



JANA RICHARDS

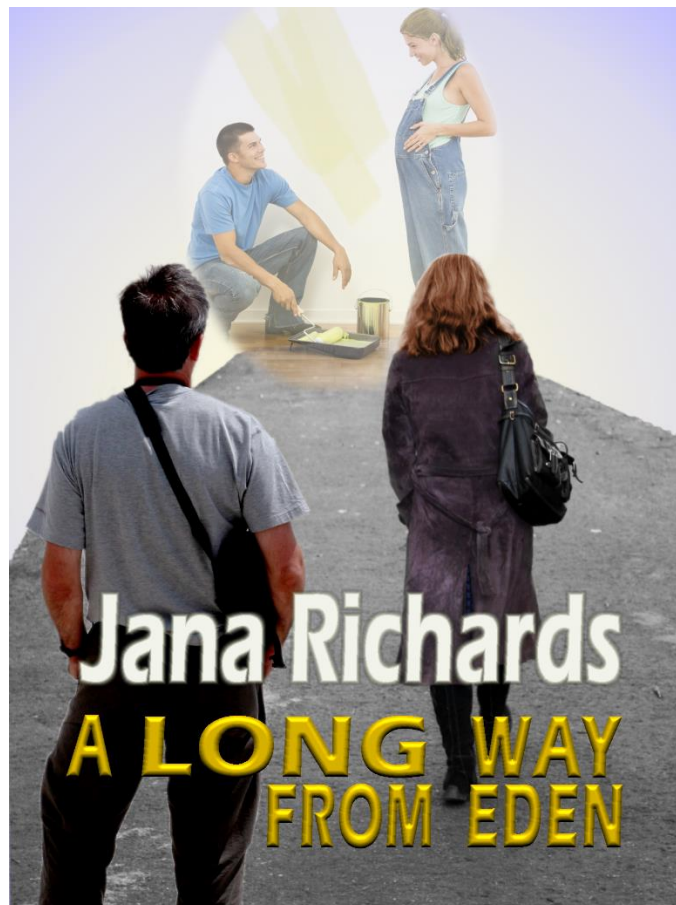
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A Long Way from Eden

Zane Martin's teenage daughter is pregnant. Meg Evan's son is the baby's father. Because Zane grew up not knowing who his father was, he'll be damned if he'll let his grandchild live with that shame. Meg was forced into an abusive marriage because of an unplanned pregnancy, so she knows that love is the only good reason to marry. Neither Meg nor Zane expects or welcomes the attraction that sparks between them. As they await the impending birth of their grandchild, old wounds open and long hidden family secrets come to light. The young couple builds a newer, stronger relationship, while Meg and Zane reach for a love passionate enough to overcome the past--if they're strong enough to trust it...and each other.



Chapter One

"Hey Meg, there's a good looking guy in booth six asking to see you."

Meg stopped rolling out pie dough to stare at Jane. For a split second her old fears screamed at her to sprint out the back door of the restaurant and not look back. With an effort she forced herself to relax. She had nothing to fear. Not after all this time.

Would she ever feel completely safe?

"Why would some guy want to see me?" She struggled to make her voice sound casual.

"Maybe it's the universe's way of saying you need a man. When was the last time you had a date?"

Meg poured apple filling in her empty pie shells. "Tom and Joe are all the men I need."

"They don't count. Tom's your son and Joe's like your father." Jane's eyes shone with mischief. "I'm talking about an honest to goodness, getting naked between the sheets kind of man. Like the guy in booth six. He looks good in a suit, but I bet he'd look even better without it."

"Jane! For Heaven's sakes. The customers will hear you." Meg pulled her away from the swinging doors leading into the restaurant. Jane had been like a baby sister to her for nearly seventeen years. Though Meg loved her dearly, sometimes she was incorrigible. She shook her head as she stared into the younger woman's eager blue eyes.

Jane's blonde curls bounced as she grabbed Meg by the hand and gave a tug. "Aren't you even curious to see what the guy wants?"

Meg held firm. "Probably just wants to sell me insurance."

"Well, whatever he's selling, you should definitely buy." Jane grinned, and pulled on her arm once more. "Come at least have a look."

Meg sighed. "Okay, I'll look, but only because you're driving me crazy."

She peered over the swinging doors and found she had a clear view of the man in booth six. He didn't look familiar, so she relaxed. She studied his face, with its long straight nose and dark brows. Because he was scrutinizing the menu, she couldn't determine the color of his eyes. A lock of dark brown hair fell over his forehead and he pushed it away with an impatient gesture.

She couldn't deny Jane's assessment. Something about the shape of his mouth, his strong, determined chin, even the restless tapping of his fingers against the table appealed to her. In another life she might have sat down across from him, smiled into his eyes and simply let nature take its course.

But this wasn't another life, and she wasn't looking for a man in the here and now. The pang of regret she felt surprised her. She hadn't regretted the lack of a man in her life for a very long time.

Jane gave her a little nudge towards the doors. "Humor me and at least find out what he wants. I'll even finish the pies."

Meg glanced at the man just as he checked his watch. It was rude to keep him waiting, whoever he was. She took a fortifying breath, handed her apron to Jane and pushed through the doors.

She stopped a few feet from his booth. Had Jane mentioned his name? From this close, he appeared tougher than the regular run-of-the-mill businessman. A jagged scar ran across the back of his hand, while another began at his left temple and disappeared into his eyebrow.

She cleared her throat when he looked up, extending her hand to him. "I'm Meg Evans. You wanted to speak with me?"

He stood and took her hand in a brief shake, his mouth unsmiling and tense. "I'm Zane Martin." He looked around. "Is there somewhere we can speak in private?"

Warning bells clamored in her head. "Anything you have to say to me, you can say right here." There was no way she was going anywhere private with this guy. She slid into the seat across from his.

He sat again and laid his hands on the table, his palms flat against the smooth brown Formica. Frowning, he said, "Are you sure? What I have to say is very personal."

"Look, Mr. Martin, I don't know you. I have no idea what you could possibly want to say to me, but whatever it is, I'll hear it right here." She folded her arms across her chest.

He studied her for a minute, his look enigmatic. She returned his scrutiny, wondering how he'd received the scars. Despite their dangerous appearance, they didn't take away from the attractiveness of the man.

He fidgeted for a few seconds, and then suddenly blurted out, "Your son got my daughter pregnant."

Meg's jaw dropped. Whatever she had been expecting him to say, that hadn't been it. She blinked as the information seeped into her brain. She'd known Tom was dating a girl, though she'd never met her. But pregnant? No way. Tom would have said something.

"I--I don't believe you."

He gave a heavy sigh. "Trust me, I wouldn't kid about this."

She splayed her hands on the table in front of her, her thoughts jumbled. "Tom's a university student. He doesn't have time for this."

"I can assure you he had enough time to knock up my daughter."

Meg gasped. "How can you be so crass?"

He scowled. "How do you want me to be, lady? Any way you look at it, it's a bad situation."

She slumped against her seat. "Well, you're not helping the situation by talking like that."

He waved a hand to dismiss her comment. "That's neither here nor there. I'm here to talk about getting these two kids married as soon as possible."

She straightened at his words and shook her head. "Married? Not bloody likely."

His eyebrows rose. "Now who's being crass?" He leaned forward so that his gaze was level with hers. The scar on his face whitened, as his face turned an angry red. "Your son has to take responsibility for his actions."

Meg leaned as far away from him as the bench seat would allow. "I'll have to talk to Tom. If what you say is true, I'll make sure he shoulders his share of the responsibility." She aimed her finger at him. "But just you remember, your daughter has to be accountable for this situation as well."

Zane nodded. "Of course. That's why I'm insisting on a marriage right away."

Meg stood and placed her palms flat on the table as she leaned down closer to his face, feeling some measure of power by standing over him. "Make no mistake, Mr. Martin. Whether Tom is responsible for this pregnancy or not, there will not be a marriage between our children."

He stood as well and she had to straighten to look up into his tense face. "Look, Mrs. Evans, try to be reasonable."

"It's Ms. Evans, and I'm being very reasonable. Pregnancy is not a good enough reason for two people to get married." When she realized people in nearby booths had stopped talking to listen to their heated conversation, she clamped her mouth shut. Heat crept up from her chest to her face and the skin prickled on her scalp. She lowered her voice. "This conversation is over."

He grasped her arm when she tried to walk away. In that moment she had a clear sense of déjà vu, a memory of being grabbed in the same way. Her whole body tensed, preparing for the expected blow. When he pulled a business card from his breast pocket, she almost collapsed at his feet in relief.

Shaking her arm free, she snatched at the card with trembling fingers. He held on to the business card for a moment before releasing it. "Call me after you've talked to your son."

With a slight nod, he dropped some change on the table and walked away. Meg clutched the card between rigid fingers, her eyes focused on his straight back and broad shoulders. She almost laughed out loud as she recalled Jane's ludicrous suggestion about the man in booth six. She had no desire to see this man without his suit. In fact, she had no desire to ever see him again.

* * * *

As Zane walked out of Joe's Diner, he could feel the eyes of the lovely Ms. Evans boring holes into the back of his head. She was lovely, even with her long dark hair pulled into a careless ponytail.

If he had gone to the restaurant with nothing other than food on his mind today, he might have pursued a lunch date with her. It had been too long since he'd had an interesting dinner companion. Yes, under different circumstances, he might have gone after her, just based on the unexplained attraction he had experienced when he'd first seen her. Maybe he was just a sucker for big brown eyes. Bambi eyes.

Unfortunately, Bambi had turned into a she-wolf bent on protecting her cub. He thought he'd suggested the only reasonable solution to their predicament. Not in his wildest imagination had he expected to come up against opposition to the idea of a marriage between their children. As far as he could see, it was the only answer.

He was still reeling from the shock of Erin's and Tom's news the previous evening. They had discussed Erin's pregnancy for several hours and they had all agreed there was no alternative other than marriage.

Even so, Zane had sensed reluctance in Tom. That had been the catalyst for his visit this morning to Joe's Diner, Tom's mother's place of employment. Although Meg Evans had balked at the idea of marriage between their children, Zane knew it would only be a matter of time before she came around to his way of thinking.

Pulling his cell phone from the clip on his belt, he punched in a familiar number. He leaned against his car while he waited for the phone to ring. It was answered almost immediately.

"Hi Ma. How are you doing?"

He pictured his mother's puzzled expression as he waited for her response. He rarely called her twice in as many days.

"I'm just as fine as I was yesterday morning." He heard rustling as she sat down. "So Zane, to what do I owe the pleasure of a call from my only child two days in a row?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I love you, Ma." How was he going to break the news to her? It would rip her heart in two.

She gave a quiet laugh. "I know you do, son. So what's happened since yesterday that you had to call your dear old ma?"

He didn't know any other way to tell her, so he decided to just get it over with in a rush. "How do you feel about coming to Winnipeg for a wedding?"

"Zane! You're getting married again? That's wonderful! What's her name? I want to meet her."

He almost choked. His mom sounded so enthusiastic that he almost wished he were getting married again, just so he wouldn't break her heart with his next words. He cut in on her excited response. "Uh, no Ma, not me. I'm not getting married."

He could almost hear her deflating. "You're not? Oh, I'm sorry to jump to conclusions, dear, but I really wish you'd find someone to spend the rest of your life with."

"Look who's talking. I don't see you rushing out to buy a wedding dress."

He heard her sniff of disdain. "You're changing the subject, Zane."

"I'm not the only unmarried one."

"I refuse to get into this discussion. Now tell me the real reason you called."

He chuckled. He knew he'd get a rise out of her. It served her right, bugging him about getting married when she never had. "Sorry, Ma. I couldn't resist."

She chuckled too. "All right, you're forgiven. Now is someone getting married or not?"

He sighed when he realized he couldn't put off the reason for his call any longer. "Yeah, Erin's getting married."

"Erin? Our little Erin? She's not old enough to get married."

"Ma, she's eighteen."

"Still too young."

He couldn't disagree with her, but that wasn't the issue. "She's pregnant."

"O-o-ohh."

Her disappointment came through loud and clear over the miles. He could only surmise she was remembering back to when she too was unmarried and pregnant, just like her granddaughter.

At last she spoke. "Who's the father?"

"His name is Tom Evans."

"And how old is he?"

Zane rotated a shoulder to release the tension. "Around twenty, I think."

"So you've met him?"

"Of course, I have Ma. What do you take me for? I like to meet the people my daughter hangs around with." Unfortunately his vigilance hadn't stopped Erin from becoming pregnant. Maybe he'd failed his daughter, but he'd be damned if he'd fail her child. He would not allow his grandchild to grow up thinking his father didn't care about him.

With effort, he forced his old resentments to the back of his mind. Before he could do that, he knew he needed to apologize. "I'm sorry, Ma. I didn't mean that to come out like it did."

Her voice lowered and he could hear the tight emotion she tried to hide. "I know you didn't, dear."

"You did a great job raising me on your own. You're the best mother a guy could ask for."

"You can stop sucking up, Zane."

"I know, but I am so--" He realized he was about to apologize again. "I just don't want Erin's kid to grow up with people thinking he's less than good enough."

He heard the catch in her voice as she spoke. "I'm sorry you had to grow up that way, son."

"I know you are, Ma. But hey, I turned out all right didn't I?"

She gave a forced laugh. "Yeah, you did." He heard her take a deep breath. "This Tom Evans. Is...is he nice?"

Zane pictured Tom in his mind. He was a good looking kid, obviously taking after his mother. He forced his thoughts back to the conversation. "Yeah Ma, he's nice."

He'd first met Erin's boyfriend about a month ago and had been impressed with Tom's intelligence and dedication to his studies. He'd liked what he had seen of the boy. His daughter's news the night before had dampened some of his enthusiasm for the young man, but he was willing to work on the relationship for Erin's sake. After all, young Tom would be his son-in-law soon enough.

* * * *

Meg stumbled through the rest of her shift by operating on a kind of automatic pilot. Jane sent curious looks in her direction, obviously noticing her distraction. Luckily for Meg, the restaurant filled with the lunch crowd, leaving Jane no opportunity to quiz her. For that small mercy Meg was grateful.

When her shift ended, she fled, too upset to withstand Jane's questions, however well-meaning they might be. Instead, she lied about having an appointment she was already late for. Thinking about it now as she waited for Tom in the kitchen of their apartment, she winced. Would the lies never end? She'd told so many over the past seventeen years that it was sometimes hard to remember what was fact and what was fiction.

She made herself a cup of her favorite herbal tea, letting the aroma calm her. She'd need to be calm to deal with Tom and the predicament he'd apparently managed to get into. Meg sighed as she sipped the hot liquid.

She'd rarely had occasion to be disappointed with Tom. He was a wonderful son, loving and thoughtful, and he'd given her cause to be proud many times over the years. Every time she recalled the day he'd won a full scholarship to the engineering program at the university, her heart filled with pride. Life hadn't been easy for them, but the love and support of the Evans family had made everything bearable. She gave herself a mental shake. Well, almost bearable.

She shuddered at the memory of the months they'd lived on social assistance. Never had she felt so inadequate as a person and as a mother. However, with those feelings had come a determination to carve out a better life for herself and her son. She had landed a job as a dishwasher at Joe's Diner, and Joe and Maria Evans had taken her in, both as an employee and as a daughter. For that and for them, she would always be grateful.

Meg heard Tom's key turn in the lock.

He entered, carrying an armful of books and looking tired and disheveled. When he saw her drinking tea at the kitchen table, he said, "Hi Mom. I didn't expect to see you home so early. Is there anything to eat?" He dumped his books on a chair near the door and came to sit across from her.

He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture speaking of fatigue and stress. Final exams for his third year of engineering loomed ahead like black clouds on the horizon. He needed to maintain good marks to keep his scholarship. There was no way Meg could afford to send him to university without it.

And now Zane Martin was demanding that Tom marry his daughter. No wonder her son looked stressed. "I'll make something to eat in a little while. There's something I need to talk to you about first."

His expression reminded her so much of his father that she had to turn away. Sometimes Tom's resemblance to Paul was so eerily similar, her breath caught in her throat. She thanked God every day that was where the resemblance with his father ended.

Tom rubbed his face in a weary gesture. "There's something I need to talk to you about, too." He sighed. "I think you might know what it's about. Has Zane Martin spoken to you?"

She took his hand. "He came to see me at the restaurant this morning. Why don't you tell me your story and we'll compare notes?"

"You're not going to like what I have to say."

Meg squeezed Tom's fingers. "Probably not, but I'm not going to love you any less."

Tom looked away but he didn't remove his hand. He cleared his throat. "I'm going to be a father."

"Oh." Putting a hand to her tight chest, Meg shook her head. "It wasn't any easier hearing it from you."

"I'm sorry, Mom." His voice cracked with emotion. "I don't know how it happened."

Meg experienced a flashback with his words. She had uttered a similar statement in her own circumstances, but she didn't want to make the same mistake her parents had made with her. Even after twenty years, she could still hear the recriminations. Taking a deep breath, she tried to focus on the humor of his words. "Oh, I think you know how it happened."

Tom grimaced and pulled his hand away. He looked up at the ceiling as if the water stain in the corner had some answers, then swung his gaze back to her. "You know what I mean, Mom."

All traces of humor left her. "Yeah, I do." She could barely choke out the words.

He ran his hand through his hair once more and lowered his gaze. "I don't know if I'll be able to love this kid and look after it the way you've loved me."

Meg pushed back her chair and went around the table to hug her son. "Of course you will, honey." She pushed back the dark hair from his forehead. "You're a loving and caring person."

He hugged her back. "You taught me well." He buried his head in her shoulder but not before she saw the sheen of tears in his eyes.

Meg held him close, giving him a moment to compose himself. When he pulled out of her embrace, she went back to her chair. A tear slipped down her cheek and she wiped at it in surprise. "Sorry about that. I just haven't come to grips with the idea of you being a father yet." She forced a smile. "So, what are your plans?"

"Well, Erin's dad wants us to get married."

Meg tensed, but she pushed back her frustration with Zane Martin's demands to focus on her son's needs. "Is that what you want?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I haven't really known Erin very long."

Tom's words had her staring at him in disbelief. "Then what business did you have sleeping with her?"

He shrugged. "It just sort of happened."

"It just sort of happened? I can't believe you just said that." She heard the shrillness in her voice. "Nothing just sort of happens. I thought I'd raised you better."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

Meg closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that." She shuddered. "I sounded just like my parents."

Tom sent her a curious look. "Your parents?"

The situation with Tom and Erin vividly brought back the past, along with all the difficult emotions of that time. Of course Tom wouldn't remember his biological grandparents. He'd only been two when he'd last had contact with them. Joe and Maria Evans were the only grandparents he knew. The rest of his history had been a mixture of fantasy and reality that Meg had created to satisfy his curious mind.

"I mean your biological grandparents, Tom. You know that I got pregnant with you when I was a teenager. My parents were pretty upset at first, but they came around after you were born."

"Just before they died in that plane crash with my Dad and his folks."

"Yeah." The lies burned in her throat, making it difficult to speak. When would they ever end?

"I'm just so confused, Mom."

Meg leaned forward. "Whatever you do, don't let Erin and her dad force you into something you don't want to do."

"I want to do the right thing."

"Oh honey, you can still be a father to your child without marrying Erin."

Tom's head came up and the look he sent her was full of pain and confusion. "But my dad married you when you got pregnant, right?"

Meg's heart twisted in her chest. She'd given him only enough information about his father to satisfy his curiosity as he grew up. He'd asked a lot of questions as a young boy and she had concocted a story about how thrilled

Paul was to be a father and how much he loved Tom. She'd invented a fairytale family for the three of them that ended when Paul, his parents and her parents died in a plane crash on the way to a fishing trip in northern Saskatchewan.

Lying didn't come easy for Meg, but over the years she'd become a master. She hated herself for it, but she'd had to protect her son.

"That was different. Your Dad and I grew up together. We'd known each other and each other's family all our lives. You barely know Erin. Can you honestly say you love her enough to stay with her the rest of your life? Because if you can't, it'll be even harder for your child when your marriage falls apart."

Tom scrubbed at his face with his hands in a gesture of weariness. "No, I can't honestly say that right now. But I don't want my kid growing up without knowing his dad like I did."

Meg swallowed a huge lump in her throat. She turned to stare at the philodendron across the room. When had she last watered it? Even though she tried to focus on something as mundane as the houseplant, she couldn't stop thinking about her son's questions. It was because of her that her son had grown up without his father.

Had she done the right thing?

"Your child won't grow up that way because you won't let him." She clutched at the green checked tablecloth as she carefully weighed her words. "For now, just concentrate on being the best dad, and the best person, that you can be."

Tom nodded once and released a pent up breath. "So you think I can be a good dad, even if I don't marry Erin."

Meg sighed in relief. "I know you can, honey. Maybe sometime in the future you and Erin will fall in love and be ready for marriage." Taking a closer look at Tom, she realized her baby was almost all grown up. And now he had a baby of his own on the way. She blinked with her next thought. She was going to be a grandmother.

The ringing of the phone interrupted her revelation. Frowning, she got up, annoyed to have her thoughts of impending grandmotherhood cut short. Zane Martin answered her hello without a similar greeting.

"Is your son ready to marry my daughter?"

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Burning Love

After causing three cooking fires in her apartment, Iris Jensen finds herself evicted and homeless. She lands on Riley Benson's doorstep, looking to rent a room in the beautiful old home he's restoring. It's only for six weeks until Iris leaves Portland, Oregon for her new job on a cruise ship. Firefighter Riley knows firsthand what a bad tenant she can be. But he needs money to finish the work on the house he loves. And something about Iris pulls at his heart...

Meanwhile, in Heaven, two angels watch over the young lovers. Angelica and Hildegard work in Heaven's Relationship Division, where angels match mortals with their soul mates. The angels believe so strongly in Iris and Riley's love that they break Heaven's rules to help them. Can the angels convince them their love will last a lifetime?



Chapter One

Chapter One Riley Benson's fire truck screeched to a stop in front of an old brick apartment building as smoke belched from a third story window. All was chaos on the normally quiet street in Portland's Pearl District. Firefighters poured water onto the roof of the building from the aerial platform of a ladder truck already on site. Police cars and ambulances flanked both sides of the street, their flashing lights illuminating the night. The air reeked of diesel exhaust and acrid smoke. After five years as a firefighter, the familiar smell sent adrenalin rushing through Riley's veins.

He jumped from the truck when it came to a stop and began unrolling hose. Police attempted to keep onlookers a safe distance away. Residents of the apartment building milled around in various states of undress. Riley caught snippets of angry rumblings from the crowd.

"I'll bet it's that girl from the third floor again. She did this!"

"That woman is dangerous!"

Before Riley could wonder what they were talking about, a woman's shrill scream sounded over all the other noise.

"Someone's still in the building! I saw a woman at the window!"

Another person shouted, "Yes, I saw her too! In the stairwell, on the second floor."

"There she is! She's heading up the stairs!"

"She must be crazy! Why would she run back into a burning building?"

Captain Andrews shouted instructions. "Benson, Carruthers, Smith. Find the woman and get her out."

Riley dropped the hose and ran toward the building's entrance, pulling his breathing apparatus over his face as he scrambled over hoses. Though this fire was mostly smoke and largely under control, that didn't mean it wasn't still dangerous. He led the way as the three firefighters formed a single line and made their way up the stairs. The smoke grew thicker the higher they climbed until Riley could barely see in front of his face.

"Frank, Jim!" Riley called on his radio. "You still with me?"

Riley felt a hand on his leg. "Right behind you."

"Bringing up the rear, Riley."

Reassured, Riley pushed on. A moment later he heard coughing and dropped to his knees, feeling along the wall until he found the woman. He slipped an arm beneath her and hoisted her over his shoulder in the fireman's carry.

"I've got her," he said over the radio. "Let's get out of here."

The woman pummeled his back with her small fists. "No, no! I have to go back! Please, let me go!"

A fit of coughing cut off her words. The firefighters rushed down the stairs and out of the building. As Riley carried the woman across the lawn to a waiting ambulance, a bald man with a paunch wearing boxers and an undershirt pointed an accusing finger at them.

"It's her! It's the girl who started the fire the last time!"

"She should be evicted!"

"We're not safe as long as she lives here," someone else shouted. Riley hurried to the ambulance and set the woman down just inside the open doors. Was it true? Had she caused a previous fire?

Dave, the EMT, tried to administer oxygen to the woman, but she pushed aside the mask and jumped from the ambulance, ready to make her escape. "Iris, it's me, Dave. You have to let me help you."

"No, no. Please!" She shoved away the mask once more.

"Riley, give me a hand here, will you?"

"Sure. You know her?"

Dave grinned. "We've met before. Iris here is a pretty rotten cook. When she burns a meal she really burns a meal. I've been a guest at her little midnight soirées on previous occasions."

So it was true. Was she some kind of firebug, one of those crazy people who got their thrills by deliberately setting fires?

Riley grasped both of her hands in one of his and wrapped one arm around her waist while Dave placed the mask over her mouth and nose. He tried to ignore the feel of her soft, warm body pressed tightly against his. She struggled to free herself, but it was a lost cause. She couldn't have been more than five-three and maybe a hundred and fifteen pounds. Despite her small stature, her curves were generous. Her breasts strained against the thin material of her T-shirt, her nipples pebbling to hard peaks in the cool night air. Riley could imagine one breast fitting perfectly in the palm of his hand...

Whoa! Where the hell had that come from?

He abruptly loosened his hold and Iris took the opportunity to wrench one arm free and push away the mask. "My cat. I have to find her. She's all I have. Please!"

Finally Riley understood. He looked into her face. Her bright blue eyes stood out starkly against her smoke-blackened face, pleading with him to understand. Tears forged little rivulets of mud down her cheeks. In her eyes he read panic and genuine fear. Anyone who loved her cat as much as Iris obviously did would never deliberately start a fire that might endanger her beloved pet. He had a dog and understood completely. No way had Iris started this fire on purpose.

"What's your cat's name?"

"Whiskers," she rasped before a fit of coughing stopped her.

"I'll find her."

At his nod, Dave placed the mask over her mouth and nose again. This time Iris didn't fight him. She sat quietly and closed her eyes as if all the fight had drained from her body.

Riley turned and headed back to the apartment building. He spoke to his captain.

"Cap, I'm going back in. The girl says her cat is still in there."

"Pets often go into hiding during a fire," Captain Andrews said. He shook his head. "This is the third fire we've responded to at Iris Jennings' apartment this year. It's a miracle no one has been seriously injured."

Riley glanced back at Iris and nodded glumly. He couldn't let a pair of pretty blue eyes distract him from doing his job, and right now that job was to find her cat.

As he checked his air pack on the front step of the building, he heard a faint mewling. Riley removed his helmet and listened, straining to hear the cat over the noise of the emergency vehicles. After a moment he heard the mewling again and followed the sounds around the side of the building into some shrubs.

"Whiskers? Is that you? C'mere, Whiskers."

A small gray cat with a white face and paws stepped tentatively from behind her hiding place in the bushes. Riley reached a gloved hand toward her, and she rubbed her face against it and purred, as if grateful for rescue. Riley scooped her up and carried her back to the ambulance, hoping the cat belonged to Iris. He didn't want to examine too closely his need to ease her distress.

Iris sat just inside the ambulance, her head bowed and her shoulders slumped in utter despair. The oxygen mask was gone. She looked small and helpless as she clutched the thin blue blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Riley fought the urge to wrap her in his arms and keep her safe. He cleared his suddenly dry throat, shaken by his thoughts.

"Is this Whiskers?"

Iris lifted her head, her gaze colliding with his. When she saw the cat in his arms her despair dissipated, forgotten along with the blanket as she jumped from the ambulance.

"Oh, Whiskers!" She reached for the cat and cuddled it in her arms. "I thought I'd lost you." Fresh tears poured from her eyes, making her cheeks even muddier. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. I think she got out of the apartment faster than you did. I found her outside."

Iris laughed and hugged the cat close. "It's a good thing you're smarter than me."

Riley watched Iris whisper reassurances to Whiskers, her clear blue eyes sparkling with tears. Aside from her amazing eyes, there was nothing remarkable about her. Black soot covered her from head to toe, and she smelled strongly of smoke. So why did he feel this pull toward her?

Get a grip, Benson.

He turned to Dave. "Does Iris need to go to the hospital?"

"I'd like to have her checked more closely at the hospital, maybe have her stay overnight for observation."

"No, I'm fine, really," Iris protested. "No permanent damage. I don't need to go to the hospital."

"You inhaled a lot of smoke, Iris," Riley said. "You should listen to Dave."

"I'm fine. See? I'm not even coughing anymore."

"Smoke inhalation can be tricky—"

"No! I'm not going to the hospital."

Dave glanced at Riley and sighed. "All right, but I strongly advise you to visit your doctor as soon as possible."

Iris nodded, rubbing her cheek against Whiskers' fur. Riley suspected the reason she didn't want to go to the hospital was because of the cat. Now that Iris's apartment was uninhabitable, Whiskers was as homeless as she was. What would she do with the cat if she were stuck in the hospital?

A Cadillac squealed to a halt next to the ambulance, and a short bald man hopped out. Riley recognized him immediately and his jaw clenched in anger. Joe Gardiner, landlord, real estate developer, and first class money-grubbing louse. Riley knew from bitter experience what Gardiner was capable of.

"What the hell is going on here?" Gardiner bellowed. A second later he spied Iris. "You! I should have known you'd be responsible for this!"

He made his way toward her, vengeance in his eyes. Riley stepped in front of him, blocking his access to Iris.

"Are you trying to ruin me? We just finished the repairs from the last fire."

Iris held her cat close. "It was an accident. I'm sorry."

"Once is an accident. Three times is arson!" Gardiner tried to go around Riley but he stepped in front of him once more. "I want you out! Now! You'll never rent one of my properties again, and I'll make damn sure no one else rents to you either."

"I'm so sorry," Iris said. "I don't know what happened. I turned on my stove to make a grilled cheese sandwich, and the next thing I knew my apartment was full of smoke. It was an accident, I swear."

"You'll never have another accident in one of my buildings. Consider yourself evicted, effective immediately."

"My things—"

"You'll find what's left of them out on the front lawn tomorrow."

Iris lifted her chin a fraction. Gathering her cat close, she walked away from the apartment building to a chorus of boos and hisses from her angry neighbors. Riley ran after her.

"Iris, wait. Do you have someplace to stay? The department can help you if you need it."

She didn't look at him. "I'll be fine. My friend lives just around the corner. Whiskers and I can stay with her."

"Are you sure? Do you need a ride?"

Iris's chin quivered as she struggled to hold back tears, giving him a glimpse of the vulnerability that lay just under the surface of her bravado. Without thinking, he reached out to touch her. Her skin felt warm and alive under his hand, and his heart gave an involuntary leap. She glanced at his hand on her arm and then lifted her gaze to meet his, a determined smile on her lips.

"You're very kind, but I'm fine. Thank you."

Riley dropped his hand and watched her disappear into the night with her back straight and her head held high. His chest tightened at the sight of Iris

walking alone down the street. Did she really have a friend around the corner willing to take her in? Would she be okay?

Enough! Iris Jennings was not his responsibility. Her carelessness likely caused this fire and probably two others. He was damn lucky he didn't live anywhere near her.

Meanwhile, in a far, far away place...

"Angelica, now what have you done? I told you not to open the Earth window!"

Angelica watched with Hildegard as firefighters hosed down a smoke-blackened apartment suite on other side of the window. She frowned. This hadn't gone quite as well as she'd hoped.

"What in the name of St. Peter were you doing? I only left you alone for ten minutes!"

"I was matching a couple of soul mates," Angelica said, forcing cheerfulness into her voice. "After all, that's what we do here in Relationship Division, isn't it?"

"Wrong," Hildegard said, crossing her arms. "It's what I do here in Relationship Division. You're supposed to be dusting my office, not creating havoc on Earth."

Angelica stamped one small foot, all pretense of cheerfulness gone. "I've been here in Heaven for ages. I'm supposed to be an angel-in-training, but nobody will train me to do anything important!"

"With good reason! You could have killed somebody with that fire."

"I had the fire under complete control the whole time," Angelica said. As soon as the lie slipped from her mouth, her truth bracelet lit up like a firecracker, its shrill siren assaulting her ears. *Stupid truth bracelet*. Every angel-in-training wore one, but hers got more of a workout than most. "Okay, so maybe the fire was a little bit out of control," she admitted. The truth bracelet silenced at once. "But I did everything else by the book. Honestly."

Hildegard marched to the filing cabinet and pulled out a folder bulging with papers. Angelica groaned. Not the file again. Was that thing going to follow her around Heaven for the rest of the afterlife?

Hildegard flipped through the papers. "You've been found unsuitable for every job you've been given in Heaven." She pulled a sheaf of papers from the file. "Look at this. When you were assigned to Messenger Division you mixed up a couple of communications. A ninety-year-old great-grandmother was told she was going to have a baby."

"It was an accident. I put the wrong message in the envelope addressed to the great-grandmother." The incident had ended her career in Messenger Division. It had been a bad day for her and she suspected it hadn't been so good for the great-grandmother either.

"Then there was the debacle in the Avenger Division," Hildegard continued.

Angelica closed her eyes in misery. "Do we have to rehash this again? Can't we just let bygones be bygones?"

From the set of Hildegard's jaw, Angelica guessed the answer to that question was no. Hildegard was as by-the-book an angel as she'd met in Heaven. Everything about her screamed businesslike efficiency, from her sensible black loafers and brown tweed suit, to her steel rimmed glasses and severely pulled back hairstyle. Only the elegant lines of her beautiful wings softened her look.

Hildegard scowled. "You nearly sent the entire Avenger squad to exact retribution on a poor old corn farmer in Iowa instead of a drug lord in New York City." "Okay, so I got the names mixed up. Johnson, Johnston. Anyone could have made that mistake."

"And yet no one but you ever has." Hildegard flipped through the pages. "Ah, my personal favorite. Divine Intervention Division. They're still trying to put their computer system back together. How did you manage to foul up an entire database? You were only there one day."

"I work fast, I guess." Angelica had no idea what happened. She'd accessed the database to do a simple search for one of the senior angels and somehow she'd managed to disable the whole system.

"What are we going to do with you, Angelica? Aside from being totally inept, you're always late for everything."

"It takes time to put this look together." Angelica gave her blonde curls a little shake, making them bounce. "Do you know how long it takes to get my hair just right? And selecting the perfect outfit can't be rushed."

Angelica smoothed the silk of her Versace gown. One of the best perks in Heaven was having access to the fashions of dearly departed designers.

"Some of the division heads are saying you should be placed in Service Division."

"What! No, not Service Division! I can't spend eternity cleaning and cooking for other angels." She held out her newly manicured hands to Hildegard. "Do these look like the hands of an angel destined for a life in service?"

"You are far too vain for your own good." Hildegard shuffled through the file. "Your Heaven entrance exams said you tested off the charts for vanity. But according to St. Peter you do have some redeeming qualities. You scored well for empathy and kindness."

Angelica beamed. "Thank you."

"You also scored extremely high on the stubbornness scale."

"Oh. Is that bad?"

"Sometimes. But sometimes stubbornness means you'll stick with a project to the end."

"Does that mean I can stay here with you in Relationship Division?" Angelica clapped her hands in glee. "It's going to be so much fun working here."

"I didn't say that. Don't start picking out the curtains for your new office just yet."

Hildegard closed the file and placed it back in the cabinet. She glanced at the Earth window once more.

"Wait a minute. Isn't that Iris Jennings? I was working on her file before I got called away to a meeting. What have you done?"

"I told you," Angelica said, mustering her tattered confidence. "I was matching her with her soul mate."

Hildegard hit the rewind button and watched as the whole scene unfolded, from the start of the fire to Iris's solitary walk in the dark.

"You nearly burned down the building and put everyone in danger. Not to mention Whiskers the cat!" Hildegard shook her head in disbelief. "If anything had happened to Whiskers it would have been unforgivable."

"But everything turned out okay. Everybody, including Whiskers, is fine. I had to resort to drastic measures so Iris could meet her soul mate."

"I've already matched her with her soul mate!" Hildegard said, her voice rising in irritation. She snapped her fingers and an extremely attractive male

mortal with dark curly hair and laughing brown eyes grinned at them from the other side of the window. "This is Antonio from Milan. Iris is heading to Greece in six weeks to work on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. Antonio will be working on the same ship. They're going to fall in love immediately and forever. End of story, happily ever after."

"No, it's not happily ever after," Angelica insisted. "I saw Iris's file sitting on your desk and I peeked inside. Antonio's not right for her." She had felt it the moment she'd looked into Iris's eyes.

"I matched them on a hundred points of compatibility, like I do all my matches. It's all very scientific," Hildegard said defensively. She picked up Iris's file. "Look. They're perfect for each other. Both of them love travel and adventure. She'd be bored comatose if I matched her with a homebody."

"No, you're wrong," Angelica said. She snapped her fingers and brought Iris back to the window. The girl's anxiety and loneliness reached out to her and grabbed her by the throat. "I can feel it. She needs a home and security much more than she needs adventure. Yes, she loves to travel, but she needs someone to come home to. She wants a man who'll always be there for her."

"I've been doing this for a long time and I say Iris and Antonio are simpatico," Hildegard said. "You can't just waltz in here and tell me how to do my job."

"If you're so good at your job," Angelica countered, "how come so many mortals get divorced?"

"It's not my fault." Hildegard straightened to her full height and gave her wings an impatient shake, her face registering her annoyance. "I make excellent matches. If the mortals choose to look elsewhere there is nothing I can do to stop them. If you'd studied the policy manual like I told you, you'd know that we here in Relationship Division are allowed to orchestrate the first meeting between our soul mates but after that it's all up to them. The Divine Leader has forbidden us from any further interference. After all, mortals have free will. Far be it from me to question the Divine Leader's directives."

From the tone of her voice, Angelica suspected Hildegard didn't exactly agree with the Divine Leader. Perhaps she wasn't the by-the-book angel Angelica believed her to be. Maybe she had a touch of rebel in her after all.

"Hildy, matching soul mates is what I'm supposed to be doing here in Heaven, I'm sure of it. This is where I'm supposed to be."

Hildegard folded her arms across her chest, one eyebrow rising skeptically. "Oh, really."

"Yes, really. I can feel when two people belong together. Why don't we work together? With your scientific method and my creative genius we can't lose."

Hildegard burst out laughing. "You *are* vain. What am I going to do with you Angelica?"

"You're going to give me a chance to prove myself," Angelica said, seizing her opportunity. She grasped Hildegard's hand and pressed it between both of hers. "Let me prove to you that the match I made for Iris Jennings is the best one for her. If she isn't madly in love by the end of six weeks, I will tender my resignation here in Relationship Division and immediately report for duty in Service Division."

"You're serious." Hildegard sounded surprised.

"Completely."

Hildegard stared into her eyes, her expression unreadable. "So who did you have in mind for Iris?"

She's considering it! Angelica could barely contain her excitement. "He's right there. The second firefighter from the left. Riley Benson."

"Well," Hildegard said dryly. "I'll give you points for irony. Matching a girl who's prone to starting fires with a firefighter. By the way, this fire, was that Iris or did you give her a little help?"

"A little of both. Iris put the pan on the stove to heat. I made her forget about it. I wanted Iris and Riley's first meeting to be unforgettable."

Hildegard snorted. "I'm sure it was. What makes Riley a better match for Iris than Antonio?"

"Riley needs Iris. Antonio doesn't. And Iris needs Riley. She needs security in her life, whether she realizes it or not. They even live in the same city. Is that kismet or what?"

"Okay, suppose I go along with this ridiculous plan. At the moment Riley thinks Iris is a crazy firebug. How are you going to change his mind about her? For that matter, how are they even going to meet again? You've had your one chance for a first meeting."

"I have faith," Angelica said. "These two belong together. Somehow the universe will make it happen."

"As long as you don't make it happen, Angelica," Hildegard warned. "Setting up a second meeting is totally against policy."

"I know."

"I'm serious Angelica. I will only consider your crazy plan if you solemnly promise to obey all the rules, including the provision banning second meetings."

Angelica held up her right hand. "I solemnly promise I will not set up a second meeting."

"Good. What about the other rules? Under no circumstances are we allowed to go to Earth to befriend, coach, or otherwise influence our matches. The Divine Leader absolutely forbids it."

"If we can't go to Earth, how do we know if the match is working?"

"No problem." Hildegard snapped her fingers and a picture of an old house in the middle of extensive renovations appeared at the Earth window. "This is Riley's house in Portland, Oregon. We can monitor the situation from here. Do you agree to follow the rules?"

"I agree to follow the rules."

"Good. Then in that case I agree to give you a chance to prove yourself with this match you've made between Iris and Riley. If the match works, you'll stay here and work with me in Relationship Division. But if they are not madly in love and totally committed by the end of six weeks, Iris will go on her Mediterranean cruise and be matched with Antonio, and you will go to Service Division. Do we have a deal?"

Hildegard held out her hand. Angelica took a deep breath. Her whole future in Heaven depended on Iris and Riley and the accuracy of her intuition. Angelica simply couldn't allow them to languish in loneliness. She needed to fight for them, whatever the risk to her.

But if she was wrong, if they weren't soul mates—

Angelica shivered. She couldn't bear to think of it. She was far too pretty to wear one of those horrid Service uniforms.

She shook Hildegard's hand. "Yes, we have a deal."

Hildegard sighed. "Heaven help us."

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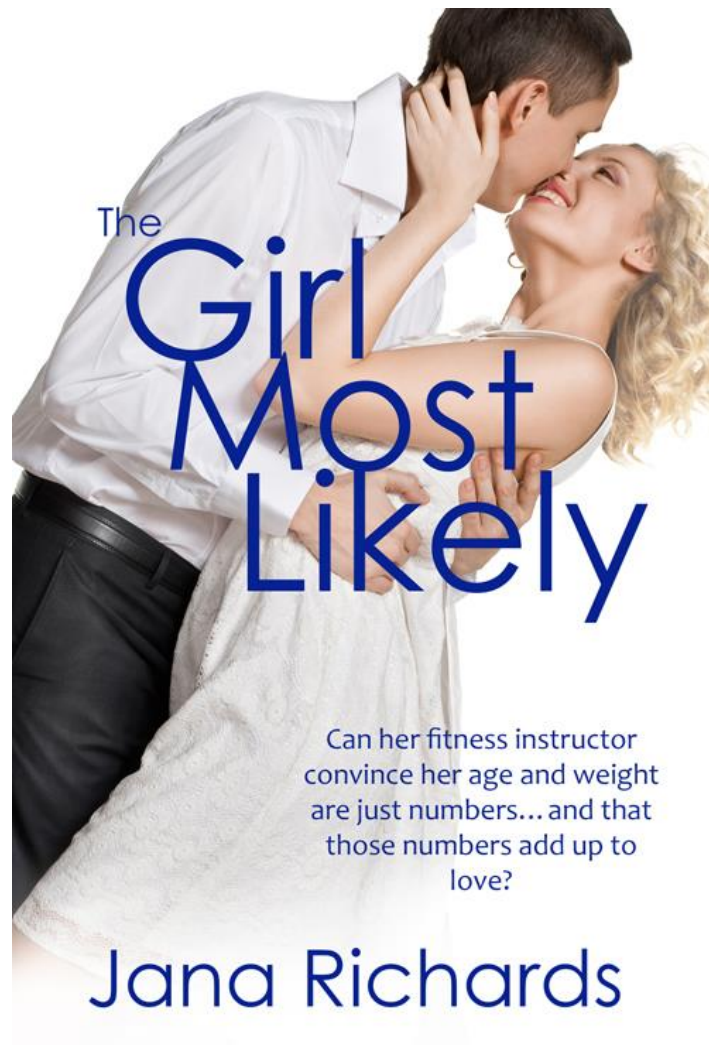
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The Girl Most Likely

Cara McLeod, the girl most likely to have the perfect marriage, is now divorced and, in her own words, “fat, frumpy, and over forty.” The thought of facing former classmates—and the ex-husband who dumped her—at her high school reunion terrifies her. Cajoled into attending by her kids and her best friend, Cara enlists help at the gym to lose weight and look great for the reunion. Personal Trainer Finn Cooper is more than willing to help—but does he have to be so to-die-for gorgeous?

Finn thinks Cara is perfect just the way she is. She’s everything he wants in a woman, except for one thing—she can’t get past the fact that he’s eight years younger. To Finn, age and weight are just numbers. But can he convince Cara the numbers she worries about add up to only one thing for him—love?



Chapter One

You are cordially invited to the 25th reunion of Summerville High School Class of '85.

Hard to believe it's been 25 years since we last walked the halls of Summerville High. Wouldn't you like to know what's going on with former classmates?

Not really.

Cara McLeod shook her head. High school felt like a lifetime ago. Best it remained in the past with the rest of the things she'd left behind, like her marriage. And her waistline.

The Reunion Committee has worked hard to plan a fabulous, fun-filled three day celebration on the last weekend in June at the historic Summerville Inn.

Bring your spouse or come stag. You won't believe the surprises waiting for you!

Surprises? Cara scowled at the embossed invitation. The plugged toilet and her car's dead battery had been all the surprises she could handle this week, thank you very much. She stuffed the invitation into the pocket of her hoodie and turned her attention back to her job.

She consulted her clip board; the personal trainer was first up. As a junior assistant, her job on the live local events show at KBST Television was to make sure guests of the show were present and accounted for, provided with coffee and snacks, and escorted onto the sound stage at the appropriate time.

Even though the guests were adults, in age anyway, the job was a lot like her previous work experience – motherhood. Keep an eagle eye on her charges at all times, feed and water when necessary, and lead them by the hand to wherever they needed to go.

She headed to the green room to retrieve the personal trainer. Would her ex-husband attend this fancy shindig for their 25th high school reunion?

Cara tried to push thoughts of Peter from her mind, but they stuck like stubborn carpet stains. What did she care if he flaunted his latest young, skinny girlfriend in front of all their old friends? She wasn't going anyway. She didn't need a reunion to remind her that few of her high school dreams

had come to fruition. She should have left the stupid invitation in the mailbox this morning. Why was she torturing herself?

She opened the door to the green room and Finn Cooper, the personal trainer, rose from his chair and smiled at her. For the first time Cara realized how tall he was. Not to mention how Adonis-like. "Mr. Cooper, you'll be our first guest, so I'll take you to the stage now." She looked around the empty room. "Where's the other guest, the chef?"

He cocked his head towards the closed washroom door. "He's been in there a while. I think he's sick. He looked a little green earlier."

Great. The last time they'd lost a guest, the floor manager nearly had a breakdown. She smiled with what she hoped looked like confidence. "I'm sure he'll be just fine. Let's get you to the sound stage."

Cara escorted Mr. Cooper to the stage, leaving him in the care of the floor manager, before hurrying back to the green room. She knocked on the washroom door.

"Hello? Are you all right in there?" She checked her clipboard for the chef's name. "Mr. Bricker?"

She heard a low moan. "I'm sick. Leave me alone."

"Mr. Bricker, are you too ill to appear on camera?"

"Of course I'm too sick! Damn sushi! I don't know whether to sit on the toilet or stick my head in it."

Cara quickly processed that mental picture. The last thing the show needed was a guest barfing on the host. Though it could be the most excitement they'd had on the set in months.

"I want to go home," Bricker whined.

"Hang in there, sir. We'll look after you."

She hurried back to the set and found the floor manager. "Bill, we've got a problem." She told him about the chef holed up in the washroom.

A fine sheen of perspiration broke out on Bill's forehead. "That's just great. Do we have any other guests lined up for today?"

"Just the personal trainer."

Jessica, the perky blonde host of *Rochester Noon*, leaned suggestively toward Finn Cooper, batting perfectly made up blue eyes at him. Cara couldn't blame her. He was one fine looking man.

Bill started to pace, mopping his sweaty brow with a hanky as he marched back and forth. "How are we going to fill an entire hour with one guest? Jessica isn't capable of winging it for that long. She has enough trouble interviewing when we provide her with the questions."

"First things first. I'm going to call a cab and send the chef home. I'm sure you'll think of something."

Cara called a taxi and escorted the chef to the front door to meet it. She helped him into the back seat and handed him a plastic bucket, just in case. By the time she returned to the set, a commercial break had been called.

"There she is!" Jessica shouted, pointing at her.

Bill grabbed her arm and dragged her to the stage. "Quick Cara, the commercial's almost over."

"Wait! What's going on? What are you doing?"

"No time to explain. You're going to be our live example of what people can expect when they go to see a personal trainer."

"What? Me on live TV? No way!"

"You're even wearing workout gear today. It's perfect," Jessica gushed.

Cara glanced down at her sweatpants, t-shirt, and hoodie. She didn't even want to think about the state of her hair. "My washing machine broke down. I ran out of clean clothes." She glanced at the trainer who held what looked like a giant set of tweezers in his hand. "What is he going to do to me?"

"Oh, don't be such a baby." Jessica pulled her up on to the stage. "It's for the show. Take one for the team."

Cara wrenched her arm away. "You take one for the team. You get paid more than I do."

"And we're live in three, two, one ..."

Cara froze. Jessica aimed her hundred watt smile at the camera.

"Welcome back to *Rochester Noon*. I'm your host Jessica Frampton and we're here today with personal trainer Finn Cooper, who is talking with us about nutrition and fitness, and what to expect if you engage the services of

a personal trainer. Finn, if someone like KBST staffer Cara, who's joined us here, were to go to your gym and set up an appointment, what can she expect to happen?"

"The first thing we would do is to have her fill out a medical history form, and based on that information we may ask Cara to consult with her doctor before engaging in any kind of weight loss or exercise program."

"Assuming Cara is in reasonably good health for someone her age, what happens next?"

Cara ground her teeth at Jessica's "someone her age" crack. She took a lot of ribbing for being, at 43, the oldest junior assistant at the station.

"Then I would compile information on Cara, such as current height, weight, build, and Body Mass Index. I would also have her keep food and exercise diaries for a week to determine what her current exercise regime and nutrition habits look like."

"Now I see you've brought one of the tools of your trade with you," Jessica said, indicating the giant tweezers in the trainer's hand. "What does this instrument do?"

"These are callipers that measure excess body fat. Ideally, if I pinch your waist with the callipers I shouldn't be able to grab any flesh."

"Why don't we try the callipers on Cara?"

Cara glared at Jessica, but could say nothing. When she looked up into his face, Finn Cooper gave her an apologetic smile. He had deep blue eyes that penetrated to her soul, searching for secrets. But they were kind eyes that promised her secrets were safe with him.

"You have to take off that big, bulky hoodie, Cara. Finn won't be able to get an accurate reading with that thing in the way."

There was a reason she wore the oversize hoodie. It covered up the spare tire around her middle that Jessica was so anxious to measure. She slowly unzipped her hoodie, closing her eyes as she pulled her arms from the sleeves and handed the garment to Finn. Though fully clothed, she'd never felt so naked and exposed. She fought the urge to cover her breasts with her arms.

Finn placed the callipers at her waist and closed the two sections together, trapping a healthy dollop of fat. Cara cringed, her face heating with

embarrassment. He handed her the hoodie and she quickly slipped it back on.

"Oh dear, that's quite a lot of fat," Jessica said. "So Finn, is there anything we can do to help her?"

Is there anything we can do to help her? Jessica made her sound like a beached whale. Next she'd be calling Greenpeace.

Finn cleared his throat. "Well, in conjunction with the all the other tests, I would help Cara by designing a diet and exercise regime tailored specifically for her."

"I understand you've brought with you today the questionnaire you have potential clients fill out. Why don't we ask Cara a couple of the questions?"

"All right." Finn glanced at her as if gauging her reaction. Did he really care how she felt? She lifted her chin a notch. Finn gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

"Cara, tell me what you currently do for exercise on a daily basis."

"Ahh, well, not very much."

If she were honest, the biggest exercise of her day was getting up from the couch to get a snack from the fridge.

"Are you able to walk a city block?"

Only if there's an ice cream shop at the end of it. "Yes, of course."

"Have you ever been told you have high blood pressure?"

"No." *But much more of this, and my head's going to explode.*

"And your diet. Do you eat 8 to 10 fruits and vegetables daily?"

Does ketchup count?

"No, probably not."

"Do you have any favourite sports or physical activities that you currently engage in, or that you engaged in at one time?"

Finally, a question she could truthfully answer. "Dancing. I used to love to dance. And way back in high school, I was on the cross country team. I liked running, though I haven't done it in years."

They went through several more embarrassingly personal questions until Jessica changed the subject again.

"I understand that in addition to having your clients fill out the questionnaire you also conduct a short fitness test at the beginning of the assessment process."

"Yes, it's important to know what kind of fitness level the person starts with."

"Can you show us some of these tests, using Cara as our guinea pig once more?"

"Well, okay sure, if Cara is okay with it?"

All eyes turned to her. If it was truly up to her, she'd run screaming from the room. Instead, she pasted a cheery smile on her face.

"Yes, of course."

"All right then. The first thing I like to determine is a client's flexibility. Cara, can you bend from the waist and touch your toes?"

Cara obediently complied, or at least she tried to. Her hands hung in midair, somewhere around her knees. She knew that at one time she could certainly touch her toes. In high school she'd been part of the cheerleading squad. Back then, she'd performed back flips, front walkovers, split leaps and all manner of gymnastic and dance moves. She'd had the flexibility of a rubber band.

But that was a long time ago. Twenty-five years, according to the invitation stuffed in her pocket.

"The second test we do is for cardio. We want to see how much endurance our clients are starting with. We usually use a step machine or a treadmill for that test, so we won't be able to demonstrate here."

"Perhaps we can improvise," Jessica said with a smile. "What if Cara did some jumping jacks to test her cardio?"

What if Cara smacked Jessica with the callipers?

"Or maybe jumping jacks are too strenuous for someone her age. I wouldn't want her to injure herself." Jessica gave her a smile syrupy enough to throw a diabetic into a coma. "If she can't do them, I understand."

That did it. "No problem at all, Jessica," she said.

"Cara, perhaps—"

"No problem, Finn."

She assumed the classic jumping jack pose, arms out at shoulder height, legs spread wide. Then she hopped on both feet, bringing her arms to her sides and her legs together. She jumped again and again, inhaling in great gasping breaths. Her knees creaked as she landed, and parts of her that she thought were solid began to move. If she was going to keep this up, she'd definitely need to buy a more supportive bra.

When did she get so out of shape?

"That's enough, Cara," Finn said with a smile. He was probably afraid she'd have a heart attack, live on TV. So was she.

Hair escaped from the clip on the top of her head and clung to her face in sweaty tendrils. She pushed it out of her eyes with an impatient swipe. One of the stage hands stood just outside camera range and signalled to Jessica. Cara narrowed her eyes. Did he have what she thought he had in his hands?

"Here we go," Jessica enthused. "A most essential tool for determining how much weight Cara will need to lose. A scale."

Cara closed her eyes in misery, her humiliation complete. She was going to be weighed on camera, in front of everyone she worked with. The whole city of Rochester, New York would soon know that her weakness for Doritos had resulted in a lot of heavy junk in her trunk.

Her only solace was that the ratings for Jessica's show had been slipping lately. With any luck, nobody was watching.

The stage hand placed the scale directly in front of Cara and then scurried off. Cara stared at the scale, wondering where they'd found one in the TV station. Jessica probably kept it in her dressing room for emergency humiliations.

With a deep breath, she prepared to get on the scale. Maybe, like pulling off a bandaid, it was best to get it over with fast. She lifted her foot.

Finn put a hand on her arm to stop her. Cara looked up at him in confusion.

"Actually Jessica, I prefer not to use a bathroom scale such as this because they can be notoriously inaccurate. At the gym we use a professional scale, similar to the kind used in doctors' offices. Our clients can be assured that we use accurate measurement techniques."

Cara threw a grateful smile to Finn and he responded with a slight nod. Jessica pursed her lips, looking less than pleased. "Fine, we'll skip that part. Anyway, I see that our time is up for today. Thank you for joining us, Finn.

Viewers interested in reaching Finn Cooper for their own personal fitness assessment can call him at the New Directions Gym. Goodbye everyone. We'll see you tomorrow."

The theme music played. A moment later Bill called, "We're out people. We made it to the end of the show!"

He shook Finn's hand, pumping it vigorously. "Thank you so much for helping us out. We'd be happy to have you as a guest on the show again any time."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Jessica put her hand on his arm. "I want to extend my *personal* invitation to you, Finn. Please, anytime you'd like to promote your business again, give me a call."

She handed him one of her business cards. "Listen, I'm nearly done for the day. Why don't you stick around and we can go out for a drink later?"

Finn gave her a polite smile. "I'm sorry but I have to meet a client at the gym."

"Oh, too bad. Another time perhaps?"

"Perhaps," he answered with a noncommittal smile. Cara hid her grin. Apparently the gorgeous personal trainer wasn't interested in vapid blondes. Her appreciation for the man's taste went up considerably.

She walked away, gripping the hairclip between her front teeth as she worked her thick hair into a top knot.

"Cara?"

She almost swallowed her clip when Finn tapped her shoulder. Her hair fell around her face and into her eyes. She pushed it out of the way as she whirled around.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"I just wanted to see if you were okay," he said.

"Yeah sure, I'm fine. A little sweaty and out of breath, but otherwise all right."

"That's good. I'm sorry about the exercises. I know you were unprepared."

Was 'unprepared' a euphemism for desperately out of shape?

“Well, hey, anything for the show. You know how glamorous TV is.”

Finn chuckled, and a dimple showed in his chiselled cheek. Cara stared at it, mesmerized. He was an incredibly good looking man, with dark wavy hair, a long, straight nose, and an exquisitely shaped mouth. And those stunning blue eyes, which at the moment, were regarding her with warm interest.

“Well, I just wanted to say thanks for being such a good sport and to give you this.” He handed her a pamphlet. “This entitles you to a free consultation with me at the gym. Just make an appointment at your convenience.”

Her face heated with embarrassment yet again. What she’d interpreted as interest was actually a sales pitch. Why would she think that anyone as attractive as Finn Cooper would be interested in her as anything other than a client? Besides, he had to be ten years younger. She forced a smile.

“Yes, thank you. I appreciate the offer.”

She had no intention of ever using the pamphlet.

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First and Again

Bridget Grant is back in Paradise. Paradise, North Dakota, that is.

She's swallowed her pride and moved back to her hometown with her daughter after her divorce and the loss of her catering company. Now she's trying to navigate the strained relationships she'd left behind – including her first love, Jack Davison.

Jack never forgot Bridget, or the day she left town – and him. When Bridget caters a lunch at Jack's tourist ranch, old flames reignite. They have more in common than ever – Jack's also a single parent. Though they both try to keep things casual, Bridget, Jack and their girls are starting to look a lot like a family.

But Bridget's only planning to stay in Paradise until she's saved enough to relaunch her business. Jack's invested too much in his ranch to leave. And with their daughters involved both have a lot more at stake than heartbreak. How can they risk falling in love?



Chapter One

It was official. She'd hit rock bottom.

Bridget Grant sighed as she wiped the sticky remains of spilled beer and nacho cheese sauce from one of the tables. Was this what her life had come down to? Serving wench in her mother's bar?

As she lifted her head, she caught several patrons staring at her. When she stared back with all the haughty pride she could muster, they quickly looked away. Less than a day in Paradise and she'd been stripped bare, as if she were swimming naked in the small-town fishbowl that was her hometown. Turning away from the gawkers, she gave the dirty table an angry swipe with her cloth.

Suck it up, Bridget.

She took a calming breath. It didn't matter what she did for a living or what anyone thought of her. As long as her daughter stayed out of trouble, she'd gladly sling beer and wipe sticky tables.

The front door opened and a group of people trooped in, their exuberance drowning out the scratchy music pumping out of the old jukebox. In the middle of the pack stood her sister Celia, looking relaxed and happy and full of life. Celia let out a squeal and left her group of friends when she saw Bridget, throwing her arms around her in a bear hug.

"It's so good to see you," Celia said, kissing her cheek. "What has it been, five years since we've seen each other in the flesh?"

"Something like that." She examined her sister's face, amazed at how much Celia now resembled their mother. She had inherited Mavis's straight blond hair and blue eyes along with the petite stature that had always made Bridget, with her tall, lanky frame and wildly curling auburn hair, feel like the odd man out in her family. Celia's face and bare arms were tanned from time spent working in the sun, and little laugh lines fanned out around her eyes. Bridget got the impression that Celia laughed a lot. *Must be nice.* Divorce and financial ruin had left her without much of a sense of humor.

"Maybe if you hadn't been so stubborn about visiting the city we'd have seen each other more often," she said.

Celia took a step away, her eyebrows rising. "Well, little sister. It's awfully early in the evening to have your claws out, isn't it?"

Just because her life had gone to hell didn't mean she had to take it out on Celia. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm glad to see you too."

"I know you are." Celia smiled and took her hand. "I didn't think you'd be working in the bar tonight. You just got here."

Bridget shrugged. "The girl who usually works Friday nights is sick and Mom asked if I would fill in." Even though she was tired from days of driving, she was glad to have something to do. "I figured, what the hell. Might as well get started."

"Good for you. How's Rebecca?"

She sighed. Her fifteen-year-old daughter had remained sullen and silent the entire trip to Paradise. "Unhappy. But I can't really blame her. I've uprooted her and plunked her down here."

"In the middle of nowhere," Celia added.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. It was there between the lines. It always has been."

"I've never fit in here."

"You've never let yourself fit in here." Celia shook her head and took a step back. "Let's not rehash old arguments. It's your first night home. I don't want to fight."

"Neither do I." She was too exhausted to get into it with Celia.

"I could get Megan and Mike to introduce her to some of their friends. Once Rebecca meets some kids her age she'll feel better about the move."

"I don't think anything's going to make her feel better about coming here." Bridget's breath hitched. "She's upset about the divorce. I know it's my fault..."

Hot tears stung her eyes and she was unable to speak around the lump in her throat. The last thing she needed was to start bawling in front of the bar crowd. Wouldn't that be a juicy topic for coffee row gossip? *Bridget Grant came crawling back to North Dakota with her tail tucked between her legs. That girl was always uppity, but you should have seen her crying her eyes out. How the snooty have fallen!*

Celia gave her shoulder a soothing rub. "I know coming here is tough for you and Rebecca. But you shouldn't take all the blame for the divorce. Ben deserves his share."

The way Celia said Ben's name, like it was something distasteful, made her feel a little better. But she couldn't escape the truth. "I appreciate your support, but it really is my fault. The business went under because of me. After that, our marriage just unraveled."

The expression of sympathy in Celia's eyes made her want to press her face to her sister's shoulder and cry out all her hurts and worries. But she couldn't do that. There was a room full of people watching them and she had work to do. Besides, she and Celia had never had a crying-on-each-other's-shoulders kind of relationship.

For one aching moment, she wished they had.

"There's my girls."

Bridget's mother Mavis approached with a smile, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "It's so good to have both my daughters home again."

Celia smiled at Mavis and gave her cheek a little kiss. It was a simple gesture, but spoke volumes to Bridget. The special relationship between her mother and sister had made her feel like an outsider in her own family for years.

Would things have been different if her father had remained in the picture? She brushed away the self-pity and moved out of Mavis's embrace.

"I'd better get back to work. What can I get you to drink, Celia?"

"I'll have a beer, but first I want you to meet some people. I think you'll remember most of them."

Bridget took a deep breath, pasted a smile on her face and turned to greet Celia's friends. Some were strangers to her but she recognized several of them. One face in particular was very familiar. Tina Marcotte, now Tina Wilson, had been one of the most popular girls in their class. She'd taken great delight in tormenting Bridget all through high school, teasing her about her hair, the glasses she'd worn back then, her clothes. She'd made fun of her opinions and ambitions, and had gossiped about her endlessly. Had Tina changed in the intervening years or was she the same bitch she'd been back then?

Bridget took their order and brought their drinks. A short time later Celia's husband Gavin joined them. "Hello, Gavin. It's good to see you again." She smiled and extended her hand. She'd always liked her sister's husband. He was good-hearted and hardworking, a salt of the earth kind of guy. The exact opposite of Ben.

"Welcome to Paradise, Bridget," he said with a grin. He ignored her outstretched hand and enveloped her in a warm hug.

The bell over the door tinkled and a man walked into the bar. Bridget almost dropped her tray. What the hell was Jack Davison doing here? He'd moved away from Paradise years ago.

Surprise quickly gave way to embarrassment. If she had to meet Jack again after all these years, why did it have to be now, at the lowest point in her life?

As he took a seat, her brother-in-law clapped him on the back. "Hey, you made it." Gavin turned to her. "You remember my brother Jack, don't you? I think he was a grade ahead of you in school."

"Of course Bridget remembers Jack," Tina Wilson piped up. "They dated in high school, remember?"

Trust Tina to remember ancient history.

Memories flooded back. Clapping madly as Jack Davison scored the winning touchdown for their high school football team. Her heart racing when he singled her out to dance at the Fall Ball. The sweetness of their first kiss. The thrill of her first love and the anguish when it ended. *When I ended it.*

His gaze locked with hers and she wondered how he remembered it, if he remembered it at all.

Jack looked lean and fit and very attractive. His sandy-colored hair was free of gray, and though a few lines etched his face, they only made him more handsome. His eyes, fringed by thick, dark lashes, were still the same shade of cornflower blue she'd always loved. Back in the day, one look from those beautiful eyes could turn her knees to water. Damn it, why did he still have to look so good?

"Hello, Jack." She extended her hand.

"Hello." He clasped her hand in a firm shake. Nerves skittered down her spine.

"So what are you doing in Paradise?" Celia had told her years ago that he had married a girl in Houston. Her telephone conversations with her sister had been brief over the years, mostly centering on their husbands and children. She hadn't wanted to hear news of her old life. "Are you here visiting Celia and Gavin?"

"No, I moved back to Paradise a few years ago. Gavin tells me you're going to be living here for awhile."

"Yes." She started gathering empty glasses from the table, aware of the interested glances from Celia and Gavin's friends. For the most part, they weren't being malicious, just curious, but her private life was just that; private.

Tina smiled and leaned forward. "And you've been living in San Francisco all these years, Bridget. It must be exciting to live in a big city. What did you do there?"

"Lots of things, but mostly I helped run my ex-husband's business."

"Bridget's being modest," Celia said. "She's a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. She was head chef of the catering company she and her husband owned."

"Really?" Bridget detected a slightly mocking tone in Tina's voice. "I imagine you catered a lot of fancy *affairs*."

"A few." Was the emphasis on *affairs* some kind of dig, a double entendre? She rejected the idea. How could Tina know about Ben's affair? She glanced toward her mother, mentally willing her to call so she'd have an excuse to leave. Unfortunately, her mother was engrossed in conversation with some older patrons, leaving her no means of escape.

"So why did you leave your catering company?"

"Tina, maybe Bridget doesn't want to talk about it," Celia said, a note of warning in her voice.

Tina had always had a knack for finding her weak spots and going straight for the jugular. Bridget's only hope was to show no fear.

"That's okay, Celia," she said. She turned to Tina with what she hoped was a composed expression on her face. "The business went under."

"Really? What a shame. What went wrong?"

The massive lawsuit might have had something to do with it. "It was probably the downturn in the economy."

"That's too bad. And I understand your husband left you after that."

Her heart dropped into her stomach. She lifted her eyes to Tina's and in that moment she hated the woman. Though Tina's face was the picture of innocent inquiry, the predatory gleam in her eyes revealed the enjoyment she took in asking these humiliating questions.

"It was an amicable split."

"But to leave you without any money and then to take up with a younger woman. Well, that's just too much." She heard her sister's sharp intake of breath before an embarrassed hush fell over the group.

"Knock it off, Tina," Jack said.

Tina gave him an indignant glare. "I was just trying to express my sympathy for Bridget's situation."

He didn't look convinced. "Sympathy, my ass."

Bridget glanced at the horrified expression on her sister's face. In a moment of weakness, she'd phoned and confided the circumstances of her divorce to Celia. How could Tina have known Ben had left her for a woman fifteen years

younger unless Celia had told her? Was this how sisters treated each other? Did one betray confidences and then sit back and watch while the other was publicly humiliated and ridiculed? She could never trust her again.

Gavin coughed self-consciously. He and the others at the table appeared uncomfortable, but she was past caring about anyone else's discomfort. Anger welled up inside her, anger at Tina, at Celia, at Ben, at the world in general.

"It's okay, Jack. Tina's right. My husband did dump me for a younger woman. But hey, my life's an open book. Maybe there are other details of my personal life you'd like to discuss. Perhaps you want to know my bra size or maybe my bank account balance, though I've got to warn you, neither is very big. Go ahead, ask me anything."

They stared at each other for what seemed like ages until Tina shook her head, looking chastised. "You're right, it's none of my business," she said, sounding remorseful. "I just wondered what brought you back to Paradise after all these years."

There were many reasons for coming home—poverty, hopelessness, a broken heart. But she had no intention of baring her soul to Tina Wilson.

"I came back to Paradise because I need some space. And plenty of privacy."

She turned away, her hands shaking as she clutched the empty glasses, but not before she caught what looked like amusement in Jack Davison's eyes. His expression made her even angrier. How dare he laugh at her?

The glasses clinked together as she haphazardly loaded them into the dishwasher behind the bar. One night in Paradise and she'd already been humiliated. *Welcome home, Bridget*. If she had enough money for gas and if she thought her old Chevy could withstand the return trip, she'd pack up her daughter and their few meager possessions and head back to San Francisco. Why on earth had she ever come back here?

The answer was simple. She had no place else to go.

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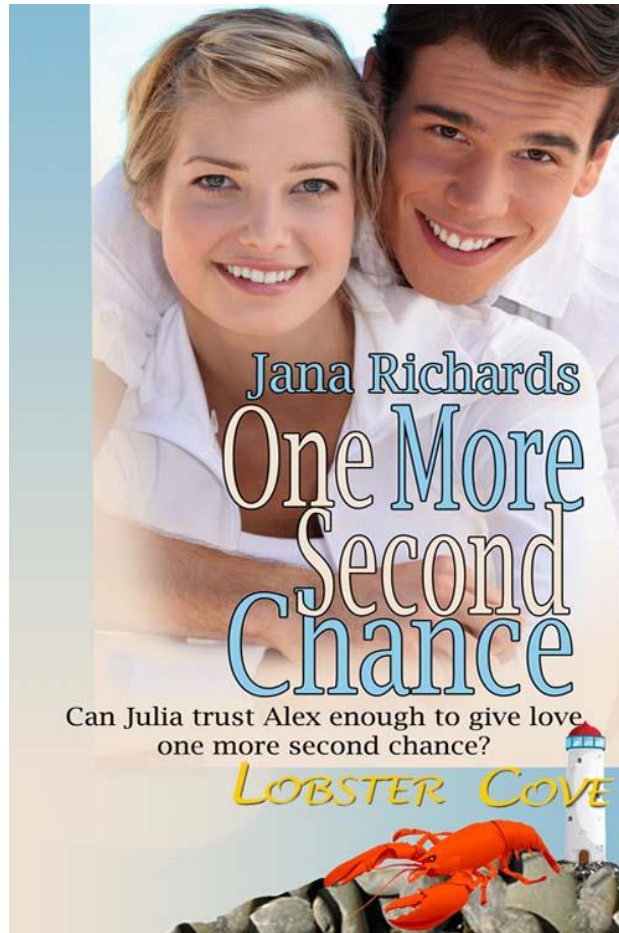
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One More Second Chance

Dr. Alex Campbell has an agenda—finish his contract to provide medical services in Maine, pay off his medical school debt, and head back to his real life in San Diego. But when he meets Julia, all his carefully laid plans are put in jeopardy.

Julia Stewart, Lobster Cove's high school principal, swears she'll never let another man drag her away from the home she loves. Her aging parents need her, and the Cove is where she wants to raise her daughter. When her mother's illness brings her and the big city doctor closer together, panic sets in. Her marriage taught her men don't stay.

Can she put aside the heartaches of the past and trust Alex enough to accept the love he's offering? Or will her fear of abandonment mean she'll send him away forever?



Chapter One

"I'm sorry to barge in, Principal Stewart, but there's a phone call for you on line one that I think you should take. It sounds urgent."

Julia Stewart knew Beth, long-time secretary at Lobster Cove High School, wouldn't interrupt mid-reprimand unless it was important. She gave her a slight nod, then turned her attention to the two teenage boys sitting on the other side of her desk.

"Looks like you've been saved by the bell. For now. We'll schedule another little chat about smoking on school property later. Go with Mrs. Anderson."

They couldn't leave fast enough. Beth threw her a worried look as she closed the door behind them. Julia picked up her phone. "Hello, Principal Stewart speaking."

"Julia, I'm sorry. It wasn't my fault. I didn't know. I'm so sorry." Her mother sobbed, her words nearly incomprehensible.

She gripped the handset. "Mom? What's going on?"

"She fell. I'm so sorry, so sorry."

Julia's heart thumped painfully. "You mean Ava fell? Where did she fall? Is she okay?"

"She was in the basement. I didn't know. It was an accident. I'm so sorry."

"Mom! What's going on? Is Ava all right?"

There was a thud, as if her mother had dropped the phone. Julia jumped to her feet, alarmed. What was going on at her parents' house? Where was her daughter?

"Mom? Mom!"

She heard voices but couldn't make out what was being said. Finally she heard her father's voice on the line.

"It's all right, Julia. Ava had an accident. She fell part way down the basement steps."

"Oh, my God!" Her heart lodged in her throat. "Is she all right? Is she conscious?"

"Yes, yes, she's banged up, but she's alert. I think she needs to go to the hospital, though. Her arm may be broken."

Julia brought her trembling hand to her mouth to cover a sob. *Dear God. My poor baby.*

"I'll meet you at the hospital."

"I think it's best if you pick Ava up and take her there yourself. She's very upset and she wants her mother."

"But it would be faster if you took her. By the time I drive to your house—"

"Don't argue with me, Julia!" he said sharply. "Your daughter needs you. Get over here, now!"

For a second, she couldn't speak. Her father rarely raised his voice. For him to do so now told her the situation was very serious.

"I'll be right there."

She slammed down the receiver, grabbed her purse and jacket, and ran out of her office.

"Ava's had an accident. I've got to go," she said to Beth on her way out. Pushing her arms into the sleeves of her jacket, she shoved open the door and dashed to the parking lot. A steady April rain chilled her to the bone by the time she reached her car. Of all the days to forget her umbrella.

Careening off with a squeal of tires, she headed for her parents' house. The weather forecast had called for heavy fog to roll in off the Atlantic and blanket Mount Desert Island, the little corner of Maine Julia called home. For once, they'd gotten it right. Her windshield wipers worked overtime to take away the moisture, but could do nothing to help her see through the misty soup. She pressed on, gripping the steering wheel, knowing she was driving faster than prudent. But she desperately needed to get to her five-year-old to see for herself that she was okay.

Finally she pulled into her parents' driveway and ran from the car, not bothering to turn off the ignition. As soon as she opened the back door, she could hear Ava crying.

"Mommy! I want Mommy!"

Julia found her in the kitchen, sitting in her grandfather's lap, her right arm cradled protectively against her chest. Tears streamed down her face. Julia knelt by her father's chair.

"I'm here, baby. It's all right now." She kissed Ava's forehead and noticed a bruise above her right eye.

"It hurts, Mommy!"

"I know, sweetheart. We're going to make it better." She turned to her father. "I'll put you in the back seat of my car. You can hold Ava on your lap."

"You'll have to take her," he said, not meeting her eyes. "Your mother's upset. I need to stay with her."

She couldn't believe he wouldn't help her take Ava to the hospital. "Dad, you have to come with us."

"I'm sorry, Julia. Your mother needs me."

What the hell was going on? Until today, she'd believed her father would do anything for Ava. How could he abandon them both like this?

She didn't have time to argue. Scooping Ava into her arms, she wordlessly followed her father to the back door. He opened it for her, then ran ahead to open the passenger door of her car. Julia carefully placed Ava on the seat and closed the door. When she lifted her head, she met her father's eyes and read the pain in them before he turned away.

"Let us know how you make out," he said, his voice cracking.

Julia nodded and got in the car. Once Ava's injuries had been addressed, she'd find out exactly what had happened and why her father refused to come with her. But for now, all she wanted was to ease her daughter's pain.

The hospital emergency room was busy for a Tuesday afternoon. After being seen by a triage nurse, they were ushered into an examining room. Julia held Ava on her lap, trying not to touch her injured arm. Even the smallest jostle made her howl. Julia wanted to howl herself, but instead she whispered soft, reassuring words and choked back her own distress.

Her daughter's sobs wrenched her heart. How had this happened? Ava knew she wasn't supposed to play on the stairs. It was an old house, with steep, uncarpeted basement stairs. She'd told Ava to stay out of the basement when she was at her grandparents' house. But she was only five; why hadn't her parents kept her safe?

Finally the door to the examining room opened and a tall, dark-haired man wearing a white lab coat entered, followed by a nurse. Julia's heart fell. She'd hoped Dr. Willson would see them. She'd known Henry Willson since she was Ava's age, and she trusted him. She wasn't keen on entrusting her daughter's care to someone she'd never met and had only heard rumors about.

He smiled at Ava and knelt to look at her at eye level. He touched her knee gently.

"Hi, Ava. I'm Dr. Campbell. Can you tell me what happened?"

She snuggled closer to Julia. "I fell."

"Where did you fall?"

"Down the basement stairs at Grandma and Grandpa's house."

"I explained all this to the triage nurse," Julia said impatiently. "Is Dr. Willson on duty today? He's Ava's doctor."

Eyes the color of deepest, darkest chocolate flashed at her from an unsmiling face. "Dr. Willson is off today. I'm the only doctor in the ER." He turned his attention back to Ava. "Would it be okay if your mom puts you on the examining table? I'm going to take a look at your arm."

Ava nodded, her chin trembling. He rose, and Julia tried to do likewise, but her arm had fallen asleep while holding Ava, and she simply didn't have the strength to raise her. Seeing she was unable to move, the doctor lifted Ava from her arms and gently placed her on the table, turning her so she was lying on her back with her head on the pillow. Julia rubbed the pins and needles from her arm.

He touched the bump on Ava's forehead that Julia had noticed, then ran his fingers through her blonde hair, likely checking for more abrasions. He lifted her left arm and examined the scrapes that were visible below the sleeve of her T-shirt. Then he gently probed her right arm, but when Ava cried out, he retreated.

"I'm sorry. Your arm really hurts, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said. Her chin wobbled, and Julia had to look away, afraid she was going to cry, too.

"Does it hurt anywhere else?"

"On my legs."

Dr. Campbell carefully pushed up Ava's jeans to reveal her shins and knees. They were badly scraped, the skin rubbed raw in some places and beginning to bruise in others. He looked over his shoulder and spoke to the nurse.

"Let's get Ava into x-ray as soon as possible. I want pictures of that arm." He turned to Ava, and gently fingered the bump on her head once more. "And I want a skeletal survey."

"What's a skeletal survey?" Julia asked.

"It's a series of x-rays of all the bones in the body, or most of them, anyway. It's commonly used in a trauma such as this to check for broken bones." He spoke to the nurse once more. "In the meantime, let's give Ava something for the pain and get a splint on that arm to keep it in place."

"Yes, Doctor."

Ava looked up at Dr. Campbell, her eyes shiny with tears. "Is it going to hurt?"

"The x-rays? No, I promise they won't hurt. It's sort of like getting your picture taken, only it's a picture of your insides." He smoothed her wayward curls with a gentle hand. "We're going to take a lot of x-rays, so it's going to take a long time, maybe an hour or more. Do you think you can be brave for that long?"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes."

"I knew you could," he said with a grin.

Despite her pain, Ava grinned back at him. The expression on her face told Julia she had complete trust in him.

Ava was soon fitted with a splint that kept her right arm immobile and was given a dose of children's strength ibuprofen. Dr. Campbell touched her good arm.

"I have to go look after some of my other patients now, but I'll be back after your x-rays are done."

"Promise?"

"I promise. I might bring someone with me to talk to you. Is that okay?"

"Okay."

Julia wondered who he was talking about. And why was he asking Ava rather than her?

With a curt nod in her direction, he left the room. Shortly after that, an orderly arrived to wheel Ava to the x-ray department. The doctor had been right about the x-rays; they took over an hour to complete. Ava was required to stand, sit, lie down, and flip over so that every angle of her body could be x-rayed. By the end, she was cranky and uncomfortable, but true to her promise to Dr. Campbell, she didn't cry once. The fact that the painkillers had kicked in by then helped, too.

Finally the x-ray technician was satisfied they'd taken enough pictures, and they were sent back to the examining room. Fifteen minutes went by, then a half hour, then an hour. Where the hell was Dr. Campbell?

"I wanna go home," Ava wailed.

Julia knew exactly how she felt. Both of them were exhausted, hungry, and close to their breaking points. Ava grew restless. Too uncomfortable to sit on Julia's lap any longer, she stretched out on the floor.

"Honey, why don't you lie down on the table? You might be more comfortable."

"No!" she cried. "I wanna go home."

She kicked at Julia's chair, then cried out when her shin connected with a chair leg, probably hitting one of her many bruises. She started to cry, her high-pitched wails growing increasingly more distraught with each passing moment. Julia got down on her knees beside her and tried to soothe her, hoping to avoid a total meltdown.

"It's going to be okay, baby. We'll get you fixed up soon. I promise."

"I wanna go home!"

Dr. Campbell chose that moment to enter the room. To Julia's complete and utter shock, Ava scrambled to her feet and ran to him, throwing her good arm around his legs.

"Can I go home now?" she whimpered.

He seemed taken aback. So was Julia. Ava was normally shy around people she didn't know, especially men. But somehow she'd come to believe she could trust the doctor.

Julia wasn't so sure if she trusted him, especially when she noticed a woman in a business suit entering the room behind the doctor and Nurse Linda. She closed the door behind her.

Dr. Campbell quickly regained his equilibrium. He picked Ava up in his arms, being careful not to hurt her, and set her on the examining table.

"Hey, what's going on? I thought you were being a brave girl."

Tears slipped down Ava's cheeks. "My arm hurts."

Julia couldn't stand it any longer. She pulled herself to her full height and glared at the doctor. "If you hadn't made us wait here for so long, Ava might have been able to endure. But she's tired and she's hungry and she's in pain. When are you going to do something about it?"

Dr. Campbell regarded her with cold eyes. "We're going to cast Ava's arm right away. But first we have some questions."

"What questions?" Julia was as baffled as she was angry. She wanted to shout at him, tell him where he could stick his questions, but held back because of Ava.

The woman in the business suit spoke up. "My name is Sharon. I'm with Child Protective Services. I'd like to have a few words alone with Ava."

Julia stared mutely at the woman. Child Protective Services? Her stomach lurched. Dear God, did they think this was something more than an accident?

"Can I speak to you in the hallway for a moment, Mrs. Stewart?" Dr. Campbell said.

Ava looked up at Julia, her lower lip trembling. "Don't go, Mommy."

"It's only for a minute, baby, I promise. I'll be right outside the door, and I'll come back as soon as I can. Okay?"

"I promise it will only take a minute," Dr. Campbell said, his tone quiet and reassuring. "Sharon and Nurse Linda will stay with you, and Sharon's going to talk with you for a minute. Is that all right?"

A tear slipped down Ava's cheek, and Julia nearly told the doctor she wasn't going anywhere. But then Ava nodded slowly. "Okay."

Dr. Campbell gave Ava a warm smile and patted her knee. "I knew you were a brave girl. We won't be long." When he turned to Julia, the smile was gone.

She followed him out of the examining room and stepped to one side as he closed the door. His jaw clenched as he turned to look at her, and fear wrapped itself around her heart and squeezed.

"What did the x-ray find?" she asked.

"A spiral fracture of the right arm." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath as if trying to control his emotions. "I've seen this kind of injury before. A fracture like this can be the result of a fall, but it can also be an indication of child abuse. An arm as small as Ava's will break like a twig if it's twisted hard enough. I'm obligated to contact the authorities if I suspect abuse."

Julia stared at him in mute shock, her brain struggling to process his words, as if trying to translate some unintelligible language. The words *child abuse* rang in her ears. Finally she found her voice.

"You think someone deliberately hurt her?"

"Her injuries are consistent with abuse."

"I don't give a damn what they're consistent with. Ava has not been mistreated. My mother said she fell down the stairs, and if that's what she said, then that's what happened."

"I believe there's more to the story than a simple fall."

"If it comes down to believing you or believing my mother, I'm going with my mother."

"Perhaps you don't know your mother as well as you think you do."

Julia sucked in a breath and stared into Dr. Campbell's dark, accusing eyes. The idea that her mother would hurt Ava was ridiculous. She adored Ava, would do anything for her...

She blinked and looked away, remembering an incident the other day. She'd heard her yelling at Ava about the milk she'd spilled on the kitchen floor, making such a huge deal of it that Ava had cried. It had struck her as strange, since she couldn't remember her mother yelling at anyone, ever. She wasn't as patient as she used to be. And how did she explain her strange phone call telling her Ava had been hurt? Of course she'd been upset, but her mother had been nearly incoherent with distress. Was something going on she wasn't aware of? She was seventy-one now. Maybe looking after a rambunctious five-year-old was too much for her.

No. She shook her head to reject the disloyal thought. Dr. Campbell was the one who was wrong.

"I know my mother. She didn't do this. It was an accident."

"We'll soon find out. Sharon is questioning Ava now."

Julia stared at the door. "She'll be scared, all by herself."

"Sharon's very good at what she does. She has a way of making kids feel comfortable."

Julia turned on him, the anger and despair she'd been holding inside spilling out. "And you? Do you enjoy upsetting five-year-olds and turning families' lives upside down? Does it make you feel powerful to sic the authorities on us?"

"Look, Mrs. Stewart, I take no pleasure in bringing in the authorities. But I've seen child abuse, up close and personal, and I can tell you it's damn

ugly. The things parents and caregivers are capable of doing to defenseless children..."

He stopped abruptly, his chest heaving. Closing his eyes, he averted his face and took a deep breath. When he turned back to her, his steely control was back in place. "So yeah, if I have even the smallest suspicion that a child has been abused, I'm going to ask questions. And I'm not going to apologize for it."

It was Julia's turn to look away. How had it come to this? What was going on with her parents?

Sharon emerged from the examining room and closed the door. "Apparently, Ava went down the stairs to get her teddy bear and tripped on a box of laundry detergent that had been left on the stairs."

"Mr. Fizz," Julia said with a moan. This was all because of a teddy bear?

"Excuse me?" Sharon asked.

Julia swallowed the sob that wanted to escape. "Mr. Fizz is the bear. Ava's had him since she was a baby. She takes him everywhere." How had Mr. Fizz ended up in the basement?

"Does your mother normally watch Ava while you're at work, Mrs. Stewart?" Sharon asked.

"No. My regular babysitter had an appointment today. Ava's in kindergarten part-time. She only goes to the sitter when she's not at school."

Sharon turned to Dr. Campbell. "What were the results of the skeletal survey?"

"There were no other broken bones aside from her right arm, and no indication of any previous breaks. Her medical records show no history of trips to the ER for any sort of similar trauma."

Sharon nodded. "Good. Given what Ava has told me, I think we can safely conclude that her injuries were the result of an unfortunate accident. Mrs. Stewart, I'm sorry we put you through the wringer. I hope you understand that whenever there's any question about a child's safety, we need to look into it."

As an educator, Julia understood. She'd asked questions about a student's bruises a few times during her career. She knew it was important not to turn a blind eye. But as a parent, it was devastating to be on the other end of those questions. She'd never felt more helpless in her life.

She managed a simple nod. "Can I go to Ava now?"

"Of course."

The doctor followed her into the examining room. The nurse had cleaned Ava's scrapes, bandaging one on her left elbow with a Band-Aid emblazoned with the face of a cartoon character.

"You're almost done, Ava," Dr. Campbell said. "We're going to send you to the cast room now. What's your favorite color?"

"Pink," she said without hesitation.

The doctor grinned, the smile transforming his face from intense to carefree. "I think we can arrange for you to have a cast in that color." He turned to Julia, all business once more. "Fortunately, even though the fracture is a spiral, it has clean edges that fit together well, so we can cast it without Ava having to undergo surgery. I'm going to use a fiberglass cast so we can take some x-rays while it's in place and make sure the arm is healing properly."

Julia took a deep breath and pushed down the tears of stress and exhaustion that wanted to fall. "How long will she have to wear the cast?"

"About a month. Please make a follow-up appointment so we can check on Ava in a week."

She nodded, too tired and upset to do much else. The doctor smiled at Ava.

"I've got to go now, but I know our cast technician will take real good care of you. You've been a very brave girl, Ava. I'll see you at your next appointment."

Like hell he will. Julia would make damn sure they saw Dr. Willson next time. She didn't want to see Dr. Campbell ever again.

But in a town as small as Lobster Cove, Maine, that likely wasn't an option.

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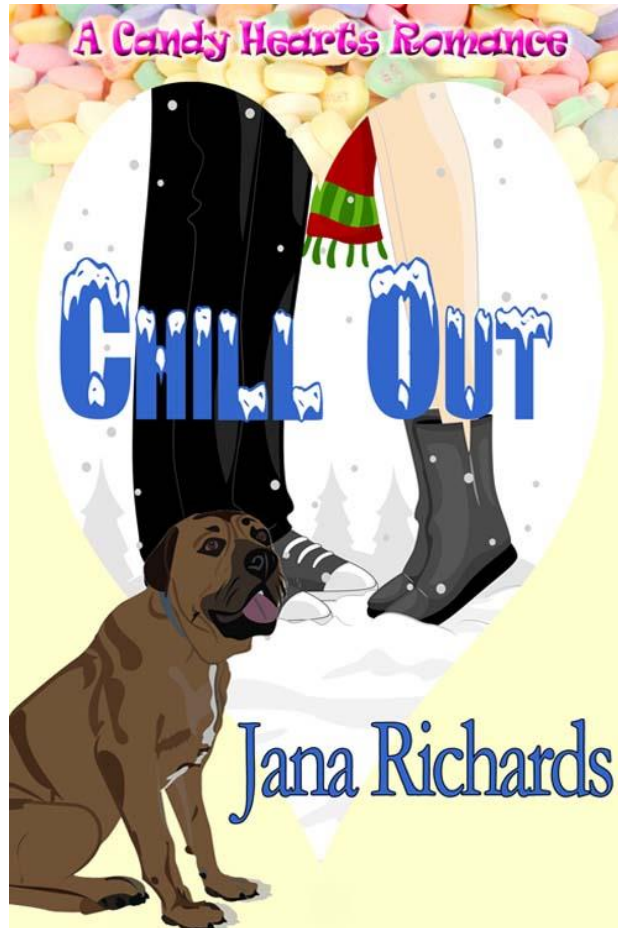
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Chill Out

Renata Cabral needs to hide for the weekend. Her cousin's Valentine's Day wedding means she'll face embarrassing questions from her large, extended family. Questions like "Why aren't you married yet?" Since the breakup of her last relationship, she's not ready to answer that question. She invents a work-related excuse and escapes to a friend's lakeside cottage.

Noah Brownlee has been hiding for two years. But now he's ready to come home and mend his broken relationship with his brother. When a friend offers the use of his lakeside cottage, Noah arrives in the middle of a blizzard with his English Mastiff, only to find the place is already occupied. With her big brown eyes and quirky sense of humor, Renata stirs feelings he thought long dead.

As the blizzard rages, the candy hearts predict love. Can Valentine's Day work its magic between them?



Chapter One

His breath was hot on her face. Renata moaned as he licked the shell of her ear, his wet tongue rasping over her sensitive skin. Blindly, she reached up to touch his smooth hair, his soft beard, his wet nose...

Wait. His what?

Renata woke with a start. And came face to muzzle with the biggest dog she'd ever seen in her life. Or perhaps it was a pony. She wasn't awake enough to tell.

"Holy crap!"

At her high-pitched squeal, the dog backed away from the sofa where she'd fallen asleep after arriving at her friend's cottage. Renata climbed over the top of the sofa, then peeked over the edge and raised her fists. How boxing was going to help if the beast decided to rip her throat out, she had no idea, but she wasn't going down without a fight.

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"He's with me."

Renata jumped at the sound of the deep male voice coming from behind her. She whirled to face him, her heart in her throat. A long-haired man with an unkempt brown beard was in the kitchen, unloading groceries from white plastic bags. He looked as big and scary as the dog.

She lifted her fists a little higher, trying to disguise her fear, as she informed him, "My husband is upstairs. With a gun. All I have to do is scream, and he'll be down here in a flash."

"Relax, nobody's going to hurt you. It's Renata, isn't it?"

Alarm bells clamored in her head. "How do you know my name?"

"Tyler told me. He's an old friend. He loaned me the use of the cottage for a few weeks, but apparently he and Caroline had a miscommunication about who was staying here this weekend."

Caroline Montgomery was her best friend and business partner. She and her husband Tyler owned the cottage in question. It was located on the shores of Falcon Lake, a little over an hour's drive from Winnipeg, and Caroline had offered it to her as a refuge this Valentine weekend.

"I don't believe you. Caroline would have contacted me. How do I know you're not a thief?"

He held up a can of soup. "Do most thieves bring their own groceries to a heist?"

She frowned. He had a point. Still, it freaked her out that some stranger had just waltzed through the door while she was sleeping.

"How did you get in? I'm sure I locked the door."

"Tyler left a key. I called out, but you didn't wake up. Do you always sleep like the dead?"

She glared at him. Her sleeping habits were none of his damn business. She'd arrived exhausted after working full tilt since six that morning so she could clear her desk and get away for the weekend. *He* was the one with some explaining to do.

Keeping one eye on the dog, she grabbed her purse and pulled out her phone. "I'm calling Caroline to check your story."

"Knock yourself out."

She saw immediately that she'd missed a phone call and several texts from Caroline. She really *had* been sleeping like the dead. She scrolled to the first text.

Sorry, sorry, sorry! Just found out Tyler told his friend Noah he could stay at the cottage. Noah just called saying he was almost there! Going to kill Tyler!

"Crap."

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. So this Noah person was legit. Renata wanted to scream in frustration. All she'd wanted was a peaceful couple of days alone to read romance novels and hide out from her family. Was that so much to ask for?

She scrolled to the next text.

Where are u? Understand if you're not speaking to me. All Tyler's fault!

"So you're a friend of Tyler's?"

"Yeah, we go all the way back to elementary school. I've been out of the country and needed a place to stay, and Tyler offered. I'm Noah Brownlee, by the way."

"Renata Cabral. Caroline and I own an accounting business together."

"So she said. I'm sorry about this."

"Not as sorry as I am."

Caroline's subsequent texts were progressively more frantic, and more than a little weird.

Is he there yet? Are u not answering cuz you're dazzled by his good looks? #smokinghot! Text me all the juicy details!

Smoking hot? Renata glanced surreptitiously at the hairy man in the kitchen. She didn't mind a man with a little scruff, but this guy had taken scruffy to new lows. The faded plaid shirt and beat up denim jeans made him look more homeless than handsome, but she had to admit he had broad shoulders and a trim, athletic build.

Will make it up to u! Spa day with mani/pedi. My treat! Call me, please!

Tyler is so dead! Went out to the lake to leave key for Noah & didn't tell me. The jerk!

Okay, now I'm getting worried. Where are u? Could have sworn Noah wasn't an axe murderer. Call me!

It was time to put her friend out of her misery. Renata dialed her number.

"Hi, Caroline."

"Renata! Thank God! Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course. I fell asleep, that's all."

"Is Noah there?"

"Yeah, he's here."

"I'm so sorry. It's all Tyler's fault."

"Don't be mean to poor Tyler. You didn't tell him you'd given me the keys, either, did you?"

"Well, no..."

"Look, it's not a big deal. I can be home in just over an hour." As much as she hated the idea of driving back to Winnipeg in the middle of the night and possibly having to face her family, the thought of staying in a remote cottage with a man she didn't know was even more unpalatable. Even if he wasn't an axe murderer. "What time is it?"

"Nearly midnight. I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted to be out of the city over Valentine's Day."

"Maybe I'll check into a hotel under a fictitious name. That should keep my mother off my trail."

"Would it really be that terrible to go to the wedding?"

Renata shivered. "Worse than terrible. You know my family."

"Kevin's not worth all this trouble, you know."

"I know." She swallowed. "I'm just not ready to deal with it, especially this weekend."

"I'm so sorry."

She couldn't help chuckling. "So you've said. Maybe this is a good time to ask about borrowing your new Italian leather purse."

"We'll talk on Monday and see if I'm still feeling guilty."

"I'm kidding, Caro."

"I'm not. Promise me you'll call as soon as you get home. I won't be able to sleep until I know you're safe and sound."

"I promise. Goodnight."

She ended the call and turned to face Noah. "I'll pack my things and be on my way."

He continued to put away canned goods. "You might want to reconsider."

"Why?"

"Take a look outside. The snow's coming down pretty hard, and the roads are bad. I'd offer to leave myself, but I almost didn't make it here."

Renata made her way to the front door, taking a wide berth around the dog, who watched her every move, his massive head resting on outstretched front legs. When she opened the door, a gust of wind nearly ripped it out of her hands. Noah hadn't been kidding. She could barely see her car through the heavy, swirling snow. With a groan of frustration, she pushed the door shut. She'd lived on the Canadian prairies all her life, and a little snow and cold didn't bother her. But she wasn't stupid. Driving a hundred and twenty kilometers through a blinding blizzard in the dark was a really dumb idea.

"It's not safe for you to be out there. You should stay the night," Noah said. "By morning the storm will have blown itself out and you can be on your merry way."

She knew it was the only solution, but not a comfortable one. What did she really know about this guy, aside from his friendship with Tyler?

She glanced toward the door, and sighed. She didn't have any choice.

"You're right. Thanks."

He rolled his broad shoulders and stretched. "It's late, and I'm tired. Where are the bedrooms?"

"Upstairs." Renata pointed to the staircase. "I've already got my things in one of the guest rooms."

Noah snapped his fingers. "Come on, Spike. Time for bed."

"Spike? That's the beast's name?"

The dog lumbered over to him, and Noah scratched his ears. "Hey, you can say whatever you like about me, but don't insult my dog. He's a great guy. Why don't you pet him? He loves a good scratch."

Renata shuddered. "No, thanks."

"Seriously, you don't have to be scared of him. He's a big softie, aren't you, boy?"

The dog's tongue lolled out the side of his mouth as Noah vigorously scratched his flanks. He didn't seem aggressive, but he was just so incredibly big.

"Are you afraid of dogs?" he asked.

"Not normally. But you've got to admit Spike is pretty intimidating."

"English Mastiffs are known as gentle giants for a reason. If they were any more laid back, they'd be comatose."

Renata couldn't help but smile at that. "So Spike has never bitten anyone?"

"No, but he's nearly drowned a few people in slobber. Why don't you say hello? If we're going to be roomies for a while, I don't want you to be scared. I swear he won't hurt you."

"I don't know..."

"I'll be right here, Renata. I won't let anything happen to you."

Renata blinked at him, momentarily arrested by the kindness in his strikingly blue eyes. She took a deep breath and started toward them. When she was within touching distance of the dog, she stopped, afraid to take her eyes off him.

"Now what?"

"Hold out your hand and let him sniff it."

"If I stick my hand under his nose, can you guarantee I'll get all five fingers back?"

"I guarantee your fingers are safe."

"Okay, you'd better be right."

Tentatively, she reached out her hand. Spike sniffed it for a moment, then ran his wet tongue over her palm. Surprised, she pulled her hand back.

"It's okay. He's just saying he likes you," Noah said with a grin. He had a nice smile with even, white teeth. For a moment Renata found herself wondering what he looked like under the whiskers.

She pulled her gaze away from Noah, and extended her hand to Spike once more. This time she was prepared when he licked it.

“Why don’t you try a scratch behind his ears? He loves that.”

Renata lifted her hand to Spike’s huge head, gently rubbing at first, then using her nails to scratch. Spike bowed his head and leaned into her hand. When she stopped, he looked up at her with adoring eyes.

“He really does like me!”

Noah grinned. “Sure he does, but don’t let it go to your head. He likes pretty much everyone.”

Renata ran her hand along Spike’s back. “Maybe, but we’ve got something special going on, don’t we, sweetie?”

In answer, the dog licked her hand once more.

“You’re right. Spike is a sweet guy. Like the saying goes, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

She wondered if the same was true for Noah. Was there a sweet guy lurking under his hairy cover? Or was he the kind of guy who would take advantage of their situation?

The smile left his face. “Look, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m not going to push my way into your room in the middle of the night.”

Renata blushed and wondered if he’d read her mind. “Thank you.”

“I hope you’ll respect my privacy, as well.”

She stared at him, stunned. Was he actually worried about her making advances? “I wouldn’t dream of disturbing you.”

“Good. As long as we understand each other.”

“Don’t worry. Your message is loud and clear.”

She watched them climb the stairs, seething at his parting words. Spike turned his head halfway up and gave her a doleful glance, as if apologizing for his master’s rude remark.

She couldn’t wait to leave in the morning.

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