ladies.

“Slammed, but it’s letting up.”

“Still have my phone number?” Brady asked.

Her gaze flicked his direction. She got pink again. “Haven’t you chosen someone else?”

“I’d rather give you time to think about the offer.”

“Why?”

The question caught Brady off guard, but he said, “I like your little girl and I can give her something she needs.”

A look, almost of panic, flamed in Abby’s eyes. Again, Brady wondered what her problem was.

“Lila and I are okay, but thanks. Anything else on these orders?”

The twins lifted their fingers off the table in an identical gesture. “We’re good.”

And Abby whirled away, leaving the Buchanon brothers staring after her.

“Stubborn,” Brady muttered as he reached for the steaming cup.

“Embarrassed,” Dawson said. “Did you see how she blushed?” Intuitive and empathetic, Dawson was the brother who always noticed things like that.

“Nah,” Sawyer said, and laughed. “She was overwhelmed by my charm. Girls always turn pink in my studly presence.”

His brothers hooted.

“Dawg’s more charming than you.”

“Prettier, too.”

“Aw, thanks, guys.” Sawyer hung his head in mock offense.

“Kidding aside, do you think we embarrassed her?” Brady asked.

“What’s this *we* business? You’re the guilty party.”

The concept gave Brady pause. He’d never purposely embarrass someone, but maybe Dawson was right. Maybe Abby somehow mistook his intentions. Maybe she thought he was putting her down.

Man, he’d never considered such a thing.

“I think I should talk to her again, show her the possibilities.”

The twins exchanged looks. “Can’t take no for an answer, can you, Brady?”

Never had. Never would. Not when someone needed him, and he was convinced Abby and Lila needed his help.

Before he left, Brady slid a twenty-dollar bill under his plate.

* * *

He’d left her twenty dollars. Abby didn’t know whether to be pathetically grateful or even more humiliated than she’d been last night.

“Wow, girlfriend, you must have been on your game this morning. Twenty bucks,” Charla Patterson, one of the other waitresses and Abby’s friend said as she helped clear the Buchanon table.

“Have you caught the eye of one of Gabriel’s Crossing’s most eligible bachelors?”

Abby shook her head at the ridiculous notion. “Like that would ever happen.”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. You have lots to offer.”

“Tell that to Warren.” She’d trusted her ex-boyfriend, a man who’d promised love and marriage but bolted when he learned the child Abby carried would be special-needs. Now, she only felt loathing for the man who had never once laid eyes on his beautiful daughter.

“Warren was a user. It’s time for you to stop beating yourself up over him and move on.”

“I’m not beating myself up. I’m glad he’s out of our lives.”

“And I’m thankful for that. I never liked the guy, even though I still think you should force him to pay child support. You could use the money.”

“No way. I don’t want him involved with Lila any more than he wants to be. He doesn’t deserve to be part of her life. Him or his lovely wife.” She sounded bitter and didn’t want to be. But his cruel rejection had stabbed deep and left her uncertain and bruised.

“There are good guys out there, hon. Guys like Brady Buchanon. His cute twin brothers, too.”

A funny little twitter went off in Abby’s belly. She clattered a fork onto a plate and ignored the feeling. “I have Lila. She’s all I need.”

“So why did Brady leave such a fat tip this morning?”

“Not because he’s after me, that’s for sure.” She forced a laugh, surprised to be bothered by that truth. “Remember how the Buchanons give away a home makeover every Christmas?”

“Sure. The makeover is a big deal. A really big deal.” Charla slapped a bleach rag against the tabletop as her eyes widened. “You don’t mean—”

“Brady offered it to me.”

“Abby! That’s amazing. Congratulations. No one deserves a new home more than you.”

“I turned him down.”

“What? Are you out of your mind?”

“I don’t need their help, Char. I can take care of my daughter and my house and my *life* without anyone.”

“Oh, Abby.” Charla looked at her with sympathy. Dishes rattled as they stacked them on the cart. “Sometimes you’re too independent for your own good. Warren really did a number on you.”

Warren wasn’t the only one though, admittedly, he’d been the latest in bad decisions that had come back to bite her. Abby was smart enough to know her background made her wary. Nobody did something for nothing. Stick your heart out there and it would get tromped. Every time. If trying to fit into a family and failing at age thirteen hadn’t proved that, Warren had.

Big, beautiful Brady Buchanon would have to find someone else to feel sorry for.

She stuck his twenty dollars into her pocket and debated on giving it back.

* * *

Lila’s play school telephoned an hour before Abby’s shift ended.

“For you, Abby,” Jan called, holding her hand over the mouthpiece. “Christina at the play school.”

The café was in the lull shortly before dinner hour and Abby was in the middle of filling and wiping down saltshakers. She recapped the latest one and went to the phone.

“Sorry,” she said to Jan. “I’m out of minutes for my phone.” But with Christmas coming, she was holding off on the purchase as long as possible.

“You know I don’t care when it’s important.” Her boss, a sturdy, energetic woman with close-cropped blond waves, winked. “Lila’s always important.”

“Thanks, Jan.” Her boss was good to her so Abby never wanted to take advantage. She took the phone and said, “Hello.”

A minute later she hung up. “Jan, Lila had a bathroom accident at school. I really have to go over there, but I’ll come back as soon as I take care of her.”

Jan glanced around the quiet café. “Charla and I can handle it for an hour until Mercy gets here. Get Lila and go on home. Tell her accidents happen to everyone.”

But they happened to Lila more than most. While her potty training had progressed to a good schedule considering the nerve damage below the waist, on occasion she had an accident.

Abby didn’t know whether to be grateful for her boss’s understanding or worried. She needed the hour on her paycheck, but Lila came first. “I’ll see you at five-thirty in the morning then?”

“Deal.” Jan waved her off.

The streets of Gabriel’s Crossing bustled with Christmas preparations. City workers in cherry pickers were draping strands of green lighted garland from one side of First Street to the other. In the center of each garland was a huge green wreath with artificial candles and a big red bow.

Just looking at the decorations going up everywhere filled her with excited dread. She loved seeing Lila’s excitement but wished she could give her more. Lila didn’t even have grandparents or other relatives to spoil her and buy her things.

But that was okay. They didn’t need anyone else. They had each other.

She swung by the house to pick up a change of clothes and reached Huckleberry Play School soon thereafter.

Greeted by Christina, the owner/operator of the day care where Lila had gone for the past year, Abby fretted. One of the rules of this facility was that children had to be potty trained. The staff accommodated Lila's special needs in other ways, but this was a rule for all children, not just Lila.

"I'm really sorry about this, Christina. Lila's been doing so well."

"She has. Don't worry about it this time, but if she regresses, we'll need to talk again."

"I understand." Truly she did, but this was the only preschool in town that accommodated Abby's long hours and odd work days. Plus, Lila loved it here. Abby wasn't sure what she would do if she had to find another placement.

"Lila is waiting in my office," Christina said. "She was very upset."

Abby hurried to the office and found her red-eyed daughter sitting with her small legs dangling from an adult chair. Chin on her chest, mouth tilted down, Lila was the picture of dejection.

Abby's heart broke at the sight. Her chest clutched as she gathered her child into her arms. "Hey, jelly fingers. Mom's here, and I brought your favorite outfit to change into."

"My jammies?" Lila asked hopefully.

Around a lump in her throat, Abby managed a chuckle. "We'll get into those after a bath at home. Okay? For now, how about your pink princess set?"

Lila sniffed, long and shuddery, and nodded her head.

Abby gathered her child into her arms and carried her to the bathroom to change, and then they headed home.

The usually chatty Lila said little in the car, though Abby tried to start distracting conversations about Christmas.

"Lila," Abby said, as they pulled into the blacktop drive and parked. "Accidents happen. Miss Jan said to remind you of that. You're doing great, and I'm proud of you."

"Will I ever be big like other kids?"

Unexpected tears jammed the back of Abby's nose and throat. She'd been dealing with the effects of Lila's mild spina bifida for years, but, instead of getting easier as Lila grew old enough to notice the world around her, the task became harder.

"You will always be the most awesome Lila in the world."

For now, this was enough to bring the faintest glimmer of a smile to her daughter's face. But how long before a nonanswer was not enough?

Heart heavy, Abby gathered her child into her arms and started to the house. As she stepped up on the porch, keys in one hand and Lila on her hip, the board she'd warned Brady Buchanon about gave way.

Her foot caught in the broken board and Abby struggled to maintain her balance. Struggled and failed. Instinctively trying to protect Lila, she twisted to the left and tumbled onto the porch in a heap. She lost her grip, and Lila hit the wooden porch and started to cry.

"Are you hurt? Oh, baby. You're okay. You're okay." In a panic, Abby scrambled to her feet and pulled Lila into her arms, searching for blood or bruises. With her nerve impairment, Lila didn't always know when she was injured.

Once she was certain no real emergency existed, Abby opened the door and carried Lila inside the living room. Both of them were shaking. She had never dropped her daughter. Never.

Lila curled up on the couch and sniveled. This hadn't been her best day.

Abby scooted onto the couch beside her daughter and laid her head against Lila's. "I'm sorry, baby. Do you hurt anyplace?"

"Uh-uh. Can I have a drink?" The usually sunny child sounded so small and pitiful Abby wanted to cry.

"Sure, you can." Abby pushed off the couch and went into the kitchen, adrenaline still pumping from the scare. "Stupid board. Stupid old house. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

As she railed against the accident, she opened the cabinet for a glass, and another chip of paint fell from the overpainted wood.

She needed a new house. A place that wasn't a danger to Lila.

Abby leaned her forehead against the cabinet and fought off the surge of pride. Brady Buchanan's voice played in her memory. He could give Lila something she needed.

As hard as it would be for Abby to accept charity again, this wasn't about her. This was about doing the right thing for Lila.

She dug in her pocket and pulled out the card with the blue Buchanan Built logo and Brady's number, and resigned herself to a little more humiliation.

Chapter Three

"You have to be kidding me?" Grimly, Brady leaned a shoulder against one unfinished wall of gypsum board, his cell phone pressed against his ear. He gripped the device as if he wanted to strangle someone. Which he did. "When did this happen?"

He listened as his father railed against yet another act of vandalism against one of the company's building sites. No one could figure out why Buchanan Built was being targeted, but someone seemed to know when a home-in-progress would be devoid of workers.

"I'll sleep here if I have to, but this project is not going to be damaged." Brady shuddered at the thought. They'd chunked thousands into this showplace along Crystal Ridge. A break-in could set them back for months and cost them more than the insurance could cover.

His father ranted, growing louder by the minute, as if the situation was entirely Brady's fault.

"Right. I hear you, Dad. Call Leroy at the police station. He knows about the others."

When he tapped the End key a few minutes later, his blood boiled and his finger trembled. What a lousy day. The trenchers had hit an electric cable and downed all the power in the Huckleberry Creek addition. A frame carpenter had been taken to the ER with appendicitis. Dad was furious over the lack of a plumber on the Edwards house. And now this. Another Buchanan Built home damaged by thugs.

He ran a hand over the top of his head and debated on a trip to the damaged site or staying with this project for the remainder of the day. Not much he could do over there until the police had made another useless investigation. Dad was already there and mad enough to spit nails faster and harder than an air gun.

Here was preferable at the moment.

From the back room, a table saw revved up in a high-pitched wail. The twins were on it, trimming out the bedrooms in a unique routed design created specifically for this house by the Buchanan brain trust.

His phone vibrated again. Brady groaned. Loudly. *Please. Not more trouble.*

"Hello," he growled into the mouthpiece, daring the caller to give him one more bit of bad news.

No one said anything for a couple of seconds, and then a very hesitant female voice asked, "Is this Brady Buchanan?"

A pleasant voice, sweet and warm and womanly.

Nice. But who?

His brain played mental gymnastics as he softened his reply, "Yes, this is Brady. May I ask who's calling?"

"Abby Webster. Have I caught you at a bad time?"

He almost laughed. She didn't know the half of it. "Not at all. What can I do for you, Abby? Maybe a little remodel work?"

He couldn't help it. He was born to be pushy when he wanted something. She'd probably turn him down again, but he had to try.

"Actually—" there was that hesitation again "—yes."

The word hummed through the cyberspace connecting them. She'd said yes?

“You changed your mind? May I ask why?” A smile lit his insides, erasing some of the lousy, lousy events of the day. Teasing, he said, “Was it my charm, or my pretty brothers? Or maybe the double order of French toast?”

He didn’t—wouldn’t—mention the tip.

She sighed out a weary breath. “Blame it on my front porch. I fell through.”

Brady’s shoulders tensed. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but I had Lila in my arms. She wasn’t hurt either, but she could have been.” Her words faded in an anguished breath.

Brady got her meaning. She didn’t particularly want the makeover, but for Lila she’d take it. He didn’t care what her reasons were. In the end, she’d be delighted with the results, and Lila would be better off while he got to play Santa. A win-win in his book any day of the week.

Already feeling vastly better, he said, “Let’s get together tonight and talk this over. I’ll come by after work.”

“Well, I—guess that would be okay.”

“Do you and Lila like barbecue?”

“What? Yes, we love it, but you don’t need to bring food.”

Brady laughed. “Abby, I’m a big boy. I gotta have food, and so do you.” Even though he couldn’t recall a time when he’d brought food for a prospective client. That was his sister’s domain. “What time works best?”

After a few more useless protests against him doing anything nice for her, she named the time and they ended the call.

His mood much elevated, he slid his cell phone into his back pocket and gave a soft whistle. “Quitting time, Dawg.”

The canine, sprawled in a corner of the great room like an ornament befitting the massive fireplace, lifted his brindled body from the bare concrete floor and gave his fur a hardy shake.

“We’re going to Abby Webster’s, and I might let you say hello. What do ya think about that?”

Dawg trotted to the door and looked back expectantly.

The dog was weird that way. He seemed to know what Brady was talking about most of the time. “Hold on a minute. I have to tell the other guys.”

Feeling unusually chipper, considering the problems of the day, Brady cleaned up his mess and secured his tools before talking to the twins.

“Another break-in,” he said as he entered what would be the master bedroom. At the moment, sawdust covered the floor, along with a stack of clean-smelling lumber. Smack in the middle of the room stood a table saw and one of his brothers in plastic safety goggles. “Dad called.”

Sawyer pushed the goggles atop his black hair and tilted his chin toward the unfinished ceiling in a pained groan. “That must have been fun.”

“Loved it,” Brady answered wryly. “You boys about ready to call it a night?” He rubbed his hands together. “I’ve got places to go and things to do.”

Dawson, on his haunches fitting trim, pushed to a stand. “You seem in a seriously good mood for someone who’s been talking to Dad about vandalism. Don’t tell me you have a date.”

“Nah, nothing like that.” Although he was taking food and going to see a woman, the reason had nothing to do with a date. It was all about the project, not the woman. “Dad’s not the only caller. Get this. Abby Webster changed her mind. The makeover is on!” He pumped a fist.

A grin deepened the single dimple in Dawson’s cheek. “Yeah? That’s terrific. When do we start?”

“I’m headed over there later tonight to work out plans. This should be the best makeover ever.”

The twins exchanged looks.

Brady pointed two index fingers, one at each brother. “Don’t start that. Abby’s not the only single-mom makeover we’ve done.”

Dawson held up both palms. “Hey, I’m with you. I was over there, remember. Nobody in town needs this remodel more than Abby and her little girl.”

“Yeah, the little girl,” Brady said. “She’s the kicker.”

Sawyer spiked an eyebrow in his usual tease. “And the mom’s no slouch.”

No, Brady thought, surprising himself. No, she wasn’t.

* * *

Abby’s nerves jittered as she opened the door for Brady Buchanon. He came inside, bringing with him the scent of hot, spicy barbecue.

“I can tell what’s in that sack,” she said as he handed it over. “The smell is fabulous.”

“Danny makes the best barbecue in this part of Texas.”

She knew, though budget constraints had meant she hadn’t eaten any of it in a long time. Eating out was a luxury reserved for Lila’s clinic visits when they really had no choice.

“You didn’t have to bring dinner.”

Brady shrugged. “It’s just food.”

Lila, who was lying on her belly on the rug sorting through a bag of magnetic shapes, held one up.

“This is a wetangle,” she said.

“Rectangle,” Abby corrected, unsure if Brady would understand Lila’s developing speech.

“I see that.” The big man went to his haunches beside her daughter. “Do you know any of the others?”

“Yes.” And she named off the circle, square and heart, making her mama proud.

“I brought you something.” From inside his jacket he took a small, stuffed animal. “I hope you like dogs.”

“A puppy!” Lila’s eyes lit up as Abby’s suddenly filled with unexpected tears. “Mama, look. A puppy. I love him.”

Abby wanted to protest the unnecessary gift, but how could she when it had made Lila so happy?

“Brady,” she simply said, shaking her head. Why had he done that? They weren’t friends or relatives. They barely knew each other.

Brady ignored her protest. He was, she noticed again, good at that.

“I have a dog outside in my truck,” he said to her beaming daughter. “Want to see him?”

Lila’s eyes grew wide. “A real one?”

“As real as can be.”

“What’s his name?”

“Dawg.”

With an odd hitch beneath her ribs, Abby listened to the easy conversation between her child and the giant man. Lila, accustomed to doctors and technicians and physical therapists, rarely met a stranger, but it was the man who bothered Abby. He couldn’t be for real. She knew that for a fact. People were nice in the beginning but after a while, they’d disappoint you.

Someday Lila would learn those things the hard way, a truth that made Abby ache. But today Lila was an innocent, trusting child clearly fascinated by the idea of a real dog, something she’d never had.

“Does he like little girls?” Lila asked.

“Crazy for them.”

“Will he jump on me?”

“Not if I tell him to be good.”

“I want to pet him.” In total trust, Lila reached her arms up toward Brady. “Let’s go.”

“Do you mind?” he said, rather belatedly to Abby.

Abby scoffed softly. Even if she minded, he’d put her in an impossible situation. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

She wanted to ask why he'd bother when he'd come to discuss the remodel, but instead she said, “Go ahead. She loves animals, especially dogs.”

Those mesmerizing blue eyes sparkled. “I gathered that by her reaction to the stuffed one.” To Lila, he said, “Come on, little one. Up you go.”

He dwarfed her child, this huge man with the handsome face and stunning eyes, but he was as gentle as a whisper as he lifted Lila into his arms.

A big, big man. Her tiny, precious girl.

Something tender moved inside Abby.

She whipped away to open the door, but Brady with his long stride beat her there and easily maneuvered both the door and the child.

“Watch that board,” she warned, suddenly scared that his superior size would send him plummeting with Lila as she had done.

“Got it.” He stepped over the opening.

Abby walked alongside, aware of Brady Buchanon in the most uncomfortable way. His kindness bewildered her. Not once since his arrival had he mentioned the makeover. Or the fact that she was the Buchanon charity case for the year.

The twenty-dollar bill was in her back pocket. She should return it, remind him that she didn't want his pity or his charity and that she was only accepting the makeover for Lila's sake. Even that stuck in her craw like a dry slice of toast. *She* wanted to provide for her daughter.

As they approached the blue pickup, a large brindle-colored dog with soulful golden eyes and a sweet expression stuck his head out the open driver's-side window.

“He thinks he can drive,” Brady said, eliciting a giggle from Lila. “You can pet him. He's a big sap. He'll love it.”

Lila placed a tentative hand on the dog's wide head. When he didn't move, only looked at her with those sweet eyes, she ruffled his ears. “Can he come out and play?”

“Sure. Open the door for him, will you, Abby?” He said the words casually, and she could see he felt comfortable with people in a way she didn't. But then, the Buchanons were a large family.

She opened the truck door, and the dog named Dawg leaped gracefully to the ground and stared up at his owner as if waiting for commands.

“Sit down, Dawg. This is Lila and Abby. Friends. Be good now.”

The dog flopped on his rear, long tail bumping the ground with comical eagerness. Brady went down on the balls of his feet in front of the animal with Lila on one khaki-clad knee. Abby watched as Dawg behaved like a gentleman while Lila petted him.

“He likes me,” Lila said.

“He sure does. Hold your hand out like this.” Brady took Lila's tiny hand and turned it palm up. “Now say, ‘Dawg, shake.’”

Lila did as Brady asked. When Dawg carefully plopped a furry paw into her palm, her giggle sent happy chills down Abby's spine.

“He did it! Mommy, Dawg shook my hand.”

“Is he always this well behaved?” Abby asked.

“Pretty much. I take him on the job with me.” Brady hitched a shoulder. “Basically take him everywhere. He has to behave or be stuck at home alone.”

“Do you let him inside the house?”

“Sure. He sleeps at the end of my bed.”

Okay, that was too much information. She didn't want to imagine a sleep-rumpled Brady in baggy pajama pants. He was a builder, here to do a job.

“Mama, can he come inside? Dawg can sit by me. I'll show him my shapes.”

Abby hesitated. To Brady, she said, “Should I let him?”

“Up to you, but he won’t be a problem. I can promise you that.”

Promises. She knew how those worked.

“I suppose it’s all right this once. What kind of dog is he?”

“Anyone’s guess. Some boxer, shepherd, Lab. Who knows? I got him from the shelter, but we don’t care, do we, pal? We’re all mutts in our way.” With one final pat on the dog’s head, Brady rose with Lila. The dog trotted along behind as they returned to the house.

Abby was keenly aware of the man who gently put her daughter on the floor mat, commanded the dog to behave and followed Abby into the kitchen.

Uncomfortable and uncertain, she asked, “Do you want to talk while we eat? Or after?”

This was not a social call. He’d surely want to do his business and move on. The Buchanons were busy people, involved in many segments of Gabriel’s Crossing life.

“Might as well eat while the barbecue and fries are hot. Talk can happen anytime.”

Though her kitchen-dining space was minuscule and made smaller by the invasion of a man the size of some mythological warrior, Brady made himself at home. He opened cabinets, found plates and knives, and generally embarrassed her.

“I can do this,” she said, grabbing the utensils from him.

“Many hands make light work.” He grinned. “That’s according to my Grandfather Buchanon who started the construction company. Having a bunch of grandsons made work easier for him.”

She quickly set out the dishes and food, going a little mushy to discover a foam container of macaroni in the bag.

He’d remembered Lila’s love of all things macaroni?

Who was this guy?

“I’ll get the little one,” he said, and ducked his head beneath the doorway as he went into the living room.

During their meal, Brady talked about everything but the makeover. He drew her out, asking questions about her work, Lila’s school, Christmas and all things Gabriel’s Crossing. He told her a funny story about his sisters and a skunk, and Abby found herself relating funny experiences from the café. Then they shared a laugh about the ongoing feud between Hoss Hanover, town mayor, and Flo Dubois, a former Vegas showgirl now in her seventies and still as sassy and ornery as ever.

Once or twice, she even forgot he was here on a charitable mission.

By the time the messy barbecue was demolished, the nervous butterflies in her stomach had subsided. Brady might be big but he wasn’t nearly as scary as she’d thought.

“Well,” he said, pushing his plate aside. “That was good. Now my brain can work. Let’s talk makeover.”

She held up a finger. “First, you have to know something. I’m only doing this because of Lila.”

He aimed those swimming-pool eyes at her. “Understood. Now, let’s get down to basics. I’ll do a walk-through and make notes of what needs done. Then, we’ll talk about it. I want your input, your ideas, what you want and need. I have people on my team who know all about special-needs construction. They’ll be in on the planning, too, but basically this project is my baby. Mine and yours.”

She was feeling a little overwhelmed. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“No need to say anything. I’ll bring by appliance catalogs, color charts, carpet samples and that kind of thing for you to look at.” He flashed a smile. “That’s where you come in.”

Carpet? Appliances? “I didn’t expect all that.”

In truth, she hadn’t expected anything, but this...this. She was starting to get excited. Not good. Not good at all. Excitement preceded disappointment.

As usual, Brady paid her no mind. He took a notepad from his jacket hanging on the back of a chair. “If it’s all right, I’ll inspect the structure first, get a basic idea of what we’ll need to do, and we’ll go from there.”

“Sure. I’ll just... Can I follow you around?”

He chuckled. "It's your house."

Leaving Lila to watch a *Veggie Tales* with Dawg sprawled adoringly at her side, Abby joined the builder. As they did the walk-through, she saw the house in a new light, from a stranger's viewpoint, and shame trickled into her stomach.

He must think she was a sorry excuse for a mother, raising her special-needs daughter in a run-down house with nothing more than a safety bar beside the bathtub.

"I installed that myself," she said, half in self-defense. She didn't want him judging her. She tried. And for now, she could carry Lila. "I was planning to add more as she grows."

"You did great." But he jotted all kinds of notes on that pad of his as he inspected plumbing under the sinks and thumped his big fist against walls. She cringed at the last, concerned he'd go right through.

"We could create a bathroom here specifically for her. Put a walk-in shower there," he said. "Big enough to accommodate her walker or a wheelchair. Add some bench seating, lower the sink and commode so she can access them herself."

The ideas made Abby's heart soar and her eyes water. "That would be wonderful. I don't know how to thank you."

"No thanks needed. Gotta make things right for the little princess." He winked. "Dawg said so."

She smiled, grateful to him for making light of a humiliating situation. For her, anyway.

They moved through the house and her brain spun as he discussed removing walls, widening halls and rearranging the interior of the house for more space and flow.

Hope, that sneaky weed, sprouted up inside her chest. His ideas were wonderful, beautiful, a dream come true. He was amazing, kind and funny, and Abby found herself looking forward to the days and hours he'd spend in her house making it better.

Though the decision had come slowly, like Cinderella preparing for the ball, she now wanted this makeover badly. For Lila's sake. Brady really could give her child what she needed.

When they entered her bedroom, Abby was thankful she'd made the bed and tidied up before his arrival. She lingered in the doorway, a little disconcerted to have him in her private space. But she'd have to get used to that, she supposed. He was a builder; he didn't think anything about it.

Brady pointed to the ceiling and exterior wall. "Some leakage in here."

"Only when it rains." She tried to sound chipper, but Brady frowned and her stomach dipped. "Will that be a problem?"

"Depends." He walked across to the window and the wooden floor groaned. He paused, bounced a little and frowned again. "Where's your crawl space? Lots of weak spots in the flooring. I'd better have a look at the joists before we get too far into this."

She didn't know a joist from a joust, but she knew where the crawl space was, though she couldn't imagine a man his size crawling under her house. "You'll get dirty."

Humor brightened his face. "I'm in construction. We get a little dirty."

"Yes, but you're the owner."

"A hands-on owner. Dad insisted we know the business from the ground up. Literally." He rotated his wide shoulders and looked down at his large body. "Though nowadays I usually send someone smaller under the houses."

"I fixed a broken pipe last winter. I could go under there and tell you what I see."

"Don't worry. I got it. Be right back."

"You'll need a flashlight."

"In my truck."

He headed outside while she checked on Lila and Dawg, and then started on kitchen cleanup. She heard him clang on a pipe with something metal, so she knew he'd somehow squeezed into the small space.

He was gone for quite a while and when he came inside, he didn't look happy.

Putting away the last dish, she dried her hands, worry niggling.

“You have spiderwebs—”

His chin dipped toward his shoulder. “Where?”

“Your hair. Bend down.” Without thinking anything of it, she dusted the cobwebs from his russet hair and the back of his shirt. The action felt intimate somehow, and she finished quickly.

“Sorry. I thought I knocked them off outside.”

A little dust on the floor was the least of her concerns. “What’s the verdict?”

“Not what I’d hoped. Or expected.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sit down. Let’s talk a minute.” He motioned to the table.

They’d been talking for two hours, but she pulled out a chair and sat. He did the same. A knot formed in her belly. Something was wrong.

“I have bad news, Abby.” Brady pinched the top of his lip, drew in a deep breath and blew it out in a hearty gust. “Your house is not salvageable. I can’t do the remodel.”

Chapter Four

Abby had known it was too good to be true. She shouldn’t be disappointed. But she was. Which was exactly what she got for getting her hopes up. She knew better.

“Is it that bad?” Sure, the old house leaked and was draftier than a barn, but she and Lila lived in reasonable comfort. Except when it rained. Or the north wind blew.

“Bad enough that it isn’t cost-effective to remodel.”

“Okay.” She nodded once. She’d been let down before. At least she hadn’t started dreaming and planning too much. Maybe a little when he’d mentioned color charts and carpet samples.

She put on her best fake smile and stood. “Thank you for trying. I appreciate the thought and your time, and I’m sure you’ll have no problem finding someone else for your Christmas makeover. It’s a wonderful thing you do.”

Brady tilted his head and lifted his index finger. “Whoa, wait a second. I didn’t say I was giving up. Buchanons never give up.”

“But if you can’t repair the problems—”

“There’s always a way.” He twitched a shoulder. “We can start fresh, build new.”

“What?” She slithered back onto the chair, more than a little stunned. Was he serious? Build new?

“Makeovers come in many forms. Remodel. Brand-new. In your situation, we’ll shoot for new. We can bulldoze this house and build exactly what you want in its place.”

Abby refused to acknowledge the sudden, thrilling anticipation frolicking in her belly. What he asked was impossible. Completely impossible. Even though the property was hers to do with as she pleased, she had no place else to go. Bulldozing to build new was out of the question! “I don’t think so, Brady.”

“Why not? I can build bigger, better and more efficient from the ground up, a house exactly the way you want it. With all the bells and whistles and lots of pretty things for Lila.”

Oh, he was cruel, dangling that carrot in front of her. For a fleeting moment the image of a perfect little cottage with fresh paint and matching shutters surrounded by colorful flowers flashed through her mind. A dream home for her and Lila. A place that would assist Lila to develop her strengths rather than inhibit her.

Then reality, that cruel beast, came roaring back. Some things just weren’t possible. “Thank you, but it won’t work.”

“Sure it will,” he said with the confidence only a successful man with an easy upbringing would display. “Starting fresh is the perfect solution.”

He clearly hadn’t been kicked in the teeth very many times, and he had no understanding of a person without alternatives, with no place to go, no one but herself to lean on. “This place may not

look like much to you, Brady, but this is our home. There's nothing perfect about tearing it down. We live here."

"You can live somewhere else temporarily. It won't be long. My crews work fast."

She wanted to accept his offer so badly her throat ached from holding back a shout of *Yes!*

"I can't," she said instead. "Please understand, as much as I appreciate the offer, I like my home the way it is." And frogs had wings. "Lila and I are fine right here."

She wasn't about to admit that she had nowhere else to go, no money for another monthly payment on a rental and no relatives to impose upon.

He tilted back in his chair and pinched his upper lip. He had a habit of doing that, she noticed, when things weren't going his way. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth in a puff of frustration. His blue eyes, laser bright, dimmed the slightest amount.

"You're saying no?" He seemed incredulous as if only an idiot would turn down a brand-new house, and she wasn't going to explain the circumstances to change his assessment. It was bad enough he pitied her living conditions; she sure didn't want him to know the rest.

"Yes." From the living room, she heard Lila giggle and fought off a surge of longing. Her baby deserved better.

She stood again and this time Brady stood with her, towering over her. There was something comforting about a nice man who could make her feel small and feminine.

Teeth clamped tight against the bizarre emotions Brady Buchanon elicited, she led the way into the living room.

Dawg was lying with his nose on Lila's lap. Her tiny hand rested on his wide head as they both watched cartoons. The dog lifted his eyes toward his master. Brady nudged his chin toward the door. "Time to go, boy."

Slowly, Dawg stretched to his feet.

"Oh," Lila said, and wrapped her arms around the animal's neck.

"Brady and Dawg have to leave now, Lila. Tell them bye."

Lila looked as if her best friend forever was abandoning her. She gave Dawg one final squeeze. "Bye, Dawg. Bye, Mr. Brady."

Brady, whose jaw was tight, as if he held back a hearty temper, softened. He gave one of Lila's twin ponytails a gentle tug. "Bye now, little one."

Stiffly Abby opened the front door, eager now for him to leave so she could forget this had happened, forget she'd almost let herself dream. "Thank you for the barbecue."

She didn't know if she was making the right choice or not, but for her, refusal was the only choice.

* * *

"So how's the home makeover going?" Dawson asked as he plopped down next to Brady on the couch at Mom's house the next Sunday afternoon.

"It's not." Brady stuck his hand in the chip bowl and filled his paw with Fritos and tossed one to Dawg.

"No?" Sawyer joined the pair in the family room waiting for the NFL game to come on. From the kitchen came smells of hot Ro*Tel cheese dip and homemade chili as the seven siblings gathered for the weekly after-church hangout and football frenzy. "Why not?"

"Abby changed her mind." Brady was, he had to admit, pretty steamed about that little turn of events. What kind of woman turned down a new house when she could obviously use it, especially when her kid had needs that weren't being addressed by her current residence? And the way she'd refused, without so much as a reason, irritated him.

"I thought she was on board." Dawson crunched down on a chip. "What did you do?"

"You think this is my fault?" Like the fiasco on the Crystal Ridge building site. According to Dad, Brady should have foreseen the decorative-rock mix-up. Now he had an entire fireplace to

demolish and start all over, as if deadlines weren't tight enough. Even the church service, where he usually found some peace, hadn't eased the stress tightening the back of his shoulders. This deal with Abby was the straw that broke the camel's back.

He glared at his twin brothers—first Sawyer and then Dawson had blamed him for the problem. If steam wasn't coming out of his ears, he'd be surprised. He'd enjoyed that barbecue supper with Abby Webster and her little girl. Maybe that's what bugged him most. He'd liked her. He thought she liked him.

Dawson raised both hands in surrender. "You'll hear no blame from me. I only meant, what's going on? Why did she back out?"

"Who knows? Abby Webster is the strangest, most stubborn woman I've ever encountered."

Dawson gave him a long look. "I thought you liked her."

"Yeah, well, the feeling wasn't mutual, I guess. She showed me the door."

"So, what did she say?"

"Just that she couldn't. It wouldn't work."

"Couldn't what? What wouldn't work?" Sawyer, the mirror twin to Dawson, stretched his long legs out on the floor next to the sofa. By the time the game started there would be Buchanons all over the room. Brady was happy he'd gotten here first to grab a seat on the couch, but he usually ended up on the floor with Dawg.

He had a quick flash of Dawg on the floor of Abby's house with Lila, the angel-drawing charmer. He'd seen her pink ankle braces and the walker she used for balance. Abby's house, with the crooked floors and raised thresholds, was a hazard to Lila. He really wanted to do that makeover for the little girl.

"Long story short, the house is a wreck. Joist rotted, leaks everywhere, bad plumbing. There's so much wrong, I wouldn't spend a dime to remodel it."

"Then you're the one who backed out," Dawson said. "I knew I should have gone with you."

"No." Brady frowned at a Frito and then at his brother. "I offered a new house instead of the remodel. Raze the old one, build from the ground up. It's only a matter of time until she'll have no choice but to move." He'd never built from ground up before on one of his makeovers, but why not?

Dawson turned a bewildered face in his direction. "She turned down a new house?"

"Flat. No reason. Just no."

"That *is* weird."

"See?" He pointed a Frito. "I told you."

"Her little girl sure is cute. Kind of gets you right here." Dawson tapped his chest with a fist. "I thought Abby would go for it for her sake."

"Yeah." Brady popped the chip in his mouth and considered going to the kitchen for the Ro*Tel dip. "Pretty adorable kid."

"A kid who needs a handicap-accessible house."

"I don't get it," Sawyer said. He dragged a throw pillow from the sofa and shoved it under his dark head. "Why would the mom refuse? Makes no sense."

"Take it from the top, Brady," Dawson said. "What exactly went down? She was on board before you mentioned the rebuild. When did things go sour?"

Brady related the conversation, trying his best to remember the exact point when Abby backed away. "It was the demolition. She said it would never work. After that—" He drew a finger across his throat. "The project was dead."

"Hmm." Dawson pushed back against the cushions of Mom's enormous gray sectional. His Dallas Cowboys jersey stretched across his lean, toned chest. Like all the Buchanon brothers, he'd played college football and was still a fanatic about the game. "She said it wouldn't work? Wonder what she meant by that? What wouldn't work?"

Brady's shoulders hitched. "You got me. I promised a fast rebuild so she wouldn't have to live elsewhere very long."

Dawson snapped his fingers and leaned forward. "Could that be the problem?"

"What? She didn't believe we could work that fast?"

"No. The living-elsewhere part."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I get it." Sawyer sat up and thumped the pillow with his fist. "Maybe she doesn't have another place to live. Or maybe money for the rent, even for a few months, would be prohibitive. A waitress doesn't make much money, and with the little girl's special needs..."

"True, but they could stay with relatives," Dawson said.

Brady shook his head. "According to my sources, she doesn't have any. Grew up in foster care, I think, and her little girl's father skipped out on her before Lila was born. It's just Abby and Lila against the world, which was part of the reason I chose them."

"That poor girl." Karen Buchanon breezed into the room bearing hot cheese dip. Behind her was Brady's adored younger sister, Allison, a peanut of a woman with dark, flippy hair. Her fiancé, Jake Hamilton, once an outcast in the Buchanon household, would show up at some point in the afternoon after checking on his cattle and his grandmother.

"I never considered her living arrangements, but that could be the problem," Brady admitted. "Maybe she has nowhere to go."

"And no spare money for a rental, even a cheap one." Dawson took both hands, rotated his head and popped his neck. "Crick," he said to no one in particular.

Brady arched an eyebrow. "You don't get much cheaper than her house."

"But it's hers."

"I wonder why she didn't simply tell me she had no place else to live during the rebuild. If that's the case."

"Oh, Brady." His mother stood behind Dawson and began kneading his shoulders. "If the girl has any pride at all, which she clearly does, she wouldn't tell you such a thing. No one wants to be pitied."

Brady opened his mouth and then closed it again, the salty taste of chips making him thirsty. "You think that's her problem?"

"Makes sense to me," Dawson said, settling into his mother's massage with his eyes closed. "Though it's your problem, not hers."

"Ditto," said Sawyer.

Brady had always been surrounded by a huge family, sometimes to the point of smothering. He couldn't fathom anyone being completely alone, but if Abby Webster had no one but her four-year-old daughter, she was a pretty amazing woman. Really amazing. She'd bought a house, such as it was, and balanced a job with the needs of her special child. Lila was clearly loved and well cared for.

"I guess I embarrassed her."

"No doubt about it." His mom left Dawson's side to pat Brady's shoulder. "But you meant well, honey."

Brady put his big paw over her hand. "Thanks, Mom. Any ideas of how to fix it?"

"Fix it? No. But I might have an idea of how to get her out of that house so you can build her a new one. Dad won't mind."

"If it involves Dad, forget it. He's against the project this year."

"I heard." She smiled. "But you're going to do it anyway, aren't you?"

"If I can convince Abby to let me."

"Good." She tugged at her pressed slacks and perched on the arm of an easy chair. "Abby's excited about the makeover. She wants it, son."

"How do you know this?"

“Jan, Abby’s boss, talked to me at the BPW meeting.” Mom was president of the local chapter of Business and Professional Women. “She was thrilled for Abby. She also told me what a hard worker Abby is and how well she takes care of her little girl. According to Jan, no one deserves your makeover any more than Abby and Lila Webster. That’s why I’m willing to step in and help out.”

Brady looked at his mother in awe. “Is there anything in this town you don’t know?”

Her eyes crinkled. “Not much.”

Sawyer snorted. Dawson just smiled. Allison found an empty space next to Sawyer, curled her little feet beneath her and reached for the dip.

“Yeah, well, that still doesn’t solve the problem. I can’t move her in with me.” Though the thought didn’t exactly repulse him. Dawg would be thrilled.

“But *I* can move her in with *me*.”

Four sets of sibling eyes turned to their mother. She pushed back a lock of tidy blond hair, a cat’s smile on her lips.

“Since you kids built your own places, Dad and I ramble around in this big old, empty house. We’ve got the room. Abby needs a temporary place to stay, and a child always makes Christmas season more fun. So why not?”

“You’d do that?” Brady didn’t know why he was asking. Of course, she’d do it. In the past, she’d mothered a number of foreign-exchange students along with her brood of seven. And that didn’t count the handfuls of friends and relatives who’d lived temporarily in the Buchanon house, including Jake, Allison’s fiancé. Mom loved having the house filled with people.

“I think it’s a great idea.” This from Allison.

Brady, for all the hope suddenly surging through his veins, had his doubts. Mom might be on board, but what would Abby think? The Buchanons were strangers to her, and the family didn’t know Abby like he knew Abby. She was stubborn, prideful, independent to a fault. Pretty, too, he’d noticed, though why his thoughts had gone in that direction he couldn’t fathom. “I don’t know. Think she’ll go for it?”

Mom arched one eyebrow and reached for a chip. “There’s only one way to find out.”

* * *

“Someone here to see you, Abby. Take a break.”

Abby slid a tray of dishes onto the sink in the back of the diner and turned toward her boss. The noon rush had passed but there was still plenty to do. “Who is it?”

“Karen Buchanon.”

“*Karen Buchanon?*” If Jan had said Brady, she wouldn’t have been surprised. In fact, she’d probably have gotten that jittery wiggle in her stomach, a totally stupid reaction to a man she barely knew. But he was a good guy who could cause Prince Charming fantasies even in a hard nut like her. She also felt a little guilty for upsetting him. He’d offered an act of kindness and she’d shot him down.

Yesterday, he’d come into the Buttered Biscuit with a big grin and a crazy invitation for her and Lila to temporarily move in with his parents while he built her brand-new house. Even though her heart had leaped at the offer, he could not have been serious. Well intentioned, yes. Serious, no way.

She didn’t know the Buchanons. They didn’t know her. Things like that didn’t happen except in movies. And how had he known a decent place to live was her primary reason for rejecting the makeover?

Five minutes later, as she sat across an open table from the blonde and lovely Buchanon matriarch, she learned how serious Brady had been. “Mrs. Buchanon, please don’t take this the wrong way, but why? Why would you open your home to a complete stranger?”

“My family has been tremendously blessed, and we believe that caring about others is not only a directive from the Lord but it makes us happier people. We love to give. Brady’s gifts are in his ability to build, and he loves giving away a Buchanon Built home at Christmas. He plans for it and looks forward to it all year.”

Abby fidgeted with the saltshaker, realized what she was doing and shoved it back to the side of the table. Brady had hinted that the Buchanons were devout Christians, but so were lots of people in Texas and none of them gave away houses. At least none that she knew about. “There are other people in Gabriel’s Crossing who could use a makeover.”

“My son’s heart is the biggest part of him and, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, that’s saying a lot. When Brady sets his sights on something, he’s a bulldog.”

“But why me?”

“It’s the way Brady’s made. He picked you and you’re it.” She folded her hands atop the table. “I do know this. He was taken with your little girl. He told the family about her, showed us the angel she drew him and even hung it on his refrigerator.”

A piece of pride chipped away. “He did?”

Karen nodded. “‘An angel from an angel,’ he said. Now, we’re all anxious to meet her. She must be amazing.”

“Oh, she is. Lila is the kindest, funniest, smartest, most resilient—” She caught herself and laughed, self-conscious and sure her warm face glowed pink. “Sorry. I get a little carried away about my daughter. She’s everything to me.”

“Then do this for her, Abby. Let Brady build your house. Give that amazing daughter of yours a new home for Christmas. And give us the pleasure of knowing your special little girl.”

Unbidden tears welled in Abby’s eyes. Buchanons didn’t play fair.

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