

A young woman with long, wavy blonde hair is smiling warmly at the camera. She is holding a white mug in her right hand and resting her chin on her left hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus teal color.

STACY CONNELLY

Not Just
the Girl
Next Door

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Stacy Connelly

Not Just The Girl Next Door

«HarperCollins»

Connelly S.

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Can she ever be more than this man's best friend? His best buddy's sister. Someone in need of protection. That's how Zeke Harper has always seen animal trainer Mollie McFadden. He can't cross the line, no matter how irresistible he finds the girl-next-door. Until a surprise kiss takes them beyond the bounds of friendship. Now Zeke wonders if this woman who opens her life to pets in need can find a place for him—in her heart!

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STACY CONNELLY has dreamed of publishing books since writing stories about a girl and her horse. Eventually, boys made it onto the page as she discovered a love of romance novels. She is thrilled that her novel *Once Upon a Wedding* was recently turned into a movie titled *Christmas Wedding Planner*.

Stacy lives in Arizona with her two spoiled dogs. She loves to hear from readers at stacyconnelly@cox.net, at stacyconnelly.com or on Facebook.

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MILLS & BOON

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To the real-life shelter workers dedicated to
finding forever homes for the animals in their care...

Thank you!

To Susan Litman and Gail Chasan
for thinking of me!

And to my Shadow... I miss you, baby girl.

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[Chapter One](#)

Mollie McFadden scooted closer to the good-looking guy in the corner. “Hey, handsome. How’d a fellow like you end up in a place like this?”

Soulful brown eyes glanced in her direction, then quickly away, but Mollie didn’t let that deter her. She had a reputation for winning over strong, silent types. “I bet you’ve got a story to tell, don’t you?”

Again a slight flicker of eyelids, this time followed by a big sigh.

“A heartbreaking one, too, huh?” She inched a little closer but kept her hands to herself even though her heart ached to offer the comfort he obviously craved. “Bet you’re feeling lost and abandoned and alone.”

Her pulse skipped a beat as he shifted. He might have simply been looking for a more comfortable position, but she didn’t miss how he settled a little closer to her. “But you have to believe things are going to get better.”

He let out a huff that sounded more than a little doubtful. “I’m telling you, it will. Look at all Spring Forest has been through in the last few months, including a tornado, of all things!”

Maybe she was reading too much into body language, but Mollie swore a slight shudder ran through his solid frame. “The storm was pretty scary, wasn’t it? But in Spring Forest, people really help each other out. You’ll see if you just give us a chance. In fact...” she leaned closer to whisper “...something tells me you might even find your perfect match.”

A pair of dark eyebrows rose at that. “I know, I know. It seems hard to believe now, but I have a good feeling about this.”

And that feeling grew and bloomed and warmed her heart into a melting puddle of goo as the rescue dog named Chief slowly lowered his chin to rest against her jean-clad thigh.

Reaching out, she gently placed her hand on the soft ruff of fur at his neck. “We’re going to find a great home for you.” Though she’d worked with plenty of pound puppies during her years volunteering at the animal shelter, Mollie’s throat clogged with tears as she promised, “The very best home.”

The Whitaker sisters, affectionately known by the nicknames Birdie and Bunny, had asked Mollie to come to the Furever Paws Animal Rescue to meet with Chief. As a dog trainer, she worked with many dogs—from purebreds to shelter mutts. Shy pups like Chief, though, were the ones she had a soft spot for. Most canines were outgoing, adventurous and loving by nature. To see one so trapped by fear, cowering in the back of his kennel, broke her heart.

Adopters were all too likely to pass up diamonds in the rough like Chief. “Not this time, boy,” she promised. “We’re going to break you out of your shell and show the world how fabulous you are.”

Mollie cringed a little at the familiar words. They mirrored the bold, confident vow her friend Amanda Sylvester had made. Only Amanda hadn’t been talking about a four-legged companion. She’d been talking about *Mollie*.

But Mollie didn’t care about the whole world seeing her as special...just one particular guy who unfortunately only saw her as his best friend’s little sister.

Chief made a small sound, a mix between a whine and a bark, definitely punctuated by a question mark at the end.

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Mollie insisted as she shoved thoughts of her pathetic love life from her mind. “The odds are way more in your favor.”

With his striking black-and-tan coloring, medium build and short fur, Chief had the outward makings of an easily adoptable dog. All he needed was a bit of confidence and adopters would no longer walk by his kennel before he had a chance to catch their eye.

“Something tells me you’re smart, too.” Even though he was a mix, shepherds were generally regarded as one of the most intelligent breeds. “I bet we can even teach you some tricks, like—”

Mollie didn’t get a chance to tell Chief about the joys of fetch. A sudden crash shook the window. With a startled yelp, the dog scrambled to his paws and scurried to his corner.

Mollie glared at the wall as if she could see through to the construction going on outside. She’d asked Birdie to take Chief out of his kennel and into one of the visitation rooms. Though the furnishings were all secondhand donations, the worn brown leather sofas, mismatched end tables and floral area rug had all the touches of a typical living room. Mollie wanted Chief to associate the home-like environment with a safe and happy place.

Something she was going to have an even harder time accomplishing now. Mollie took a deep breath and forced her own tense muscles to relax. Getting frustrated wouldn't help. She often felt her own dog, Arti, could tell what kind of a day she'd had before she even walked through the door and kicked off her shoes. She didn't want poor Chief thinking she was upset with him.

But despite her best efforts, the loud noise had erased the small progress she'd made. Curled in the corner with his nose practically tucked behind his hind leg, the dog refused to respond.

Swallowing her disappointment, but reminding herself that changing behavior took time, she slipped from the room and walked down the long hallway toward the main lobby. Thanks to a recent fund-raiser, the Whitaker sisters had plans to spruce up the small space, including updating the furniture and adding some color to the plain beige walls and a new stain treatment to the concrete floors.

For now, the main bright spot was the small gift shop off to the side where a rainbow of leashes and collars lined the walls in a variety of styles and sizes. The store also offered a selection of bowls and toys and beds. Everything an adopter might need when taking home a new furry friend.

One of the shelter volunteers was working the front desk, phone tucked against her shoulder as she jotted some notes. "I'm sorry, can you say that again?" the girl asked, pressing her free hand against her ear as the high-pitched whine of a saw filled the air.

Mollie pushed one of the glass doors open and stepped out onto the front porch. The scent of freshly cut wood drifted on the midmorning breeze, and she followed the strident, no-nonsense sound of Birdie Whitaker's voice around the side of the building. The sixtysomething shelter co-owner, dressed in a denim jumpsuit over a long-sleeved blue T-shirt, was known for working twice as hard as most people half her age.

"Is everything okay?" Mollie asked after the woman finished her conversation with the construction foreman.

Birdie shook her head. "I can't wait for these repairs to be over. I hope the work will start to speed up now that Rebekah's applied for a grant," she said, speaking of the shelter's new director.

The brown roof and dark gray siding weren't much to look at, but the prominently displayed logo—the silhouette of a dog and a cat within a large heart—spoke to the shelter's main purpose. And, as always, Birdie focused on what mattered most. "We hope to use that money to expand the kennels so we can house more animals, plus create an outdoor space for the cats and a dog run."

"The changes are going to be a huge benefit to the shelter," Mollie agreed. And, more importantly, to the animals. Birdie and Bunny were such amazing advocates for the furry friends in their care—always striving to treat them as potential pets rather than as unwanted strays.

"But now for the reason why I asked you to come to Furever Paws today. What do you think about Chief?"

"He's such a sweet dog, but he's so skittish." After explaining her minor success with the dog and then Chief's reaction to the noise outside, Mollie asked, "Is there anyone here he's bonded with?"

If ever a dog needed a foster home, it was Chief. Between the volunteers and a stream of adopters coming through, not to mention the varied mix of other animals, shelters could be stressful. Add in the construction noise, and kennel life had to be terrifying for the poor dog.

"Well," the older woman mused, "there is someone." Spotting another volunteer walking up the gravel parking lot with a gorgeous yellow Lab, Birdie said, "Excuse me for one moment."

After speaking to the young woman, Birdie returned to Mollie's side. "Come with me. There's something you should see."

Leading the way back down the hall toward the visitation room, Birdie stopped at the large viewing window. As she stepped up to the glass, Mollie looked for Chief in his corner, but the dog wasn't there. Instead, he was sitting in the middle of the room, gazing adoringly at a gorgeous blonde.

"He doesn't even look like the same dog," Mollie said, amazed by the change in his demeanor. Though his ears were still back and his head bowed in typical submissive behavior, Chief had stopped

shaking. She might have even seen a hint of a tail wag across the linoleum floor. “Who is that in there with him?”

Birdie grinned. “That is Charlie.”

“Charlie.” Mollie took a closer look at the large dog circling the room with her nose pressed to the ground and her tail swishing through the air. “Isn’t she the dog Claire and Matt were considering for his niece before Ellie ended up falling in love with Sparkle?”

Claire Asher, a teacher at the local middle school and fellow volunteer, had recently gotten engaged to her one-time high school sweetheart, Matt Fielding. The two of them had reunited while helping Ellie train Sparkle.

“Yes. Matt’s sister wanted a smaller dog. I’m starting to think that might be just as well, seeing how Chief is so attached to Charlie. Bunny is hoping we can find someone to adopt them as a pair, but with larger dogs, that’s not as likely.”

Adopting them out together would be ideal. So, too, would fostering them as a pair. Not that Mollie had arrived at the shelter with any intention of fostering Chief. She was supposed to be there only to offer her assessment. But hadn’t she known within minutes of meeting the shy dog that the shelter wasn’t the best place for him? As she watched Charlie lower her chest almost to the floor with her tail wagging wildly behind her in a classic play bow, Mollie knew having the happy-go-lucky Lab on her side would make working with Chief much easier.

Mollie sighed. She’d never been able to turn away from a dog in need. She smiled in memory of her first dog, Shadow. Her parents had never allowed animals in the house, so the stray that she and Zeke Harper rescued had ended up living at his house a few doors down. Mollie had spent almost as much time over at the Harpers’ as she had at her own home.

Of course, not all of that had been about spending time with Shadow...

Pushing the thought from her mind, Mollie turned her focus to the shy shepherd. “Chief needs a quieter environment and to spend one-on-one time with a human to get over his fear.”

“So you’ll take them—I mean, him,” Birdie corrected quickly.

But Mollie wasn’t fooled. Knowing it had likely been the older woman’s plan all along, she sighed. “I’ll take them both.”

* * *

Mollie knew she’d made the right decision as soon as she loaded Charlie and Chief into her SUV. Chief balked when she led him toward the back hatch, lowering his head and thrashing against the leash. Mollie had anticipated having to struggle to get the good-sized dog into one of the crates she’d borrowed from the shelter. Charlie, however, sailed over the lowered tailgate and settled right in. Clearly afraid of being left behind, Chief followed suit.

“You’re going to be my right-hand dog, aren’t you, Charlie?” Mollie asked as she left Spring Forest behind and headed toward the rural outskirts north of the small North Carolina town.

Four years ago, when Mollie had been looking for a home of her own, she’d known she wanted a place in the country. Dog training could be on the noisy side, and she hadn’t wanted any next-door neighbors to complain. Plus, she knew she’d need plenty of outdoor space for distance training as well as agility work.

Her tiny house on its large lot was perfect.

She wrinkled her nose a little at the thought. Okay, it was perfect for the dogs. She still had some work to do—maybe even a lot of work to do—before the place would be perfect for her. And she really did have a plan for the needed repairs and improvements and upgrades. Somehow, though, time tended to get away from her, which led to dozens of half-finished projects and an overwhelming number of idea boards on Pinterest.

“Don’t you worry, though,” she told the dogs. “You guys come first.”

She’d get around to those repairs soon enough and—

Mollie braked a bit harder than she'd intended as she caught sight of a familiar sleek black sedan parked off to the side of her house. Her heart instantly skipped a beat. She hadn't expected to see Zeke today. She'd texted him after Birdie asked her to swing by the shelter. So for him to show up unannounced, at a time when he knew she wouldn't be around, only meant one thing.

Her pulse picked up as she opened the driver-side door, and Mollie had to remind herself that she was annoyed with him. How many times did they have to have this conversation?

"Hey, Moll." Walking around the side of her house like he owned it, Zeke Harper greeted her with a smile. "How did it go at the shelter?"

Mollie tried to glare at him. She really did. But as he lifted a muscled arm to wipe the sheen of sweat off his forehead, annoyance wasn't exactly the emotion sending a blast of heat through her body. Dressed in a navy T-shirt and well-worn jeans with—heaven help her—a leather tool belt around his narrow hips, Zeke Harper looked more like the hot host of a DIY show than like the respected psychologist he was.

Trying to keep her voice, her blood pressure and her hormones from blasting sky high, she asked, "What are you doing here, Zeke?"

He hitched a thumb over one broad shoulder. "I thought I'd get a jump on replacing those rotted steps on the back porch." A smile he didn't try all that hard to hide tugged at his lips. "You were off to such a good start, tearing them out like you did."

Mollie's face heated. She'd felt quite proud of herself as she'd torn out the rotting wood steps, risers and stringers. Since then, she'd made several unsuccessful attempts at cutting the new stringers but could never quite get the angle right. So she had moved on to another project and contented herself with knowing she was getting her lunge work in every time she came in from the backyard.

"I was going to finish them," she said.

"Sure you were, kid," Zeke said happily as he threw an arm around her shoulders. "But what are friends for?"

Mollie cringed a little, enough so Zeke noticed and quickly removed his arm. "Sorry, I guess I am kind of sweaty."

"You know I'm not afraid to get dirty," Mollie challenged.

As their gazes met, for a brief second the atmosphere around them seem to change, to shimmer with an electric charge like the air right before a storm. His hazel eyes, normally so full of teasing and laughter, darkened, and Mollie's heart fluttered in her chest.

But then he blinked, and whatever she *thought* she'd seen disappeared. "You had a three foot drop-off at the edge of the porch. That's not safe."

Overprotective concern. Now *that* emotion she immediately recognized and the curious flutter sank to her stomach like a stone.

Kid, she reminded herself as she swallowed hard. *Friend*. That was how Zeke thought of her. The little sister he'd never wanted.

He had teasingly dubbed her with the title long ago, and even though she'd never thought of him as a big brother, a part of her clung to the designation like a shield. Anything to keep the man she'd fallen in love with years ago from ever learning about her hopeless crush.

"You could at least wait for me to ask for help first," she argued.

"I would." He pinned her with a knowing look. "But you never ask."

Maybe she did have a habit of digging deeper when she was already in over her head. But she wasn't a kid anymore, and the woman in Mollie longed for the day when Zeke Harper would see her as someone other than his best friend's little sister...always in need of rescue.

[Chapter Two](#)

"Two dogs?" Zeke demanded as he followed Mollie around the side gate to her backyard. Though her property extended far beyond the fence line, the wooden structure that surrounded the large grassy area was one of the first remodeling projects he'd helped her with.

Before taking on the leaky faucets. Before putting in the new water heater. Before tearing out the decades-old carpet. Because the fence was important to the dogs and the dogs were more important to Mollie than anything.

He admired her huge heart when it came to the animals, he really did. But he was starting to worry that she was dedicating too much of her life to the dogs she rescued and the ones she trained.

“Your text said that you were going to the shelter to evaluate a dog. You never said anything about bringing two of them home with you.”

“I *did* go to evaluate him.” She tossed the words, along with her reddish-blond curls, over her shoulder as she glanced back at him. “And my evaluation was that Chief needed to be in a foster home and out of a kennel.”

Mollie had introduced him to both dogs—the happy, playful seventy-pound puppy named Charlie and the shy, scared Chief.

The poor guy did look terrified. He’d been cowering in the back of the crate in Mollie’s SUV, and it had taken quite a bit of coaxing from Mollie and some encouraging barks from Charlie to get him to come out. And even then, he’d crouched so low that his belly was practically brushing against the grass.

“Look, I get it, but don’t you think this is a lot to take on? Between the house, volunteering at Furever Paws, your job, your own dog...” He waved a hand to the house, trying not to cringe at the sound of Arti howling like mad inside. Mollie loved the long-eared hound like a kid, but Zeke wasn’t sure he’d ever met a goofier, clumsier, crazier dog.

“I can do this, Zeke. The house is fine. I’m perfectly capable of handling my volunteer work and my job, and Arti is, well, Arti.” Unleashing both of the new dogs to explore a backyard filled with various dog toys and agility equipment, Mollie said, “I’ll introduce the three of them later today, but I’m sure they’ll get along.”

Though Zeke didn’t dare say so out loud, it wasn’t the house, the shelter, her job or her dogs he was worried about. It was Mollie herself. She worked hard, probably too hard, and while he knew she kept in good physical shape—she couldn’t possibly keep up with the rigors of dog training and agility if she didn’t—she spent too much time alone with only canine companionship.

But whenever he encouraged her to go out more often, Mollie would only laugh. “What can I say?” she’d joked more than once. “I get along better with animals than I do with people. I wear my ‘crazy dog lady’ title with pride!”

Zeke didn’t think Mollie was crazy—not as a friend and not as a psychologist. He had noticed, though, that she’d isolated herself more and more over the past two years. That worried him. When he saw a problem, his first instinct was to find a solution, and he quickly decided Mollie needed to get out more, to go on a date or two. She’d need a bit of encouragement, of course, which was where he came in. Fixing her up would be no different than fixing her back steps.

Okay, maybe it was a little different...

Certainly his track record with power tools was better than his own success when it came to relationships. And that included the time in shop class when he’d slipped while working with a circular saw and needed twenty-two stitches. At least he’d only tried cutting his fool hand off.

Lilah Fairchild had done her best to rip out his heart.

But Mollie was nothing like his ex-fiancée. She was sweet and kind and funny, and Zeke didn’t like the idea of her being alone.

And Patrick wouldn’t have, either.

Zeke took a deep breath and refocused his attention on Mollie and the new dogs as Charlie raced over at full speed and jumped up, planted a pair of muddy paws right on Mollie’s chest and dropped a tennis ball at her feet. Zeke knew plenty of women—Lilah included—who would have been annoyed. But Mollie merely laughed and bent to pick up the slobber-covered green felt. “Somebody needs a few lessons in the proper way to greet people, but look what a smart girl you are to find a ball!”

The silly Lab basked in the praise, tail wagging her entire body, pink tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. Zeke wasn't surprised. Mollie had always known how to encourage him, too, how to cheer him up like she had in the days following his broken engagement.

Lilah wasn't good enough for you. You deserve someone so much better.

Mollie deserved the best, which would make finding the right guy for her a tall order. Not that plenty of guys wouldn't be willing. Even though Mollie wasn't the type to waste time messing around with her hair or piling on makeup, she had a fresh-faced beauty. With her reddish curls, blue-green eyes and freckled skin, he'd always thought she was cute.

He watched as Mollie tried to engage the dog in a game of fetch, but Charlie clearly had other ideas. Like playing keep-away by racing around the yard, prized ball clutched in her drooling jaws. The dog zigged every time Mollie zagged, and her laughter grabbed hold of something inside his chest.

Cute? Hell, she was gorgeous.

The late-afternoon sun brought out the blaze of golden highlights in her hair. Her royal blue Best Friends T-shirt showed off her toned arms and the thin material hugged her breasts. Her jeans were well-worn and faded, one of the back pockets partially torn off and flapping against a perfectly rounded backside. The tattered square seemed to taunt him to reach out and give a tug, and he didn't think it was any latent OCD tendencies that had his palms sweating.

Almost as if sensing the wayward direction of his thoughts, Charlie charged toward Zeke, grass churning beneath her paws, and launched straight at his midsection. He might have withstood the blow if Chief hadn't wandered up behind him, close enough that the back of his knees connected with the dog's sturdy body as he stumbled backward, upending him as easily as the stupid prank-playing jocks back in high school had.

He landed flat on his back with a grunt, squinting up at the bright sky overhead. The fragrant grass was cool through the material of his T-shirt, but not cool enough to keep the heat of embarrassment from sinking into his skin.

"And to think, I didn't even have to train them to do that. Such natural talent!"

"Very funny," Zeke grumbled, glaring up at Mollie's smiling face as she moved to block out the sun. Not that her smile was any less bright or less effective at warming the blood pumping through his veins.

She held out a slender hand. Determined to regain control of his baffling desire, Zeke reached up, caught her by the wrist and pulled too hard...just like he would have done back when they were kids.

Mollie lost her balance, her startled shriek cutting off with a soft "Umph," as she tumbled down to the ground beside him. Charlie, thinking this was another new game, nosed her way in between them, bouncing the disgusting ball off Zeke's forehead before trying to lick the two of them to death.

Chuckling as he lay on the ground, it was like he was a kid again, running wild with Mollie, Patrick and Shadow, and all seemed right in his world once more. Mollie was still the ponytailed, tagalong kid he remembered, the one who always had been and always would be his friend.

But then she sat up, shaking her hair back with a toss of her head as she leaned over him. Time jumped forward from one heartbeat to the next, and suddenly she was all woman. The smell of fresh-cut grass mingled with the wildflower scent of her skin, and Zeke's body clenched in reaction.

The hazy mist of nostalgia burned away under the unexpected blaze of lust, followed quickly by an equally scorching wave of guilt. Mollie wasn't that little girl anymore. The dog dancing around them was Charlie, not Shadow, and Patrick was—

Cutting off the thought, Zeke pushed to his feet. Charlie sat a few yards away, the ball at her feet, and if ever a canine could look smug, she did. "You've got your work cut out for you with that one," he said, his tone sharper than he'd intended.

Mollie frowned up at him as she slowly stood. She brushed at the blades of grass clinging to the back of her jeans, and Zeke had to force his gaze away. “It’s been too long since you’ve had a dog. You’ve forgotten how much energy a puppy has to burn.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

Acting as though she hadn’t heard him, Mollie said, “I can think of a really easy way to remedy that.”

They’d had this discussion plenty of times, and the familiarity of the argument helped settle his unease. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t understand why not. You know how much you loved Shadow.”

“I did. She was the greatest. But you did the heavy lifting.” Mollie had been over at his parents’ house all of the time—willing to walk the dog, play fetch with her, keep her well groomed.

“Taking care of someone you love is never work.”

Zeke wasn’t sure why his eyes automatically went to the newly built stairs leading to Mollie’s back porch. That had been a lot of work, but he’d been more than willing to do it because...because...

“It’s a responsibility,” he argued, not even realizing he’d said the words out loud until Mollie started talking again.

“Owning any kind of pet is a responsibility.” She shot him a grin. “But you’ve always been a responsible guy.”

He *was* a responsible guy, and by default, Mollie was his responsibility. Whether she liked it or not. He would never admit it, but a part of him was glad that Mollie had a stubborn tendency to resist his efforts. Any show of gratitude would only have added to his feelings of guilt—and Zeke already had plenty of that where the McFadden siblings were concerned.

Years ago, Zeke had made his best friend a promise. Straight out of boot camp and ready for a tour that would take him overseas, Patrick McFadden had asked Zeke to look out for his little sister.

Zeke had immediately agreed. He and Patrick had grown up as neighbors in an affluent, historic section of Spring Forest. Patrick had been the closest thing Zeke had to a brother. And just as Zeke and Patrick had always been best friends, meeting up after school, playing sports, exploring the woods around Spring Forest on the weekends, Mollie had always been the kid sister wanting to tag along. Looking out for her came as naturally as hanging out with Patrick.

Both men knew Mollie had a big heart—maybe too big. She was always willing to think the best of people, to give anyone who asked a second, third, fourth chance. The last thing either of them wanted was for someone to take advantage of her giving, caring nature.

With his friend answering the call of duty and willing to risk his life in service to his country, Zeke didn’t want Patrick to have to worry about his little sister back home. So Zeke had made his friend that promise.

And then, two years ago, Mollie had shown up at his door, her bright eyes ravaged by tears, to tell him that Patrick was never coming home.

His best friend was dead, and the promise Zeke had made—along with the reminder of Patrick’s final visit home—weighed on Zeke so heavily that the crushing pressure on his chest made it hard to breathe.

He looked down, startled by the cold press of a nose against his hand followed by the familiar weight and warmth of a sturdy canine body leaning against his leg. Reaching down, he ran his palm over Charlie’s silky golden head, taking comfort in the easy, quiet companionship.

“You need a new best friend.”

His heart cramped a bit at the softly spoken words, and he looked up to find Mollie watching him, her gentle soul reflected in her blue-green eyes. Logic told him neither she nor the dog by his side could possibly know what he’d been thinking. But from his own experiences with Shadow and with the service dogs at the veterans’ support group where he volunteered, he knew how intuitive animals could be.

And as for Mollie... Patrick was a tie that would always bind them together. Zeke didn't need to tell her he was thinking about his friend. Not when Patrick was always there between the two of them.

* * *

The steps were perfect. The raw wood was sanded to a smooth finish awaiting the stain or paint of her choosing. Mollie had no doubt that each step and rise was strictly to code and not a single degree off.

But that was Zeke. All straight lines and precise measurements. His massive toolbox lay open at the top of the stairs. Inside, each red plastic section held a specific size of nail, screw, nut or bolt. Everything properly labeled and carefully maintained, and nothing like her junk drawer, which held a random mishmash of items that may as well have escaped from the island of lost tools.

"You could have waited for me, you know. I would have liked to see how you figured out how to cut the stringers...just in case."

"It's not that hard."

She held up a hand as Zeke went on about maximum riser height and tread depth, cutting him off by saying, "I get it. You're brilliant."

And he was. Zeke was the smartest person she knew, and not just book smart. If there was anything he wanted to learn—and Zeke tended to want to learn *everything*—he could pick up a how-to book or watch a few online videos and know all there was to know about cutting stringers, building a fence or replacing a faucet.

"You don't have to worry." He stomped a booted foot against the lowest tread. "Trust me, these suckers are solid. They aren't going anywhere."

"Well, no. Not unless I tear them out again."

"Tear them out? Why would you do that?"

"Because they're too perfect!" The old steps, though lacking in structural integrity, had made up for their rough, splintered surfaces with character. They'd had knots and dents and a weathered finish that matched up with the rest of her house. "I'm going to have to replace the deck, the door, the back half of the house to try to get everything to look half as good as your steps."

Zeke only grinned. "Sounds like I have my work cut out for me the next few weekends."

"No, Zeke. You don't. It's my house. My responsibility."

For a brief second, a shadow seemed to cross over his handsome features before he offered her a confident smile. "Of course it is, but that doesn't mean I can't help out around here, does it? How else am I going to pay you back for all the delicious meals you make me?"

Mollie hardly considered herself any kind of gourmet chef, but she did like to eat. She also liked to cook, especially if it meant cooking for Zeke.

Though if there was any truth to the old adage *the way to a man's heart is through his stomach*, Zeke would have fallen for her back when she was in the eighth grade and he ate all the cookies she'd made for a bake sale.

"You can't tell me you don't have some mouth-watering meal already started."

"I may have thrown the ingredients for chili into the slow cooker before I left this morning."

His gaze narrowed. "What kind of chili?"

Mollie rolled her eyes. "Tofu," she said. "What do you think?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "I think you'd better be lying."

"It's ground sirloin." Though she did occasionally like to switch things up with a white chicken chili or ground turkey, she knew better than to lean too far in the healthy food direction.

Zeke had complained more than once that the tall, model-thin women he dated in Raleigh loved dressing up and going out to dinner and yet refused to order anything more than a small salad and ridiculously priced bottled water. He swore he broke up with his last girlfriend after she invited him over for pizza and then served vegetable toppings and soy cheese on a cauliflower crust.

He didn't have to worry about that with Mollie on any score. She hated cauliflower and loved thick-crust pepperoni pizza covered in mozzarella. She was not tall, she was not thin and no one would mistake her for a model.

All of which made her perfect for Zeke. The perfect buddy, that was.

Mollie swallowed a sigh as she stomped up the expertly crafted steps and led the way into the kitchen. She was greeted by the smell of slow-cooking beef, onions and garlic, and by the exuberant head to tail wagging of her black-and-tan coonhound.

"Hey, baby girl! I missed you, too." Mollie reached down to run her hands over the dog's floppy ears. After the initial greeting, Arti immediately set about sniffing every inch of her denim jeans. By the time the dog was finished, Mollie was certain the hound had figured out every person she'd talked to and every dog she'd stopped to pet in the hours since she'd been gone from the house.

Fortunately, Arti was not the jealous type. Mollie only wished she could say the same when Zeke bent down to say hello and her dog had the fantasy-inspiring pleasure of throwing herself against that broad chest, nuzzling his neck and even stealing a quick kiss.

"Crazy dog!"

Of course, Zeke's laughter as he pushed Arti away and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand was very much the response Mollie anticipated if she ever acted on that fantasy.

Crazy Mollie...

Zeke had been over for dinner at her house often enough that she didn't need to tell him where to find the soup bowls, glasses or spoons. They moved around each other in the small space with Mollie ducking beneath his arm as he reached into an upper cabinet, sidestepping his broad form as she pulled the toppings from the refrigerator and swatting his hand when he tried to sample a bite of chili straight off the wooden spoon.

It was all so easy and natural, and Mollie had years of experience ignoring the delicious shiver that raced through her body at the incidental touches—the brush of her arm against his chest, the warmth of his hand at her shoulder as he leaned close to inhale the spicy aroma of the simmering chili.

"That smells amazing," he complimented her, and Mollie couldn't help thinking the same thing—about Zeke.

She wanted nothing more than to turn in the circle of his arms and breathe him in. To soak in the warm and spicy scent of his aftershave combined with summer sunshine and cedar. To have him look at her the way, well, the way he was currently looking at her chili. Like he wanted to eat *her* up with a spoon.

"Just one bite?" he cajoled. "Please..."

His warm breath teased her ear, and a shiver ran down her spine. With her legs as weak as if she'd just completed a five-mile run through the mountains with Arti, it was all Mollie could do not to melt into a puddle at his feet.

Instead, she gave him a playful jab in the ribs with her elbow. "Finish setting the table and pour our drinks, would you? I might work with animals, but we're going to sit down and eat like civilized people."

Her parents had never been pet friendly, and when she had announced she wanted to train dogs as a profession, they'd reacted as though she'd announced she planned to don animal skins, eat raw meat and live in the wild. Maybe running around with a bunch of dogs and having a layer of dog hair—and occasionally doggie drool—covering her clothes was not the most glamorous of careers. But she was *good* at training dogs.

Zeke's low chuckle, though, only served as another challenge to just how uncivilized Mollie was feeling at the moment. Fortunately, he backed away before she could make a total fool out of herself.

Shoring up her trembling legs, she carried the pot of chili over to the oak table and set it amid the bowls of sour cream, green onions, shredded cheese and sliced jalapeños.

After digging into the chili like he hadn't had a good meal in ages, Zeke asked, "How are the repairs going at the shelter?"

"Already underway, thanks to the money made at the fund-raiser last month." Mollie had operated a booth at the event, promoting her own business as well as bringing attention to the shelter and its needs. Zeke had volunteered, as well, helping her set up and drawing a fair share of female attention to the booth.

"And the Whitaker sisters told me that Rebekah Taylor, the new shelter director, has applied for a grant, not only for repairs but also for expanding the shelter."

"That must be a challenge, to start a new job while the shelter is undergoing construction repairs."

Mollie nodded. "I would think so, but if the grant comes through, the tornado might just end up a blessing in disguise."

She looked up in time to find Zeke watching her with a hint of an amused smile on his handsome face. "What?" she asked defensively, glancing down at her T-shirt to make sure she hadn't somehow ended up with half her dinner dribbled down the front. No chili stains, but Mollie winced a little at the muddy paw prints she'd failed to notice earlier.

Great, just great.

"Only you would find a silver lining in a tornado."

Heat bloomed in Mollie's cheeks. Growing up, her parents had often warned her about the folly of viewing the world through rose-colored glasses. "You think I'm naive."

Zeke shook his head. "I think you're amazing. Chief and Charlie are the luckiest dogs in the world to have you in their corner."

The words took Mollie's breath away. "Zeke...that's—" She had to clear the emotional lump in her throat before finishing in a rush. "That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"It's true." Reaching out, he grasped her hand in his as he gazed into her eyes.

And even though they had touched thousands of times in the years they had known each other—everything from teasing shoves and friendly hugs to clinging to each other beside her brother's grave—this felt different.

Suddenly *everything* felt different.

She could feel the warmth from Zeke's hand radiating up her arm and leaving a delicious trail of goose bumps in its wake. She could hear every beat of her heart, every bated breath she took, magnified in her head. Zeke's hazel eyes had never seemed so rich, so warm.

"It hit me out in the backyard earlier..."

"It did?" The words escaped in a Minnie Mouse-like squeak, but Mollie didn't care.

Zeke nodded. "You're such an amazing woman, Mollie. It makes no sense to me that some lucky guy hasn't come along to sweep you off your feet."

Oh... Oh! It was finally happening. After so many years of dreaming, so many years silently hoping. "Well—" Mollie swallowed "—you've probably guessed by now that I've been waiting—"

"And that's just the thing. You shouldn't have to wait. Not anymore."

"No," she agreed. "Not anymore. I'm ready, Zeke, I am."

Mollie had fallen for him when she was only a kid, on the day they'd rescued Shadow together. And, yes, back then, she had been too young for him. Even as an awkward, lovestruck teenager, she'd been too young. But that was then. Now, a four-year age difference meant nothing. Now, she was a woman and for Zeke to finally see her that way—

"I know. That's why I want to fix you up with one of my friends."

[Chapter Three](#)

"Wait, what?" Mollie yanked her hand away and jerked back so quickly, she nearly upended her chair. Barely catching herself before she could tumble over backward, she stared across the table. "You wanna what?"

“I was thinking that I could set you up on a date. You know, with one of the guys from the basketball league. Several of them are single and—look, Mollie, what I’m trying to say is that you’re a great girl, a great catch.”

Right. Which is why he’d just tossed her overboard.

Pushing away from the table, she grabbed her bowl of half-eaten chili and stalked over to the kitchen counter. Her face burning in humiliation, Mollie couldn’t bear to look at Zeke. Leave it to her to read his words so completely wrong!

When it came to dogs, she could interpret every tail wag, every raised ruff, every ear flick. But with people?

She didn’t know what was worse. That she’d so stupidly fooled herself into thinking he was interested or that he thought she was so desperate that he had to set her up on some kind of pity date.

Barely restraining the urge to throw the dishes into the sink—or right at Zeke—Mollie set the bowl on the counter and marched back to the table to face him. “This isn’t like your coming over here and working on my house without my permission. I don’t need you to fix my love life!”

But Zeke didn’t give up easily. Especially not when he was sure that big brain of his was right. “Mollie, this isn’t about fixing anything. It’s about letting me help you.”

She let out a low growl that would have done King, her most aggressive dog to date, proud. Instead of backing off, though, Zeke circled the table, clearly not the least bit intimidated. But then again, King had been a ten-pound Chihuahua.

Reaching out, Zeke caught her shoulders in his wide hands. As mad as she was, that moment earlier—when she’d so foolishly let herself hope, let herself believe—had unleashed something inside her. All the barriers she’d built up over the years were suddenly gone.

She wasn’t a kid, and she wasn’t his little sister. She was a grown woman, and she wanted Zeke to hold her, to kiss her, to love her as only a man could love a woman.

“Zeke—”

But even though everything had changed for Mollie, nothing had for Zeke.

“I know you always tell me you like dogs better than people,” he was saying with a smile, “but it will do you good to go out and meet someone new. And, hey, if it would make things easier, we could always go on a double date.”

“You’re seeing someone?” Mollie’s chest cramped at the thought as she stepped away from his embrace.

Recently, Zeke had mostly dated women he met in Raleigh. Mollie always told herself she was glad. She didn’t want to see firsthand how smart, how sophisticated, how sexy those women were in comparison to her. And she feared the day when Zeke might actually find a woman he saw as The One. A smart, sexy, sophisticated woman who knew better than to serve him vegan pizza.

Two years ago, that worst-case scenario nightmare had seemed all too close to coming true when he’d gotten engaged to Lilah Fairchild. There was not a woman on the planet Mollie wanted to see Zeke pledge his eternal love to, but there wasn’t a woman in the world she wanted to see him with *less* than Spring Forest native Lilah Fairchild.

Mollie was still endlessly grateful that Zeke and Lilah had broken up before that fateful walk down the aisle. Even if her unwitting role in their breakup still made her squirm when she wasn’t able to push the memories from her mind.

Since Lilah, Zeke had kept his dating life separate from his life in Spring Forest. Mollie supposed he thought it easier that way, with less chance of things getting messy.

Mollie thought of the toolbox on the back porch with everything in its proper place. She reached for her glass of milk—because, of course, what else would Zeke expect her to drink?—and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. He’d stuck her in a box clearly labeled Friend, back when she was a kid, and she despaired of ever finding a way to break free.

Setting the glass back on the table, she strove for a casual tone as she said, “You hadn’t mentioned going out with anyone recently.”

He lifted a broad shoulder in a half shrug. “I’m not seeing anyone right now, but I could always make a call.”

Because dating was that easy. Just picking up a phone and making a call. Other than Zeke, Mollie could barely remember the last conversation she’d had with the opposite sex that didn’t involve her business, the shelter or estimates for something that required updating on her house.

Geez, no wonder Zeke thought he had to fix her up! Her love life really was that pathetic.

“I just thought it might make you more comfortable if I was there with you.”

Mollie could think of little that would make her more uncomfortable—including stabbing hot needles into her eyes. She didn’t know which would be worse—Zeke witnessing just how socially inept she was while on some painfully awkward blind date, or sitting across the table from him and watching him romance another woman.

“Right. With me. On a date.”

With her but not dating her. With her while he was on a date with another woman.

* * *

“What about next Friday?” Zeke asked as he pulled out his phone and opened his calendar app. He knew Mollie well enough to realize she’d keep putting the date off—the way she did with the repairs around the house—unless he got her to agree to a specific day and time. “That would give me a chance to—”

“Enough!”

Surprised by the sharp comment, he glanced up from the screen. “What’s wrong? Is next Friday not a good day?”

“No, Zeke,” she gritted out between clenched teeth, “next Friday is not a good day.”

Zeke hadn’t expected her to jump at his suggestion. Not with how stubborn and independent she was. But he also hadn’t expected her to stare at him like he’d lost his mind.

“Mollie—”

“There will never be a good day.” Standing in front of him, she lifted her chin and glared, spots of color flaming in her cheeks. Her slender throat moved as she swallowed, and he bit back a curse.

Though he’d tried easing into the subject of setting her up, he’d clearly embarrassed her. They’d been friends for so long, sometimes he forgot how shy she could be around someone new. He’d never understood how a woman who could stare down a Rottweiler had a hard time looking a guy in the eye.

“Look, it won’t be so bad.”

She sucked in a deep breath. “Going on a double date with you and—” She waved a dismissive hand as she muttered, “You have no idea.”

Zeke felt his own face heat at the unspoken slight against the women he dated. Not that Mollie had met any of them. No one in Spring Forest had met any of the women he’d dated since Lilah. Introducing a woman to his friends and family would be an unspoken signal that the relationship was getting serious. And Zeke didn’t do serious. Not anymore.

But he’d break his own rule for Mollie. He’d do anything for Mollie.

He owed it to Patrick to look out for his little sister.

But as Mollie tossed her wild curls back and met his gaze head on, she didn’t look embarrassed anymore. Sparks snapped from her blue-green eyes and her chest rose and fell as her breathing quickened. When she stepped closer and pointed a finger at him, he’d never seen her look so angry.

He’d never seen her look so *sexy*.

And Zeke wasn’t thinking about his best friend or some meaningless double date with a woman from Raleigh as his blood heated in his veins. The sudden rush of desire caught him so off guard, he took a stumbling step backward when Mollie poked him in the chest.

“I don’t need you to set me up. I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“You—”

“I’m fine!” she repeated. “And I can get my own dates, thank you very much!”

* * *

“How am I possibly going to get my own date?” Mollie lamented to her friends Claire and Amanda the next day. The two women had answered Mollie’s SOS text message, agreeing to meet her for lunch at the Main Street Grille.

With Claire’s recent engagement to Matt, and as busy as Amanda was with her new catering business and with her fiancé Ryan Carter, single dad and owner/editor of the local paper, Mollie hated to drag her friends into her problems. If circumstances hadn’t been so dire, she wouldn’t have bothered.

But instead of seeing the problem as an insurmountable issue, Amanda and Claire exchanged eager grins. Amanda scooted her chair closer to the table, her rich chocolate eyes bright as she said, “I’ve been dying for the chance to set you up.”

“Huh.” Wishing she could share her friend’s enthusiasm, Mollie slouched in her chair and picked at her Caesar salad with her fork. “You and Zeke both.”

Claire’s expression turned sympathetic. “I know this isn’t easy, but maybe it’s time for you to move on.”

Everything inside Mollie rebelled at the idea of giving up on the dream that had lived in her heart for so long. “How can you say that? Especially after the way you and Matt reunited after all these years.”

“Matt and I had a history together. A romantic history, so in a way, it feels like our relationship picked up right where we left off. You and Zeke have a history, too, but it’s a history of friendship.”

“So you think it’s hopeless, then. It is hopeless. *I’m* hopeless.”

“You are far from hopeless!” Amanda argued. “You are a wonderful, amazing person who deserves a wonderful and amazing man in return.”

“Zeke is—”

“A wonderful and amazing man, I know.” Gentling her voice, Amanda said, “But you have to realize, hon, that he might not be the wonderful and amazing man for you.”

“I’ve always thought he was perfect for me.”

“And he is...if all you want is a friend. But if you want more than that, then it’s time to admit what you and Zeke have isn’t enough.”

Not enough...

Mollie had spent her entire life feeling as though what she had to offer was not enough. Her brother, Patrick, had been the firstborn and everything her parents wanted in a child. Outgoing, good-looking, talented, smart—while Mollie had been little more than an afterthought.

Losing Patrick had only made Mollie long even more for a family of her own—one that consisted of at least a few two-legged members. Fostering and training dogs certainly filled a huge part of her life, but she still had an empty spot in her heart.

“I do want to get married someday, to have children,” Mollie admitted.

Zeke’s children...

But he wanted to pawn her off on one of his buddies.

Giving up on eating, Mollie pushed her plate away. “I’m no good at dating. I never know what to say and always end up feeling so self-conscious that I don’t say anything... It’s just a disaster.”

“All you need is a little confidence. Let us fix you up, and you’ll see dating isn’t so bad.”

“I don’t know—” Mollie was about to tell her friends to forget the whole idea when a masculine voice called out, “Hey, sis!”

The three women looked up as Amanda’s older brother, Josh, walked over to their table. Like all of Amanda’s siblings, Josh was blessed with warm olive skin, deep-brown eyes and dimples to die for. He greeted them with a smile before reaching over his sister’s shoulder to break off a piece

of her cornbread muffin. Shaking his head sadly after sampling the bite, he said, “They just aren’t the same since you left.”

“Stop! It’s the exact same recipe,” Amanda insisted, but Mollie noticed her friend had to take a taste for herself, just to make sure.

“Quit trying to guilt your sister for following her own dreams,” Claire scolded him.

“Oh, come on! Giving my brothers and sisters a hard time is the best thing about having siblings.” Josh caught Mollie’s eye and broke off suddenly with a quiet curse. “I’m sorry, Mollie, I wasn’t thinking—Patrick was a true hero.”

“Yes, he was,” Mollie murmured around the ache in her throat, as she always did when anyone brought up her brother and his service. Like everyone else in Spring Forest, she was proud of and humbled by her brother’s dedication and bravery.

Patrick had been an amazing man and a remarkable soldier. But the brother she mourned, the brother she missed, had also been human. He’d had his fears, his doubts, and he’d made mistakes.

But her parents, Zeke, the whole town wanted to remember Patrick McFadden as the heroic soldier who had died for his country. For all of them, and for the sake of her brother’s memory, Mollie would do everything in her power to keep it that way.

She held on to her smile despite the sting of tears as she added, “He would be the first to agree with you about how much he enjoyed giving me a hard time.”

Looking slightly relieved at her joke, Josh grinned. “Patrick loved to kid around, but every guy in Spring Forest knew not to mess with you or they’d have a pissed-off soldier on their hands.”

Looking as puzzled as Mollie felt, Amanda asked, “What do you mean, Josh?”

His dark brows rose. “You didn’t know? Before he left for basic training, Patrick had a heart-to-heart with every teenaged dude in the county, making sure they all knew his little sis was off-limits.”

Noticing the look her friends exchanged, Mollie reached for her iced tea, half surprised she didn’t spill it down the front of her shirt as she took a quick sip. “That’s ridiculous,” she muttered into the glass. “I was a kid when he left.”

“You were fourteen,” Amanda pointed out.

Josh nodded. “And Patrick already knew what the rest of us figured out in high school—that you’d turn into a beautiful young woman.” Josh shot her a quick wink that had Mollie’s face flaming. “He was right to warn us all away.”

After Josh excused himself and headed to the kitchen to speak with his brother-in-law, typical sounds still filled the restaurant—the clink of silverware against plates, the waitresses taking orders, the din of conversation all around. But a dead silence had fallen over their table.

“Well, there you have it,” Claire announced finally.

Amanda nodded. “The reason you’ve had such a hard time dating all these years had nothing to do with you. After Patrick warned them off, guys got used to thinking of you as off-limits, and that never changed.”

Was it possible? Mollie thought back to her high school days, when it seemed every girl had a date for Homecoming, Spring Fling, Prom...every girl but her. Mollie had believed she was somehow at fault. She was too shy, too awkward, too plain. Was it her big brother’s warning that had really kept the boys away?

“Why would he do that?”

“You know how Patrick wanted to protect you.” Amanda reached out to squeeze Mollie’s hand. “He was gone so much, he didn’t have the chance to see the strong, confident, beautiful woman you’ve become.”

“Now it’s time for the rest of Spring Forest to take notice,” Claire added.

The idea of anyone noticing her had Mollie ready to break out in hives, and Claire and Amanda wanted the *whole town* to take note? “I don’t know—”

“You heard what Josh said and—” Amanda’s eyes flew open wide. “Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before, but Josh would be perfect for you!”

“Josh? But he’s—”

“He’s what?” her friend asked a little defensively. “Yes, he’s my pain-in-the-neck brother, but he’s also smart, funny, good-looking. Give me one good reason why you don’t want to go out with him.”

Mollie didn’t bother to give the only reason that truly mattered...

He wasn’t Zeke.

* * *

Mollie smiled with a touch of pride as she gazed at the gorgeous guy across the table. “Congratulations, Stanley! You have officially graduated!” Though she knew the six-pound papillon didn’t understand, she couldn’t help thinking the tiny dog was grinning as he sat in his mistress’s lap.

“My good, good boy!” If Stanley was grinning, his owner, Mrs. Winchester, was positively glowing. The wealthy sixtysomething widow wore a stylish pale pink pantsuit. Gold and diamonds flashed at her slender wrists as she lifted Stanley toward her face.

Mrs. W, as she preferred to be called, had an active social life that included playing bridge, meeting friends for lunch and going on long shopping excursions. All of which she wanted to do with Stanley trotting by her side or riding in his custom-made carrier. But the tiny dog’s guarding behavior had made that a challenge.

As part of a “final exam,” Mollie and Mrs. W had met for brunch at a trendy restaurant in downtown Raleigh. The summer day was slightly overcast and cool, perfect for dining alfresco on the dog-friendly patio. “He’s been a perfect gentleman, if I do say so myself.” The dog hadn’t growled or snapped once. “And he certainly looks the part.”

In honor of the occasion, Mrs. W had dressed her boy in a tuxedo, complete with bow tie, top hat and tails. Not that Mollie was judging. She’d been known to dress Arti up for certain holidays. Her favorite costume included a single antler tied to the dog’s head, à la Max from the classic Christmas cartoon.

At the end of the meal, Mrs. W gave Mollie a perfumed hug with Stanley sandwiched between them. “I can’t thank you enough, Mollie. I do enjoy going out, and I hate the idea of leaving poor Stanley home all alone in that big house by himself.”

Mrs. W’s husband, the original Stanley, had left her with a significant fortune and the mansion to match. Mollie had a feeling that the elderly woman was the one who truly felt too alone.

And while she might not have the fortune or the mansion, Mollie certainly understood the companionship of a four-legged friend. With a final reassurance that the woman could always call if Stanley regressed at any point, Mollie said goodbye to her client. With her next lesson not scheduled until later that afternoon, Mollie decided to stroll along the outdoor mall.

She wasn’t much of a shopper, but she found herself lingering in front of a brightly lit boutique. She didn’t know how she’d escaped lunch the other day without promising Amanda she could set her up with Josh. If she agreed, and that was a big if, she should probably think about buying something new to wear.

Faceless mannequins flaunted skinny arms and legs, their slender forms draped in an array of short-skirted, low-cut, skintight dresses. Signs and posters promoted red-hot looks and sizzling summer sales. For a split second she considered stepping inside, but no... This was why she didn’t go shopping. Or go out, for that matter.

Mollie sighed as she moved to the next shop, this one worse than the last. Bright white lettering and a sleek black background provided a stark contrast to the hot pink awning. The storefront offered a lavish display of lacy lingerie. Matching bras and panties—some satin, some sheer. Baby-doll nighties, silk kimono-style peignoirs. In every shade of the rainbow, plus a few animal prints thrown in to appease a woman’s—or *man’s*—wild side.

Despite her career choice, Mollie feared she did not have a wild side. Her own underwear, like the rest of her wardrobe, was selected for function rather than fashion, with nothing satin, sheer or sexy about it. With the late morning sun shining behind her, she could see herself in the glass. Button-down khaki camp shirt. Olive green capri pants. Hair caught back in a ponytail.

Red-hot? Sizzling? More like bland and boring.

But if she stood just right, she could see the shimmery reflection of an emerald nightie draped over her body. The image was as transparent as the sheer material of the lace-trimmed gown, but she could almost feel the cool, silken whisper against her skin...

“Hey, Mollie! I thought that was you.”

Mollie...it's always been you...

So lost in the moment, feeling almost trapped within the glass, her heart leaped to her throat when she realized the sight of Zeke standing behind her was not part of her fantasy. Wearing a maroon dress shirt open at his strong throat, sleeves rolled back over his leanly muscled forearms, and a pair of slate-gray trousers, Zeke Harper in the flesh was far sexier than any desire-filled daydream.

Turning around quickly enough to make her head spin, she tried to grab hold of the longing inside her that was getting harder and harder to ignore. Zeke's practice was only a few blocks away, but Mollie hadn't expected to run into him. She hadn't exactly been avoiding him, but at the same time, she wasn't sure she was ready to face him, either.

You have to realize he might not be the man for you.

Her head was starting to get the picture, but her heart insisted on coloring outside the lines. She soaked in the sight of him, not wanting to admit how much she'd missed him. The cool breeze ruffled his hair just the way Mollie longed to do, and the way the fine linen molded to his chest was sexy enough to make her mouth go bone dry.

“What are you doing here?” he asked with an easy smile that faded into a frown when he stared at the store behind her.

Her entire body flushed hot, as if he'd caught her wearing one of the revealing negligees. Hadn't she imagined the feel of emerald silk or black satin against her skin while gazing through the glass? Was it possible that Zeke—

Mollie dismissed the thought. If not for his recent “encouragement” for her to start dating, she would have sworn Zeke didn't know she was a woman at all.

“I met a client for brunch.” Unable to stop herself, she added, “And then thought I'd do some shopping.”

“Shopping?” He echoed the word as if he'd never heard her say it before—which, Mollie admitted, was entirely possible. The doors behind them swished open as a satisfied, or perhaps soon-to-be satisfied, customer stepped outside, hot pink bags in hand. The fragrance of warm vanilla drifted out from the store along with the soft, seductive strains of a love song.

But it was standing so close to Zeke that had Mollie's senses reeling. Breathing in his spicy cologne mixed with the soft, feminine scent left her light-headed, and she couldn't think of trying on the seductive lingerie without imagining Zeke taking it off.

Staring up into his hazel eyes, for a split second she thought she saw all the heat, all the desire, all the want she longed to see shimmering in their endless depths. She'd always loved his eyes, so rich and warm with the intriguing, ever-changing kaleidoscope of gold and green... She stood close enough to see herself reflected there, like her image in the glass, and in a sudden, painful rush, she knew.

All the heat, desire, want she saw shining in his eyes was her own.

And oh, God...

What if Zeke could see it, too?

Because the only thing more completely humiliating than a hopeless crush on her best friend would be her best friend knowing about it!

She stumbled back a few steps, nearly falling into a nearby trash can before catching her balance. “Yes, shopping! For a new chew toy. For the dogs,” she blurted out, just in case Zeke actually thought the chew toy was for her. Her cheeks burning in helpless mortification, she waved a hand down the line of shops. “There’s a pet store around the corner.”

“Oh, right.” Shaking his head, Zeke gave a small laugh that held a slight hint of relief. “Pet store. How are the new dogs?”

Grateful to focus on something else, Mollie said, “Charlie’s settling in.” She’d introduced the two foster dogs to Arti, and as she’d expected, her goofy hound dog had greeted them with eager sniffs, happy to have some new playmates. She definitely didn’t have to worry about the two girls...

Almost as if reading her mind, Zeke asked, “And Chief?”

“He’s...coming along.” In the few days since bringing Chief home from the shelter, Mollie had witnessed how truly traumatized the poor dog was. The large backyard both Charlie and Arti loved was too big and intimidating for the frightened shepherd. “It’s going to take time, but I feel like I had a breakthrough yesterday using a tethering technique with Charlie.”

“Tethering?”

Nodding, Mollie explained how she’d used a carabiner to hook the end of Charlie’s leash to Chief’s collar, connecting the two dogs. “Charlie isn’t afraid of anything, and it doesn’t take much to get her to run around the yard.” With a soft laugh, she added, “Poor Chief didn’t have any choice but to follow.”

The objects that were too scary for the shepherd to face on his own had been so much easier to handle with Charlie leading the way. Mollie had watched in satisfaction as the Lab wandered off with Chief happily trailing behind.

“That’s great, Mollie.” Pride filled Zeke’s expression as he smiled down at her, and it was easy to forget how frustrating he could be sometimes. “Sounds like you’re making real progress.”

“Yeah.” With Chief. Too bad she couldn’t say the same for herself. Standing so close to Zeke, basking in his praise, it was easy to forget the realization she’d had working with the dogs.

On a professional level, Mollie appreciated the tethering technique. But on a far more personal level, as she’d watched the two dogs together, she couldn’t avoid the obvious comparison.

As the kid sister, she’d always been the one tagging along, following her beloved big brother and his best friend. But Patrick was no longer there for her to follow, and Zeke—

Zeke would never see her for the woman she was as long as she was still walking in the same steps as the girl she’d always been.

“I’m meeting some colleagues for lunch,” he was saying. After glancing at his watch, he offered, “You want to come?”

Tagging along...

Mollie shook her head. “I still have my shopping to do.”

“Ah, yes. Your chew toy. For the dogs.” His lips lifted in a teasing smile, one Mollie was suddenly determined to wipe from his gorgeous face.

She needed to prove she was woman enough to choose her own path. And if he didn’t see that—if he *couldn’t* see that—well, then, maybe it was time for Mollie to turn her attention to a man who did.

“That’s right, and something for me.”

Spinning around, she stepped toward the lingerie store. In the split second before the automatic doors to the vanilla-and-spice-scented shop opened, she caught a satisfying glimpse of Zeke’s stunned expression in the reflective glass.

[Chapter Four](#)

“Hey, sorry I’m late.”

Zeke looked up from his coffee as his friend Matt Fielding claimed the seat across from him. “No worries.” He lifted his cup in greeting. “I just ordered.”

The two men typically met at Whole Bean Coffee Saturday mornings before heading over to the local gym to shoot hoops. Matt was still working his way back from injuries sustained while he was in the army but insisted the games of b-ball were far less stressful on his leg than the rigors of physical therapy.

“How’s everything going?” he asked over the din of caffeine-laced conversation going on all around them.

As usual, the coffee shop was crowded. He’d spotted Mollie’s friend Amanda and the new shelter director, Rebekah Taylor, earlier, but Mollie wasn’t with them. Not that Zeke expected her to be. Her weekends were usually booked solid with the group classes she offered. Most evenings she gave private lessons to dogs and owners who either preferred one-on-one meetings or needed more individual help.

Add in the two new foster dogs and the additional work she’d taken on since the tornado had hit the shelter, and she certainly had her hands full.

No doubt that was the reason she hadn’t returned his calls or texts for the past few days.

“And then Ellie and Sparkle decided to run off and join the circus.”

“That’s great, Matt, and—wait, what did you say?”

“Does it matter?” his friend asked wryly. “Since you haven’t been listening since I sat down.”

“Sorry, I was thinking about Mollie.”

Matt’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Zeke sighed. “I’m worried about her. Seems like all she does is work with her dogs.”

“Some people could say the same about you and your patients, not to mention all the time you spend at the veteran support group.”

For Zeke, volunteering was the least he could do to try to repay the soldiers who had sacrificed so much. Soldiers like Patrick... In the months after his friend’s death, Zeke had reached out to the local VA and organized a therapy group for former soldiers to come and share their experiences. But no matter how many hours he spent helping the wounded warriors who had returned home, the time had yet to ease his own feelings of loss.

Of guilt.

“I’ve been home for months, and you haven’t mentioned seeing anyone special.”

Giving his head a quick shake, Zeke reached for his coffee and took a large swallow of the strong brew. “Maybe it has been a while,” he told his friend. Zeke realized he couldn’t remember the last woman he’d gone out with. Not that Matt would have known about his dates either way.

Ever since his broken engagement, Zeke had kept his dating life separate from his friends and family. Oh, sure, someday if he met a woman and things got serious, he’d have to cross that line, but he didn’t see that happening. Not for a long, long time.

Not after Lilah...

Lilah had moved to town right before his senior year, and the elder Fairchilds and Harpers became quick friends. Much to his teenaged mortification, his parents asked him to show Lilah, the new girl, around. They hadn’t understood how ridiculous the request was. In a small town like Spring Forest, the blonde, beautiful newcomer was instantly the most popular girl in school.

All the boys, including Zeke, were smitten. But even as a geeky teen, he’d known he didn’t stand a chance. Lilah had a type, and he didn’t fit the star quarterback, homecoming king, cool kid mold. She and Patrick had even briefly dated the summer before his friend went off to boot camp.

She’d left after graduation, but a few years ago she’d stunned the town by moving back home. At the time, Zeke hadn’t given it much thought. He’d grown up. He’d moved on. Lilah—and his ridiculous crush—were part of his past. Or so he thought, until he’d gone out with his coworkers and spotted her at the hottest new nightclub in Raleigh. In all the years they’d known each other, she’d never given him a second look. But that night, he’d felt the full-on impact across the crowded bar as she’d checked him out head to toe...

And with one look, he'd been hooked.

Their parents had been thrilled when he and Lilah started dating and absolutely ecstatic when they got engaged. Friends for over a decade, they'd celebrated the idea of becoming family... But when the engagement ended, so too did that friendship.

"I offered to fix Mollie up," he told Matt.

"You?" Choking on a sip of coffee, Matt set his mug aside. "Sorry if I don't see you in the role of cupid."

Zeke waved the image of the arrow-shooting cherub aside. "I know Mollie better than anyone, and I'm good at reading people. I thought I could find the right kind of guy for her."

"I'm, wow, really not sure where to start with any of that, but okay, Mr. People Reader. Who's the guy?"

When Zeke had first mentioned the idea to Mollie, at least a dozen single guys had come to mind, but since then... Since then, he'd watched Mollie walk into a shop filled with sexy lingerie and he hadn't been able to get the image of her draped in satin and silk and lace out of his mind.

If mixing his dating life with his friends and family was a line in the sand he wouldn't cross, then even considering any kind of romantic relationship with Mollie was the Great Wall of China. He and Patrick had long ago sworn they were brothers in every way that mattered, which made Mollie like a sister to him, and he would not—could not—think of her in any other way.

But there was nothing to stop any guy she went out with from imagining all that and more...and he really had to ask himself why he thought Mollie dating was such a good idea in the first place.

"I'm—I'm not sure," he muttered. "It can't be just anyone."

"Well, what about Dan Sutton?"

The local lawyer was well respected in Spring Forest despite the fair share of gossip surrounding the disintegration of his business partnership and marriage after his partner and his wife ran off together. Still, Zeke shook his head. "He has his hands full raising his three girls."

"I don't know," Matt argued. "Maybe as a single dad he's looking for someone to help lighten the load. And look how Dillon helped bring Ryan and Amanda together."

Dillon was Ryan's six-year-old son, and what had started out as a pretend engagement to appease the boy's grandparents had quickly turned into a genuine love match.

"Dan's a good guy, but he's not right for Mollie. He's a bit too conservative." Zeke couldn't see the man putting up with a layer of dog hair all over his expensive suits. "Mollie needs someone more down-to-earth."

"What about Cade Battle then? You can't get much more down-to-earth than a farmer," Matt pointed out, but Zeke was already shaking his head.

"Cade's too much of a loner." Though the hardworking man had a soft spot for the Whitaker sisters and partnered with them to foster some of the less domesticated animals that showed up at the shelter, he barely gave the time of day to anyone else.

Matt brought up a few more guys—Grant Whitaker, the Whitaker sisters' nephew, and Davis Macintyre, a vet tech at the shelter, but Zeke shook his head. "Grant is heading back to Florida after the renovations on the shelter are complete. And Davis is even more introverted than Mollie. She needs someone who can help bring her out of her shell a little."

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