

FIREWORKS ON THE FOURTH

Malinda Martin

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CHAPTER ONE

Brandon Crane was in a good mood. As he walked through the little town of Charity, Florida, he knew the surroundings were just what the doctor ordered.

The heat of an early June sun was something he was familiar with, coming from New York City. There the concrete jungle magnified the sun's rays, and along with the sweating mass of millions of people the temperature soared. Here in Florida he was gratified that the town boasted plenty of green space, vibrant trails, and community pools. He couldn't wait to try them out.

He saw Hal's Place at the end of Main Street and knew from his brother and sister-in-law it was the hangout for any local. Grinning, he reveled in the fact that as of yesterday, he was a local of Charity, Florida.

It might have been a huge change from the fast-paced world of New York, but he was ready for it. When the position came available at Charity School, he jumped at the opportunity. Over a thousand miles wasn't far enough, in his opinion, to be away from the hurt and guilt he'd left behind.

Crows called out down by the lake's edge. The interactive fountain was flowing with laughing children running under the sprays of water. Easy listening music hummed softly from speakers along the road. He breathed in the sweet, clean air, grinning at the scent of cinnamon rolls coming from the bakery and coffee from the bookstore. Yes, this was just where he wanted to be.

His hands in his pockets, his eyes half closed, he slowly strolled down the street, basking in his new life.

He didn't see the woman hurrying out of a repair shop until they collided. His hands went to her shoulders to steady her, a flush coming to his face. "I am so sorry. Didn't see you there."

She held a package tightly into her chest and slowly lifted her head. And he was faced with the biggest, prettiest blue eyes he'd ever seen. "You want to take your hands off me now?"

Embarrassed that his hands were indeed still on her shoulders, he dropped them. "Sorry. I . . . I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well you should be. You could have hurt somebody. Or something." She glanced back at her package and he couldn't help being curious as to what the package held.

She was tall, close to his own height of five ten, and willowy. As if a strong wind would carry her away. Her hair was a wavy, auburn red, thick and pulled back with combs. He would have said she was a looker if she hadn't been scowling at him.

"If you tourists are going to take over our city, you should learn how to behave properly." He didn't have the heart to let this woman know he was now a local.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he rocked back on his heels, ready to spar with her. "Behave properly. Explain, please."

She seemed surprised that he'd confront her instead of simply moving on. "Well. Bumping into innocent women on the street. Almost damaging her property." She adjusted her arm so that it was protecting the package in her hands.

Nodding to the package, he said, "Just what's so important about the package? I mean, is it a family heirloom? National security secrets? Key to the National Bank vault?"

"Funny." She looked like she thought it was anything but. "Actually, it's none of your business and if you don't just move on down the road, I'll be forced to call out for a cop. One thing you don't know about our little town, we're very protective of our own."

He warmed at the thought of being part of the town, but said, "You don't say? Well, maybe I'd better stay a while, see if I like it."

Her face was comical as her eyes widened and she bit her lower lip. "Maybe you'd better not." She surveyed his outfit of pressed pants, white oxford shirt, and Dockside shoes. "We're very . . . casual around here. You'd probably hate it."

The tee shirt she wore that invited people to tour the local amusement park and the cutoff jeans shorts and flip-flops echoed her statement. He'd have to tone down his wardrobe if he wanted to fit in, and he did.

"Something to think about. Okay, so nice to meet you, sorry about bumping into you, have a nice day." He nodded to her and walked away, happy to have gotten in the last word.

He should have known better. "Hey white shirt." He turned. "Look where you're going next time."

"Take care of that important package." He quickly walked away, determined to ignore anything else the annoying woman said. He'd just let the encounter slide

off his back. She was only one of two thousand people in Charity. What were the odds that he'd have any more interaction with her?

Jerk!

Sally Forester moved quickly down the street toward her apartment over the toy store. Her mind was whirling from the meeting with the insanely handsome stranger.

Her mind wouldn't go there—to the deep gray eyes that looked at her with amusement or the strong chin that held firm with a confidence that she wished she possessed. His sandy hair was windblown and her traitorous fingers itched to run her fingers through it.

Bad fingers! She was off men. For good. Well, at least the next millennium. Besides, she just didn't have time for men any more, with all she had to do—her job, her volunteer activities, healing her broken heart. She was not going to let a gorgeous tourist get her juices started. She'd learned her lesson. The most attractive men never seemed to stick for the long haul. And if she was going to have anything, it would be for the long haul. Not that she wanted anything anymore.

Reaching her second floor apartment, she opened the door to the haven she'd created. When Paul had left, she'd thrown out everything that reminded her of him, filling her apartment with things that made her feel better—comfy quilts, dainty figurines, lots of chilling murder mysteries. She was in no mood for romance novels.

At the small dinette table she set down her package and purse. The shop had said it was running perfectly. If that stranger had somehow damaged it when he

bumped into her, she'd pull apart the town until she found him and made him wish he'd never laid eyes on her.

She unwrapped the parcel and sighed with delight. It was a big red apple with a clock in the middle of it, something that might have been silly, probably to the white shirt stranger. But it held a host of meaning to her and she hugged it tightly to her chest.

Carefully, she set it on the bookcase that took up most of the living room wall and listened to the soft tick tock, the moving second hand. And smiled.

She was going to be all right.

He was delighted with his new apartment. It was over the bakery with a view of Main Street, showing him all the happenings of the downtown area. Trevor and Mary had told him about the yearly events. He was still shaking his head over the idea of Florida snow falling on the street during the Christmas season.

A soft knock sounded on the door followed by a blonde head popping in. "Okay if we come in?"

He smiled at his sister-in-law, giving her a hug and his brother a combo handshake, shoulder bump. "Good to see you, guys. Especially since I've got all these boxes to unload."

"No problem. It's the least we can do to help you get settled."

"Speak for yourself," Trevor said, putting his arm around Mary. "I wanted to go over to Cocoa Beach for the day but I want to please my wife more."

"Aww." Mary kissed him and Brandon rolled his eyes.

“I don’t have that much stuff. If you help, we should be finished before long and you can still make the beach.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Each took a box and began unpacking. Mary took the two boxes marked kitchen, complaining that he needed more. “I’ll go over to Williams-Sonoma and pick you up a few essentials.”

“Microwave, fridge, can opener. What more do I need?” Brandon said, to which Trevor chuckled.

“We can’t have that. I’ve got to get you over at Mom and Dad’s house for dinner. You’ve got to try Elena’s cooking. Mom brought her down from New York and her cuisine is awesome.”

“You really don’t need to do that. I have everything I need here in town. I can go down to the bakery, get a slice of pizza across the street, get takeout from the Italian restaurant, or didn’t you tell me Hal’s food was pretty good?”

“Take-out gets old.”

“That’s why I buy frozen dinners.” To Mary’s smirk, he said, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine, little sister.”

“Hey, Brand. Could I borrow this book? I haven’t read it yet.” Trevor showed the cover of a gruesome murder mystery.

“Euw! That looks horrible, how could you read something like that?”

Brandon shrugged. “It helps me get to sleep at night.” Mary shook her head and Trevor chuckled. For himself, he thought horrific murders were nothing

compared to his divorce. He'd much rather go to sleep thinking of a story from a book than what he'd had to deal with in real life.

"You been by the school since you got in?" Trevor asked.

"Not yet, although I do have the key to my classroom. After I get settled here, I think I'll go by. Make a list of everything I'll need to get ready for the fall."

"I can't understand how you teach junior high kids. I think they'd drive me up a wall."

"That's because you got too much of your younger brothers and sisters when you were home." The Crane's boasted a family of seven children, of which Trevor was the oldest and Brandon was third.

"Could be," Trevor said, considering.

"They're really not so bad, just between childhood and young adulthood. I like teaching math, sharing with them skills that will help them in life."

"That's a wonderful way to look at it," Mary said. "You are such a nice man, Brandon."

His mind went back to the redhead from the street and he held back a grin. "I don't know that everyone here in town would agree with you."

"Why do you say that? Already made a friend, did you?"

He turned to his brother and said, "Ran into a woman. Literally. She wasn't amused."

Mary hurried into the room and sat on the arm of his sofa. "Really? Tell me more. I might know her."

“Nothing to tell.” He moved to another box, pulling out his tomes of math instruction books. “We annoyed each other for a few minutes, then parted. The perfect relationship. Best for me, anyway.”

It was silent for a moment until Mary said, “Brandon, that’s not true. Why, you could—”

Her abrupt silence meant she’d gotten a look from his brother. Mary was probably going to go on about what a good catch he was, he needed to jump back in the dating pool, yadda, yadda, yadda.

He couldn’t help saying, “Thanks, bro.”

“No problem. I got your back. Just remember that the next time you have a crisis like, oh, say a divorce, could you just be honest with the family and tell us instead of worrying us to death?”

It was an old argument. When he and his wife had split, he couldn’t bring himself to tell his family. He’d been so hurt, so ashamed that he was the first in the family to go through something as horrible as a divorce. So, he’d made up excuses, lies, while he lived with the pain alone until the truth came out. It still grieved him to think of that time in his life.

“Yeah, sure. The next time I’m going through a divorce you’ll be the first to know.”

“All right, you two. Let’s change the subject,” Mary said diplomatically, standing to return to work. “Trevor, how about helping me set up the kitchen. Although, there’s not that much to do. Really Brandon, you have nothing for your kitchen.”

“I’ll take the advice into consideration.”

Glad the conversation had changed, he continued to open boxes and put things up, listening to the casual chitchat of his brother and his wife. He couldn’t help the sadness that gripped his heart. He’d never had that easy communication with Lorraine. Maybe that was why their marriage hadn’t worked.

No, their marriage hadn’t work because she betrayed him and left him high and dry.

He pulled out a case that contained his clarinet. Lovingly, he pulled out the instrument and set it up on the stand he’d already set up on his coffee table, looking forward to playing it soon. After his work was done. The instrument had gotten him through a lot of heartache.

Hopefully, in Charity he wouldn’t need it so much.

Later at the school, he walked around the halls, enjoying the quiet that would cease to exist when school resumed. That was okay. He loved the energy of the kids, their outlook on life, even their outrageous questions.

His room was bigger than what he’d had in New York. It was in the junior high wing, facing a large grassy area that he was sure the school used for picnics and games. He had a few ideas about taking his class out for lessons occasionally. No reason math couldn’t be taught out in the real world.

“Hello? Mr. Crane, good to see you.” Patricia Antonelli, the energetic principal of the Charity school, walked in all smiles. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon.”

“Just wanted to get a feel for my room, see what I’ll need.”

“Good for you. Nice to have a teacher so excited about teaching.”

“I’m eager to get started. It’s almost a shame that I have to wait out the summer before I can get going.”

The woman seemed to think for a moment about his comment, then said, “You may not have to, Mr. Crane.”

“It’s Brandon, please.”

“Brandon.” She flashed him a big smile. “We have a summer camp. Not school by any means, but a program for bored children here in Charity.”

He sat on the edge of his desk. “Sounds interesting. Tell me more.”

“The community puts together fun activities for the kids with a little learning thrown in. Most of our workers are volunteers so it’s nice whenever we can get an actual teacher to help out.”

“I like the idea of getting to know some of my students before the fall. When does it start?”

“We wait three weeks after school, just enough time for the children to become bored. We’ll be starting in a couple of weeks.”

“Hmm. I’d love to see what you’re planning. See how I can fit in.”

“Wonderful. I’ll go get you the brochures now. We have our last meeting Thursday night at seven in the library. Please join us whether you decide to help us or not. It will be good to meet some of our volunteers in the community.”

“Thank you. I will.”

When she left, he settled into his chair and leaned back, his arms behind his head. Yes, this was just what he needed, what he wanted. It was the right move

coming to Charity and nothing was going to keep him from becoming part of the little town.

CHAPTER TWO

Usually Tuesday afternoons in early June were a little slow which didn't bother Grace McCrae, the co-owner of the diner with her husband, world famous photographer Stuart "Mac" McCrae. The diner had been named for Grace's father, who had passed away years ago and although there had been ups and downs, she loved the little diner that served the needs of Charity.

Even now, she was behind the soda fountain counter, smiling, listening to eleven-year old Holly Jackson tell her about her family's upcoming vacation to Key Largo.

"And then Daddy is going to take me and Noel snorkeling. I've never been before but Daddy says there are beautiful fish to see, like from *Finding Nemo*."

"What are the twins going to be doing while you're snorkeling?" Grace asked, referring to her eight-month old twin brothers.

"*Belle-Mere* is going to play with them in our hotel room," she said referring to her French stepmother. "Then we'll take them to the swimming pool and let them splash around. And then we'll take them to the beach. They've never seen the ocean before."

"That sounds like a lot of fun, Holly. But I'm going to miss you while you're gone."

With a serious expression, she said, "It's only a week. We'll be back soon."

Grace reached over and mussed the girl's blonde head. "Good, because I'm not sure how we'd get along in Charity without you and your family."

Her smile was wide. “We’ve got to get back. The summer camp at school is going to be awesome. I have to be back for that. And Noel has volunteered to help this year.”

“I think that’s very nice of him.” Holly’s nineteen-year old brother worked part-time at Hal’s and was a special friend of Grace and Mac. Grace was glad Noel was helping out in the community.

“Can I refresh your water?”

Holly giggled. She’d already finished her chocolate chip double thick milkshake and a giant sugar cookie. The girl did have a sweet tooth. She held up her water glass for Grace to take.

As she was filling it, the door opened and a man with three children walked in. She’d never seen them before so perhaps they were on vacation. She set Holly’s water down and headed for the front of the store. “Good afternoon. Four?”

The man with black hair smiled warmly and said, “Yes, that’d be good.”

She led the way to a booth watching as the youngest, a little girl about five, sat with her father and the others, an older girl and boy, sat on the other side. Grace handed out the menus and said, “We have a dinner special coming up in about . . .” She glanced back at the wall clock. “About thirty minutes.”

“I think we’ll just be having ice cream. What do you say, kids?”

The three cheered, “Ice cream,” and the man laughed. Grace liked seeing a father enjoying his children. She hoped that one day she and Mac would have children to enjoy.

“Okay. You look over the ice cream dishes and I’ll go get you some waters.”

As she was filling the glasses, a pretty, older woman came into the diner, followed by a fifty-something man with dark hair. The two were chuckling over something. "What's so funny, you two," Grace said as they walked to the counter in front of her.

The woman, Grace's mother Pauline, giggled as she walked to a work sink and scrubbed her hands, ready to go to work. "I was telling Jed about the time your father was determined to teach us how to fish and when you threw your line in, you threw your pole in, too."

The two chuckled and Grace frowned. "I was eight years old. Could have happened to anybody." When they laughed out loud, she gave in and joined them. "So, what's got you talking about fishing?"

"Jed offered to take me fishing in the lake. With him and Big Jed, of course, on Saturday morning."

The man smiled and Grace felt her heart go squishy. Little Jed and his father Big Jed were local legends and very good friends to her. Their reaching out to her mother made her feel good since Grace feared Pauline sometimes felt lonely.

"I think that's wonderful, Mom. I can't think of anyone better to go fishing with than the Jeds."

"I agree with you. So, you'll be back a little later for dinner?" Pauline asked Little Jed.

"Shore will. Keep me a seat here at the counter," he said before leaving.

Grace frowned. "Big Jed's not coming in tonight?"

"He'd got a date with Elena."

“Got it. Listen, I’m going to drop off these waters to the cute family in the back booth and then clock out. They just want ice cream.”

“Okay, honey. You go on and head out. Tell Stuart hello for me. I don’t think I’ve seen him in a few days.”

“I’ve been keeping him busy,” Grace said with a wink.

An hour later, the dinner rush had started. Obviously, everyone had heard that the cook, Tom, was making his famous “Ham Caribbean.”

Pauline sighed with blessed contentment. She’d never been happier. She glanced at the diner name above the soda fountain and said a prayer of thanks for her husband Hal. He’d given her so much—their daughter Grace, the diner, and the Charity community that had enfolded her into their arms with more love than she believe she deserved.

And she had something else to be happy about but she was going to let that be her special secret for a while longer.

The family in the back was still there after consuming four banana splits, four milkshakes, and five giant sugar cookies. They seemed to be having a great time, laughing with each other, studying what looked like a map of the town. She’d make another run over to see if they needed anything else.

More guests entered the diner and she smiled at the two she recognized. “Well, Mary and Trevor Crane. So good to see you. Ya’ll just get into town?”

“A few days ago,” Mary said, hugging Pauline. “We actually had a reason to leave New York, other than I was homesick for Charity.”

“We both were.” Trevor gave Pauline a hug. “My brother just got the job of new junior high math teacher. We helped him move down.”

She looked behind the pair and saw the man that was obviously Trevor Crane’s brother—both had sandy hair, although Trevor’s was a shade lighter. Their eyes were both green, both compelling. The brothers were tall, fit, and handsome. She stretched out her hand to him. “Hello, Trevor’s brother. I’m Pauline Hudson. Welcome to Charity.”

“Thank you. I’m Brandon. These two told me I’ve got to make Hal’s a regular hangout if I’m going to be a local here.”

“They are correct. You all want a booth, table, or counter?”

“How about a booth.”

“Got one right this way.” She led them to the booth next to the family. Pauline handed out menus and turned to the booth next to them.

“Ya’ll need anything else?”

The happy faced father said, “No, thank you. I hope it hasn’t been an inconvenience to take up space for so long. We’re new in town and wanted to soak up some of our surroundings.”

“Well, this is just my day to be meeting new residents. Welcome to Charity. I’m Pauline Hudson. My daughter and her husband own Hal’s and we’d be delighted for you to come back anytime.”

“Thank you. I’m Marcus Carrington. My children—Kelsey, Justin, and Bella.”

“Hello, children.” They returned the greeting. “If there’s anything you’d like to know about Charity, you can ask me. Or any of the regulars here at Hal’s. We pretty much know what’s going on.”

“I do have a question. I’m setting up a law practice in town and am looking for activities for my kids. Any suggestions?”

Pauline let the question simmer. “As a matter of fact, I do. The Charity School has a summer camp starting in a couple of weeks. It’s not school, she quickly added to comfort the kids. My sources tell me it’s a lot of fun. And it’d help you three to make a few friends before school starts in the fall.”

“Wow. Sounds awesome.” Marcus turned to his kids. “Think they’d let me go to camp with you?” The two youngest chuckled and the older girl rolled her eyes.

Pauline also chuckled. “You’ll have to take that up with the school. Why don’t you go by tomorrow and ask them about it. I’m sure they have pamphlets about it.”

“Will do, thanks. Well, troops. Think we’ve done enough damage for one evening.” He pulled out his wallet and handed a bill to Pauline. “Thanks so much,” he said under his breath. “New moves can be tricky with kids.”

“I understand. Please feel free to come by Hal’s anytime. It’s really a happy place.”

“I sensed that.”

After a satisfying dinner, Brandon said goodbye to Mary and Trevor and started back to his apartment. Not ready to be alone, he decided instead to walk through the town, enjoy the ambiance, soak up the scenery.

After walking longer than he'd planned, he was thirsty. Across the street and around the corner from his apartment was the Town Tavern, so he headed there. He couldn't hold back a grin when he glanced around at Charity, the evening now late. It was vastly different from New York City. He knew it would be different during special events they had downtown but for the moment it looked like they were actually rolling up the sidewalks. Most of the stores were closing for the evening and all that looked opened were the Italian restaurant, Hal's Place, and the Tavern.

The bar was bigger and nicer than he'd expected. Mahogany paneling covered the walls. A huge bar took up the middle of the space with a gleaming mirror wrapping around the back of it. The booths were quiet, upholstered in brown leather. A nice place.

He toyed with the idea of sitting at the counter and seeing who he could meet tonight but to be honest, he was tired of talking to people. All he wanted was a drink and then sleep in his own bed.

There were no hostesses to seat him, so he found a booth and sat, leaning back with a deep sigh. His eyes continued to scan the place, approving of the tasteful décor.

He saw a big, blonde man behind the bar and wondered if he was supposed to go to the bar and get his drink or wait for a waitress. His question was answered a few seconds later when he heard, "Good evening. What can I get for you?"

He looked up and saw . . . her. His mouth gaped at the sight of the redhead he'd met just today. It seemed like an eternity ago. She was a barmaid? Well, he'd

admit she made a pretty one, with her thick hair pulled on top of her head, her blue eyes smoky, alluring. “Good evening.”

“You? What are you doing here? Thought you’d be long gone by now.”

“No, thought I’d hang around for a few days. The locals are so . . . welcoming.”

“Listen, pal, I’ve got friends all over this town and if I even get a hint that you’re following me, you’ll find yourself run out of town before you know it.”

“Really? Will they use pitchforks and torches? I’ve always wanted to actually see that done.”

“You’re a real laugh riot, but I’m not laughing. Now really, why don’t you just beat it?”

“I came in for a drink.” He scanned her. “I assume from your . . . costume—”

“Uniform.”

“—that you are a waitress here, so I assume your job is to take a person’s order. I’ll have whatever beer you’ve got on tap. Thanks.” He enjoyed giving her a smile and in return getting a sneer. As she walked away, he chuckled quietly. It was the most fun he’d had in a long time.

“I can’t believe it! Of all the . . . ‘Whatever’s on tap.’ Boy, I’d like to tap him across the street and into the lake.” Her ire high, Sally muttered under her breath as she went behind the bar to fill the jerk’s order.

“Says ‘you are a waitress here’ like I’m some lowly wench. I’ll show him who’s lowly, I’ll—”

“You say something, Sally?”

Sven, or the Nordic god, as Sally liked to think of him, turned his bright smile on her. The man always seemed to be happy, about what she didn't know. He was the best bartender she'd ever seen, kind, caring, a good person.

Unlike Mr. Get-Me-A-Beer-Wench sitting in the corner.

She sighed and said, "Nothing. Just not too crazy about one of my tables."

Like a guard dog come to attention, he said, "Someone giving you trouble, honey?"

It made her smile. She'd so like to say, "Why yes, that preppy looking guy in the corner. Sic, Sven." But she didn't want to get her friend in trouble. "No, not really. He just . . . bugs me."

"You can't let people get to you. It's not worth it."

"I know." She pulled the tap back when the mug was full. She looked at the amber liquid and an evil smile on her face, she worked up a good ball of spit in her mouth. She leaned closer to the mug.

"Sally. Don't even think about it."

Her eyes lifted to see Sven staring at her, his hands on his hips. Caught. She swallowed her spit and gave him her brightest smile. "Think about what? I'm just on my way to give my customer his delicious drink."

As she walked away, she felt Sven's eyes on her and knew she wouldn't be able to do anything to the drink. Darn.

The man's eyes smiled at her as she approached his table. Maybe she could *accidentally* spill his drink over him. She glanced back and saw Sven still watching her. All right, she'd be a good girl.

She put down a cocktail napkin and set the frosty mug on it. “Will there be anything else?”

Glancing around, he said, “Could I have a bowl of those bar nuts?”

Her jaw clenched. “Of course.” She walked to the bar and poured some nuts into a bowl and took it back to him. “Anything else?”

He handed her a bill to pay. “No. You can go now. But stay near in case I need something, okay?”

Absolutely a jerk. Although she gave him a smile, somewhat brittle, her eyes shot arrows at him. “Of course.” She took the bill and turned, cursing Sven for stopping her from spitting in his drink.

It was a larger group than he’d anticipated at the Charity School library Thursday night. Brandon was eager to hear the school’s plans for their camp and for the kids. It sounded like a lot of fun.

He’d already met several people in the group—town handyman Colin Byrnes, boutique owner Hope Anderson, and Merrilyn Swenson, who happened to be his sister-in-law Mary’s mother.

He took a seat, waiting for Patricia to get the meeting started. Fingering a brochure, he felt someone move in his row and take a seat a few spaces down. When he glanced up, ready to introduce himself, his face froze, then slowly the ends of his lips curved. It was her. Again. The woman kept practically falling in front of him.

Her red hair was back in a ponytail and she seemed to be studying a brochure like the one he'd been looking at. He waited, hoping she'd sense his presence.

When she finally did and her eyes met his, there was an instant of confusion, then recognition, then irritation. He held back a chuckle. Why was irritating this woman so much fun?

Her mouth opened and closed, like a fish gasping for air and he couldn't hold back the chuckle. Standing, he went to the chair next to her and said, "Good evening."

"You. Again. Really, if you can't find the way out of town I'd be happy to help you with that."

"No need. In fact, I've already showed the movers out of town. After they left all my things in my apartment. Here in town." He enjoyed the disheartened expression on her face. "And yes, before you ask, I'm now a permanent resident. I suppose it was the friendliness of the locals. I guess I just couldn't resist their charm." He gave her a sweet smile.

She turned away, looking everywhere but him. "Why are you here?"

"I heard it would be a good way to meet people. Something to fill my summer. What about you?"

She started to say something then seemed to change her mind. "It's none of your concern."

"If we're going to keep meeting, perhaps I should know your name."

"I hardly think that's necessary."

He was just about to disagree with her when Patricia called the meeting to order. "Thank you so much for being here tonight. I just know this summer's camp is going to be the best in Charity's history."

She went over a few basics, such as dates and registration information. "Now before I hand out assignments I'd like to introduce you to our newest faculty member who's graciously decided to help with our camp this year. Teaching junior high mathematics, please welcome, Brandon Crane."

A polite applause sounded and Brandon stood and nodded to the crowd.

"You're a teacher?" the woman next to him said.

"Guilty. Now you know my name but I still don't know yours."

"Shh. I want to hear what Patricia has to say." They both tuned in as the principal started going over the different areas of camp.

"Each day we'll have a craft time, library time, snack time, play time, and what we're calling discovery time. I'm especially excited about this. We'll have a different resident of our town come and speak to the children, including a hands-on period coordinating with their talk. It could be about what they do for a living or a hobby they have, where they're from. It's going to be a wide array of speakers that I hope will spark the students' interest. Merry Swenson will be heading that up."

Patricia glanced at her clipboard. "Now, for assignments. Faith and Gloria will be heading up the crafts. Genevieve and Barbara are in charge of library. Little Jed and Pauline will be in charge of snack time. Sally will be in charge of games." She glanced up from her clipboard to find her. "Oh, Sally, I thought Brandon could help you out with that." She set her board down and said, "I've got stations set up with

information on each assignment so let's head that way. I'll walk around and be available to answer any questions you might have."

Had Patricia been looking at the woman next to him when she referred to Sally? The woman he'd be working with? Annoying her was one thing but spending mornings all summer with her was something else. And how would he concentrate on the kids if she was there to distract him? Maybe he could speak privately with Patricia and get a new assignment.

The glare in the woman's eyes as he turned to her, confirmed his suspicions. And for the moment he couldn't help laughing out loud at the situation.

CHAPTER THREE

With what she thought of as a smarmy laugh, the man stretched out his hand and said, "I guess you're Sally. I'm Brandon Crane."

She took the hand. Not because she really wanted to but was afraid others were looking and she didn't want to stir up any trouble. Still, she said nothing but continued glaring.

"Okay. So, why don't we take a look at the information? Sounds like fun, right? What kid doesn't like games? Maybe we can sneak a little math into them. Don't want their minds to atrophy over the summer."

She turned and headed for their station, picking up the large camp manual and thumbing it through, not seeing anything. Why? Why did she have to work with this man? There went her entire summer, the chance she had to actually work with the children, what she dreamed of doing. And he'd ruined it.

He stood next to her, looking over the resources. "I see here we've got a few helpers. Do you know them?"

Glancing at the sheet he held, she nodded. "Yes."

Silence. Finally, he put the sheet down and said, "Listen, I know you don't like me. I suppose I have been a little . . . rude. Maybe we can start again. What do you say?"

If she was a kind person, a friendly and agreeable person maybe she could. But in her life she'd been hurt too many times, been betrayed enough to refuse to accept a new beginning with the man. The handsome man, which made it worse.

“I think Hal’s is still open. Would you like to go get a soda and discuss our area of the camp?”

Was he serious? His eyes told her he was. Incredible. Not wanting to stay for a minute more, she grabbed all the materials in front of her into her arms. “I can do this on my own. You’re my assistant so just make sure you show up Monday morning nine o’clock ready to . . . assist.”

She rushed out of the library, deciding to go home and get to work on lesson plans. Possibly the only lesson plans she’d ever get to make.

The pleasure of planning fun activities for the kids filled her next two hours. The floor of her apartment was covered with agendas, books, games, everything she’d need to give the kids of Charity a memorable summer.

She stretched a kink out of her neck, deciding a soda might hit the spot. The thought brought Brandon Crane to mind. No, he wasn’t going to ruin her alone time.

After getting a soda from her fridge, she went to the tiny balcony that opened onto Main Street. She loved to sit in her wicker rocker that took up the whole space and watch the happenings of Charity. She always felt like an outsider, an observer looking in. Her own fault. The people of the little town were very inviting. But she felt she had nothing to give back.

She settled back sighing contentedly as she took a first sip of her drink. The Thursday evening in June was pleasant and the people passing below happy, seeking out a restaurant or a shop to browse. It was peaceful as she leaned back and rocked.

Her eyes drifted across the way at the apartments across the street. They were a little bigger than hers, a little nicer. Didn't matter. Her cozy apartment was home.

The clock above the apartments showed it almost ten thirty. It was nice to have an evening off from the tavern. Her feet certainly appreciated it. Looking back down at the apartments, she noticed a man come onto one of the balconies. He was tall, muscular, sandy-colored hair. Not that she was noticing.

He held a wine glass in his hand as he pulled a plastic chair out onto his balcony and sat. His head lifted as the glass went to his lips and . . .

No! Couldn't be. She leaned forward in her chair studying the man. It couldn't be him. Again? Really? Her eyes blinked twice, somehow hoping it was an optical illusion but no. It was him. She swallowed hard.

Then his eyes found hers across the way and he seemed to have the same initial reaction of "couldn't be." But his eyes seemed to laugh at her. He lifted his glass in salute and took another sip.

How dare he ruin another bright spot in her life? Would the man never stop? She stood, gave him a glare, and went back inside, deciding to go to bed early. And not think of smiling eyes glancing her way.

Brandon was happily settling into Charity. He loved the easy pace of the town, loved getting to know the regulars at Hal's Place, and loved the quietness that the area brought to his damaged soul.

But he was still bothered by Sally. If they were going to embark on a summer together, partnering to bring kids a wonderful camp experience, they really should at the very least get along, shouldn't they?

He hadn't seen her since finding her staring at him from a balcony across the street. So, she lived directly across from him. Interesting. He thought about picking up a dessert, something chocolaty since all women loved chocolate, and walking to her apartment to suggest a truce but he didn't. Maybe it was his male pride, but he didn't want to approach her on her turf. Been there, done that. Still recovering from that.

The weekend before the camp started, he figured he had to do something. He didn't want to show up Monday morning and stand around like a dope while Sally did everything, with him being a useless assistant.

Main Street was starting to get busy and he hoped he could get to the Town Tavern before Sally was swamped and couldn't speak with him. If she was working. If not, he'd break down and go to her apartment tomorrow.

A round-faced woman with a sweet smile met him at the entrance of the tavern. "Good evening. How many?"

"One." Distracted, he glanced around hoping to find a certain waitress. "Hey, is Sally working tonight?"

"Yes, she is. Would you like one of her tables?"

His eyes went back to the woman. "That would be great. Thank you." As the woman directed him to a booth, his mind was whirling with what to say. How could he amend things?

He was still formulating what he was going to say when she approached. "Hello, what can I . . ." The words died on her lips when she saw him and she sighed deeply.

Brandon held up a hand. "I know I'm not a friend, but I'm hoping you can put aside your dislike for me for the kids at camp."

She held her tray in front of her, considering his words.

"Listen, I get that you don't like me. That's okay. But why don't we work together to make camp a great experience for them. Huh?"

Her eyes narrowed and went to his. "What did you have in mind?"

"I know you're busy tonight but how about meeting me tomorrow. We can go over what you've got planned. You can talk me through what you need from me. Then we can go into Monday a unified front. Crucial when you're dealing with kids."

The edges of her lips lifted. Slightly. "I suppose you're right. Okay. Two o'clock, at the rocking chairs by the lake."

"Great." He wasn't sure why, but he felt as if he'd won a major victory. "Oh, could I have a beer." When she sighed again, he wondered if he'd lost the ground he'd gained.

"Sure, coming right up."

A glimmer lit her eyes and he wasn't sure he liked it at all. When she came back and set his beer before him, along with a bowl of nuts and pretzels, she stayed, her hands folded over her tray. "Why don't you try your beer, it's a new blend, see if you like it."

He took a healthy sip, savored, and then swallowed. "Nice. Has a bite to it." He felt uneasy with she gave him an evil grin.

She smiled widely and walked away.

Okay, so she'd probably done something to his beer. Maybe he should have been concerned but decided it had been worth it to see the smile that transformed her face from angry to beautiful.

He did have a point. Or so she kept telling herself as she walked toward the lake. It was for the kids, she kept telling herself. Working with an irritating, obnoxious, yet completely gorgeous man wasn't her choice, but she'd endure for the kids.

No wedding ring on his finger. She wondered why. A man like that couldn't remain single. But none of her business. And he taught junior high kids. Wow. Brave. Her age of choice was the younger elementary age. They were still cuddly and she could use all the cuddly she could get in her life.

As head of the games division of camp, she'd have kids of all ages. She didn't mind that, since she just wanted to work with children. It had been a wish her entire life and though it didn't look possible at the moment, she'd take working with them however she could.

Carrying her tote bag filled with files, she hoped she got there before him so she could settle, get organized. When she saw a rocking chair in motion, a sandy colored head over the top, she realized he'd beaten her there.

As if he sensed her, he turned and smiled. "Hi. Saved you a seat." He patted the chair next to him and she went to sit.

"Ahhh. I hadn't tried the rocking chairs here before. It's peaceful. Nice. Thanks for suggesting it."

Why was he being so nice? Was this a trick? "You're welcome. I've brought—"

"Shh." His hand went to hers to stop her. "Just listen for a moment." He closed his eyes. "I think this is why I love Charity. Do you hear it? It's just simple life, the way it's supposed to be lived."

She ignored the hand on hers and closed her eyes, trying to hear what he did. Birds were singing. Children playing in the fountain were giggling. Laughter was heard from people strolling past. There was an occasional plop in the lake of fishes jumping. A light breeze blew over her. He was right. Here was life, the good life, and she never took the time to sit still and enjoy it.

Her weight relaxed back into the chair and she gently rocked back and forth, feeling a peace she hadn't in far too long. When she finally opened her eyes, it was to see gray ones staring at her. The grin that annoyed her was back.

Clearing her throat, she stopped rocking and opened her tote. "Okay, suppose we go to work. I've mapped out a basic agenda, mixing physical games, free time, and organized sports. I think they'll like the mix, I know I did as a kid."

"You liked PE?"

Her eyes still on the plans, she said, "Sure. I was always tall and fast so I was always wanted on a team." Why did she reveal that much about herself? She could feel her face heating.

“Hmm. I wasn’t so tall as a kid but I was fast. You had to be when you were one of seven children.”

Her head snapped up. “One of . . . seven?”

“Yep. Third in line. I have two brothers and four sisters. You might know the oldest. Trevor. He came to Charity one Christmas and fell in love with Mary Swenson. Smartest thing he ever did.”

Dawning broke. “You’re Trevor’s brother? Of course, I can see the resemblance now.”

“Really? Always thought I was more handsome.” He gave a lopsided grin to indicate he was teasing.

She ignored the comment. “We all love Mary and were a little concerned when she started to fall for someone we didn’t know. But I think it worked out fine.” Curiosity getting the better of her, she asked, “Is that why you’re in Charity? Because of them?”

“They told me about the town. Raved about it. When I wanted a move, I applied at the school and was hired on, so here I am. What about you?”

“Me?” Not wanting to get too personal, she shrugged. “I grew up here.”

“Must have been nice.”

His voice had softened and not wanting to get too friendly, she glanced down at the lesson plans. “I have a basic schedule for the first four weeks and the rest sketched in, in case we want to change or shift something.”

He studied the plans for a long time, looking over every sheet. She was getting nervous and readied a sarcastic retort if he opposed her plans. When he turned to her, the intensity of his eyes made her breath catch. "What?"

"These are very good. I didn't know you were a teacher."

A surge of joy raced through her at the compliment. "Uh, I'm not. Just a volunteer for camp."

"Sally, I've seen professional, award winning teachers' plans with less thought and organization behind their lesson plans. These are well thought out, engaging, and just look like a lot of fun. The kids are going to love them."

She wasn't sure how to respond. A lump had settled in her throat, preventing any long answer. "Thank you."

"So tell me, what specifically do you want me to do, since you've got it all laid out?"

He wasn't going to argue? Wasn't going to insist he have a hand with the plans, wasn't going to demand to be in charge?

Her brows furrowed. "Wow. I wasn't ready for that question. I don't know how to answer it."

He sat back and rocked gently, thinking. "Well, I guess we can play it by ear the first week. How about you run the classes and I'll be your right-hand man. I'll assist with the activities be sorta crowd control, making sure little ears and minds stay where they should. I think together we'll give the kids a good time."

She was starting to like this man and she didn't want to. Surely, he had a hidden agenda, an angle. Maybe he'd take over on Monday, squeezing her out of her plans. Well, if he thought he was going to do that, he'd better think again.

Sitting straight, she put her papers back in her tote. "Fine. I guess I'll see you Monday morning."

"Great. Hey, do you think you could make a copy of those papers for me?"

"Why?"

He frowned. "If I'm helping out, I'd just like to know what we're going to be doing." Leaning on the arm of his chair, his head cocked, he asked, "Tell me, are you this prickly and suspicious with everyone or just me?"

She held back the grin. Darn him for being likeable. She stood and simply said, "Just you." He didn't see the smile on her face as she walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monday morning was filled with excitement. Parents dropped off eager children, who greeted friends, glad to be back together after three long weeks. Brandon chuckled watching the activity. He was so happy to be back working with kids he almost rubbed his hands together.

He'd been pleased for the progress he and Sally had made the day before, until she'd put up her hard façade again before she left. He tried to clear his mind, concentrating instead on the kids.

Everyone met in the auditorium for a formal opening. Patricia went to the podium and instead of speaking to get the loud assembly's attention, she put her hands in front of the microphone and clapped a rhythm of beats, which the children then copied. The room became silent. Amazing. He'd have to ask her about that strategy.

After the assembly ended, he stood in the back to help kids get to their first activity, then quickly moved to the gym where Sally waited with cones and hoops spread out in a sort of optical course.

A little blonde haired girl ran to her and threw her arms around her. Sally returned the hug, her face in a big smile. "Holly! I'm so glad to see you. How was your vacation?"

"It was fun. Daddy took us snorkeling and I saw Nemo." She giggled.

"And what about the twins. Did they like the Keys?"

The girl giggled again. "They liked the big pool at the hotel. And they were so funny on the beach. They got sand all over themselves, everywhere, and I do mean everywhere!"

Brandon chuckled, as did Sally. In contrast to her attitude, her laugh was a light, breathy sound. Nice.

Seeing him there, she said, "Holly, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Crane. He'll be teaching junior high math in the fall and in the meantime he's helping me out."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Crane. I'm Holly Jackson. I'm starting sixth grade in the fall."

"Nice to meet you, Holly. I guess I'll be seeing you in class soon." The girl's eyes twinkled, her smile wide. Brandon was enchanted.

The day went well, although exhausting, as each group made their way through the gym, participating in the games for that day. No big problems, only a little shushing while Sally spoke to the kids. All in all, not a bad morning.

When the last of the kids had left, he helped Sally clean up, stacking cones and putting away balls. It was quiet in the gym, their every motion echoing through the large room.

"I thought it went well today, how about you?"

She didn't turn his way but said, "Yes. It did."

So, she didn't want to talk, no problem. He, however, did. "I especially like the game you had, 'Hot Lava,' jumping into the hoops and staying away from the cones. Fun. The kids really liked that one. Where did you find that one?"

"Oh, in a book somewhere."

“Well, I thought it was—”

She held up her hand for silence, her eyes going to the side door. Then he heard it. Someone was just outside and . . . it sounded like the person was whimpering.

Sally softly walked over and leaned out. “Um, hello? Is something wrong?”

He heard a sniff and started over to see if Sally needed help.

A young girl’s voice sounded. “I was just . . . uh, I needed a little time alone before leaving. I hope that’s all right.”

The girl sounded mature for her age, which Brandon would have put at about eleven, twelve maybe. Thinking it might just be a girl thing, he stayed in the gym, but close by in case Sally needed him.

He saw her bend down to get on the girl’s level. “Sure that’s all right. Is something wrong? Anything I can help with?”

“It’s not . . . I mean, I don’t think . . .” She sighed heavily. “We’re new in town and it’s just hard, you know?”

“Yeah. I know. It’s never easy to pack up everything and have to move to a new town, new people, new school.”

“I know it’s a good thing. I actually like Charity. I’m just . . .”

“Lonely?” Sally asked.

“Yes.”

There was a moment of silence and Sally said, “I know I told you kids that my name was Ms. Forester, but since we have so much in common, I guess outside of the class you can call me Sally.”

“Really? Thanks. My name is Kelsey Carrington. What do you mean we have so much in common?”

“Well, Kelsey, I came to Charity about the same age of you, thirteen.”

“I’m twelve.”

“See? About the same age. I had to come live with my grandparents, which was great. They were wonderful people, but I still missed my old friends. It was hard.”

“Why did you have to live with your grandparents?”

He heard a pause and knew nothing good was coming.

“I never knew my father. And my mother never really wanted me. She tried to hang in there, give me a home, but when I became a teenager, I was just too much for her. But I’m thankful my sweet grandparents gave me a wonderful home.”

“My mother doesn’t want me either.” Brandon felt a lump in his throat.

“Oh, honey,” Sally whispered.

“She left years ago, when my sister was a baby. Dad heard about Charity and thought it would be a good place to live. Plus he was tired of shoveling snow in the winter.”

“He won’t have that problem here.”

Brandon peeked out and the sight he saw made the lump even heavier. Sally was sitting on the concrete floor, her arms around the girl, rocking her. It was heartbreaking but at the same time a beautiful picture of compassion.

The girl looked up at Sally. “Is it really a good town? Will they accept us? Will I make friends?”

“Kelsey, I guarantee that before school starts in the fall you’ll have a resounding yes to all three of those questions. In fact, let me be your first friend. What do you say?”

She smiled and nodded. “Okay. I’d better go find my brother.” Kelsey stood and said, “Thanks, Sally. I really mean it.”

Sally stood as well and brushed off her jeans. “No problem, Kelsey. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kelsey walked away, hopefully her steps lighter than they’d been before. Brandon walked out, touched by Sally’s kindness. He shoved his hands in his pockets and sighed. “That was . . . incredible. You were really good for that girl. Knew exactly what to say.”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide, as if she couldn’t believe she’d received the compliment.

“You have a gift with kids. I’m really glad to see you using it. I’m very impressed.”

Her blue eyes warmed and an accompanying feeling flooded his insides. For a brief moment they stared at each other, some kind of connection occurring over their love of children. Before he was ready, she turned away and muttered, “Thank you.”

Like a splash of cold water, he shook his head, returning to sanity. “Well, if you don’t need me, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

As he walked away he couldn't help wondering at the confusing woman and then determining she shouldn't take up so much time in his brain.

Grace loved Hal's Place. The diner that her father started was her happy place, interacting with town residents, serving tourists, and catering to the children of Charity. She stocked a much loved candy gallery at the front counter and enjoyed watching them take their time in choosing their purchases.

Just now, Reilly and Thomas, two third graders, were agonizing over the choices of cherry licorice or blueberry bubble gum or lemon jellybeans. Come to think of it, the lemon jellybeans sounded good to her right about now. That and a big hamburger. She was hungry.

"It is a hard decision. Why don't you get a little of all three?" The boys seemed to think that was a good idea and she proceeded to wrap up their purchases.

The bell over the door rang and she looked up to see her favorite patron, Holly Jackson, walking in, as always, a big smile on her face. "Hey, Miss Grace."

"Hey, Miss Holly." They both chuckled over their usual greeting. "What can I do for you today?"

"I heard Miss Pauline made some more giant chocolate chip cookies. I hope there's some left."

Grace grinned. "Good news really travels fast. I suppose we may have one with your name on it. Go ahead and take a seat at the counter. I'll be right with you."

Once she set a large cookie and a glass of milk in front of Holly, she said, “So, camp started today. You going to tell me all about it?” Grace placed her elbows on the counter and leaned over, ready for Holly’s report.

“Oh, it was wonderful! It was so much fun, I can’t wait until tomorrow. We’re making pictures using colored gravel in crafts. I think I’m going to make my picture of Hal’s Place.”

“That’s so nice. I’ll want to see it.”

She giggled. “Okay. And in library time I started reading a book about a pink hotel on the beach. It’s a mystery. I can’t wait to get back to it. Then at games, Ms. Forester and Mr. Crane had us playing games with hoops and cones. It was fun and we were laughing so hard I got a stitch in my side.”

“Wait a minute. Mr. Crane? I don’t think I know him.”

“He’s going to be teaching math at school. He’s really nice. I like him a lot.”

“High praise. I hope I get to meet him soon.” She saw the sweet family she’d seen a few weeks earlier come in and said to Holly, “Let me help these folks,” and went to greet them.

“Welcome back, good to see you. A booth?”

“Yes, thank you.”

As she set menus before them she said, “So, do you folks live around here?”

“Just moved into Charity. I’m Marcus Carrington.” He proceeded to introduce his three children.

“Welcome. I’m Grace McCrae. You couldn’t have picked a better town. It’s a wonderful place. If there’s anything you need I hope you’ll ask us here at Hal’s. We pretty much keep up with everything going on in Charity.”

“I’ve heard that, and thanks.” He hesitated and said, “Actually, I do have a question. I’m opening up a legal practice here in town with an office on the main avenue but also doing a lot of work at home so I can be with the kids. However, I’d love to meet someone who could help babysit during those times I have to be away.”

“Babysit? Really, Dad, I’m almost a teenager. I don’t need a babysitter,” the oldest girl, Kelsey, said.

“Of course, honey. But some do.” His eyes moved to his son and youngest daughter, obviously placating the twelve and a half year old Kelsey. Smart dad.

“Off hand I don’t know of anyone but I will think about it and ask around. I’m sure we could find someone for you.”

“I’d really appreciate it.”

“All right, Carrington family, I’ll be right back with waters while you decide on what you want.”

When she walked back to the counter, she saw one of her favorite families coming in. “Faith! I haven’t seen you in ages. Hey, kids. How’s everything?”

“Busy.” The woman pushed back her unruly, thick brown hair and gave a tired smile. “But the school’s camp started today, which we’re all thankful for. We’re celebrating the first day with an early dinner at Hal’s.

“Say, have you finally gotten over that flu you had?”

“Oh, yeah, I have. Finally.” Grace smiled and glancing around said, “I don’t have any booths but I see a table over there. That okay?” When Faith nodded, she said, “You all go on and I’ll get you waters. Do you need menus?”

“Are you kidding? We could recite the menu by heart, couldn’t we kids?”

Grace chuckled. “Okay. Let me get those waters.” She turned to see someone entering the diner and a smile instantly bloomed on her face. Their eyes met and his expression matched hers.

Mac McCrae walked to her, her heart accelerating. They’d been married for over three years and his smile could still bring her to her knees. “Hey, honey.”

He gave her a quick kiss and wrapped an arm around her waist. “How’re you doing?”

“Good. It’s a fair crowd today. Still a little early for summer tourists. Oh, hey, take these waters back to the father and three kids in the back booth for me, okay? They’re new in town so introduce yourself. I’ll take waters back for Faith and her kids.”

“Sounds good.” He gave her another kiss and headed back.

He took the heavy tray and walked back, setting the waters down. “Hey, I’m Mac McCrae. Grace’s husband. She tells me you’re new in town.”

“We are. Marcus Carrington.” He stretched his hand out to shake and introduced his children. “You got a great place here. It’s already my kids favorite restaurant in Central Florida.”

“Shows your children have great taste.” He winked at the kids. “Good to have you here. I’ll send Lacy back to get your orders.” Backing up, he bumped into Grace and chuckled. “Excuse me.”

“My fault.” She smiled and facing Faith said, “Lacy’ll get your orders going.”

Neither Grace nor Mac saw the kids from both tables eyeing each other.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was the end of the first week of camp and Sally was exhausted. In addition to working mornings at school, she was putting in extra time at the tavern, trying to save up for school.

As the kids were starting to leave for the day, she saw Kelsey dragging her feet, as if she carried the weight of the world. Sally walked up to her, a smile on her face. "Hey, Kelsey. So tell me, how did the first week of camp go?"

With a dramatic sigh, she said, "Good. I've enjoyed the camp, I'm just . . ."

"Still haven't met anybody new?"

"No."

Sally looked around and saw a potential candidate. "Well, that's about to change right now. Rachel? You got a minute?"

A girl about the same age as Kelsey answered. "You need something, Ms. Forester?"

"Yes. I need you to meet my new friend. This is Kelsey Carrington. Kelsey, I'd like for you to meet Rachel Hamilton. I think you two may be about the same age."

"Twelve," Kelsey said.

"Yeah. I just turned twelve."

"Wow. That's great. I'll bet you two have a lot in common. Why don't you walk with me toward the administration building and we can talk." She glanced over her shoulder to see Brandon watching her. He smiled and nodded, telling her he'd put the equipment away. She returned the nod.

"I saw you at Hal's the other day, didn't I?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah. I was there with my dad and brother and sister."

"Where was your mom?"

Sally cringed. "Her mother doesn't live with her, honey. And you have two younger siblings so you're both the oldest. How cool is that?"

"You have two younger sibs? My condolences," Kelsey said, to which Rachel laughed.

"Yeah, it can be a hassle. So you live in Charity?"

"We just moved. From Indiana. Dad got tired of the snow."

"I think snow would be fun. At least for a while. I'd miss the beaches. Where do you live?"

"On Eastern Way."

"No kidding, me too."

Sally's smile widened. "Well, how about that. The same street. What are the odds?"

"If you like you can walk home with us," Rachel said.

"I'd like to but I've got to get my brother and sister and meet our dad up front. He's taking us grocery shopping."

"Oh, well, I guess I'll see you on Monday. Or maybe on Eastern Way sometime. We go to the community pool there a lot."

"Yeah, maybe I'll see you. There's my dad, I gotta go. See ya Monday. Thank you, Ms. Forester."

"No problem, Kelsey."

As Kelsey hurried off, Sally said, "Thanks for being so nice, Rachel. I think Kelsey is lonely, being in a new town and not knowing anyone."

"You think? Well, she seems nice. And I'll try to introduce her around."

"That would be wonderful, thank you." Sally hugged her. "I have a feeling she won't be lonely for long."

In the teacher's lounge, boxes of pizza were set up for a special luncheon for the volunteers of summer camp. The group wasn't big as many of the volunteers were parents that needed to tend to children or others that needed to get back to work. Still, Brandon got a coke and plate, happy to reward himself after the first hard week.

"How's it going, Brandon." Jillian, the young, peppy school receptionist got in line behind him.

"Great. I'm always happy when the first week is over and everyone gets into the swing of things. Plus . . ." He placed a meat lovers slice of pizza on his plate and held it up. "Pizza."

"Yes, it was really nice of Patricia to set this up. We're all so very grateful for those that freely give their time for the kids. It's . . . inspiring." She fluttered her eyes at him. Always nice to be flirted with by a pretty girl but he'd never liked office romances.

He cleared his throat and said, "My work in summer camp is entirely selfish, I'm afraid. I wanted to get a jump on the school year in the fall, meet some of the kids, get my bearings."

“It’s a shame that you were put on game duty. You should be doing discovery, that’s a much more important position.”

“I think every position is important.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” Sally stood behind Jillian, giving her a tight smile. “Everything fine in the front office, Jill?”

“Yes. Oh, Sally, I hope I didn’t offend you. You know I’d never do that. You’re doing a fine job playing with the kids and I know that the teacher’s always love your help during the school year.”

“Yeah, thanks.” She got her pizza and moved away from the table, leaving Brandon to wonder about the interaction.

He got another piece and a little salad and went to sit next to Sally. “It’s been a good week, I think. How’d it go with the two girls?”

Her raised brows showed him she was surprised he’d thought any more about it. “Good. I think there’s a potential for a friendship, something Kelsey needs. Thanks for putting the equipment away.”

“Anything for the course of friendship.” He took a bite of salad, watching her nibble on her pizza slice. “You and Jillian don’t get along?”

Her eyes went to the woman and then back at her pizza. “She’s all right, I guess. If you like her kind. Which apparently you do.”

He almost choked on his salad. “Excuse me?”

“It’s nothing. Only that you two looked chummy discussing how irrelevant my job is here at camp.”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Okay, that is wrong on so many levels. We weren't 'chummy.' I was only being polite and incidentally, she isn't my kind, not at all. And what is that about being irrelevant?"

She shrugged as if it didn't matter. "It's just a pet peeve of mine. I hate for someone to think the work I do isn't important. Especially here at the school."

Brandon took a moment to think. "As a teacher who deals with children everyday of the school year, I can confidently tell you that anyone that has a heart for children and works at a school, heck, that volunteers at a school makes an impact on kids. To me, there's nothing more important.

"And when I see someone do what you did today with Kelsey, well . . . no, Ms. Forester, irrelevant is the last word I'd use when describing you."

After a moment, she softly said, "Thanks."

They ate in silence, chatter filling the room around them. He was exhausted and planned to go back to his apartment, take a nap, and spend some time relaxing by playing his clarinet.

Another thought crossed his mind. "You do work here during the school year?"

"Yes. I'm a floater. They assign me wherever I'm needed. I could be helping in kindergarten or third grade or high school history."

"Ah, so I may see you in the junior high building during the year."

"You may."

The woman kept getting more interesting and he wanted to know more about her. "Since you're so at home in the classrooms here, maybe you could give me

some help. I'm going to do some more organizing in my room this afternoon. If you're not busy, why don't you come help me? Pay me back for finishing up for you today."

Sally smirked. "I should have known that would come back on me." He thought he glimpsed excitement in her eyes at being in a classroom. "Sure, why not. I'm not working at the Tavern tonight so I've got some free time."

"Good. How about I get us another couple of slices and then after we eat we can walk over." She nodded.

His classroom always thrilled him. There was something about being in charge of it, decorating and organizing it to how you wanted to teach, imagining young minds being challenged here, growing, developing. It was his passion.

He opened the door, switched on the light, and let the excitement of the room fill him. It was a double pleasure when he heard her gasp behind him. "Wow. This is amazing."

"You think so?" He tried to look at it through her eyes. Humorous math posters filled the wall, interspersed with bulletin boards revealing various math tricks. In one corner of the room was a big rug with brightly colored bins filled with games, models, and toys he used to demonstrate mathematical concepts. He liked this area the best.

"I wish I'd had a math class like this in junior high. It's wonderful. Alive. Interesting. The kids are going to love it."

Her sincere praise warmed him. "Thank you."

"I can't think of anything you need to do."

“Just getting worksheets ready. You up for it?”

Her smile was wide across her face. “Bring it on.”

They worked for several hours, speaking of everyday things—Charity, the Tavern, apartment living, the Charity School. As they were finishing up, he couldn’t help asking, “If you love teaching so much, why not work here fulltime?”

He could see her expression tightening. “You need a degree for that. At least for what I really want to do.”

“And what is that?”

She looked him in the eye, clearly gauging his interest. “I want to teach first or second grade. So much. But I still have classes I need to take to get my degree.”

“How many hours are you lacking?”

“About fifteen.”

“Well, that’s about one semester, isn’t it?”

She folded the last of the pages she was working on. “Sure. If you can spend the time and money to finish it up. I need to work. To eat and pay rent. I can only take one class at a time, if I’m lucky. So it’s still a while off.”

“I see. Well, I’m sure when you do get a classroom, you’ll be a wonderful teacher.” Her eyes went wide. He shrugged and said, “I’m a professional. I know someone who has it in her to be a great teacher. Your students will be very lucky to have you.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re pretty much done here. How about I walk you back to town, since you live across the street from me.”

“And how funny is that. I can’t tell you how irritated I was when I saw you across the way.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think I was irritated as much as surprised. Anyway, it’s a great location.”

“Agreed. Okay, let’s go.”

They walked slowly toward town. She kept up a discourse on things he didn’t know about the little town, things that would be helpful. He enjoyed listening to her.

“So why did you move here?”

“Ever since Trevor came her a few Christmases ago, he’s talked about how great it is.” He stuck his hands in his pockets, looking straight ahead. “I went through a tough divorce and just got tired of . . . feeling the pity, the guilt. Letting my life slide into a rut. I thought it was a perfect time to make a move, try something different.”

“I guess that’s something else we have in common.” Her eyes wouldn’t meet his. “I’m divorced, too. But instead of moving away, I wanted to cocoon here in Charity instead of going someplace else. I craved the comfortable, the same.”

“Hmm.” A slight breeze blew, lightening the heat of a summer Florida day. “How long ago?”

“Just after Christmas. It was sudden.” She blinked hard and added, “But okay, really. It was a mutual thing. Just wasn’t meant to be between us. I’m fine, really.”

“Well, my hat’s off to you. It’s been two years for me and I’m still not sure I’m okay.” He shook his head. “I thought we’d be together for the rest of our lives. We seemed so perfect for each other. She worked at the school board, we both came from religious, solid homes. Both loved living in New York.”

When he didn't go on, she said, "What happened?"

"She found somebody else. Just like that. It was a visiting professor from Munich. Before I knew it, she was saying goodbye, flying away to Germany with the man." He chuckled with no humor. "So much for the rest of our lives."

"That's hard. So, you just stayed there? Where you lived together?"

"Yeah. I thought I could handle it. But as time went by, I didn't get better. Everything I saw made me think of her. My parents, as much as I love them, could never understand what happened and that we got divorced. Several of my sisters were friends with her and just knew it had been my fault.

"The people at my school stood up for me but anything connected with the school board and I was the outcast."

"That's awful."

"After two years of it, when Trevor kept mentioning Charity, I got a little more information and applied to the school."

"I think you did the right thing."

"You do? But you were able to stay put, go on with your life where you were."

"If you call going to school, working part-time in a tavern going on with your life. Besides, everyone here in town was on my side. I have a lot of good friends here. That helps."

"Well, if someone has to get over a divorce, I think Charity is probably a good place to do it. Look at this view." They'd continued walking past both their buildings, down the main street, past Hal's Place, and around the lake. They gazed across the

water at the beauty of downtown Charity. Brandon sighed deeply. "Yes, I'm really glad I moved here."

"You won't regret it," she said, her eyes on the little town.

"Is that my handsome brother-in-law I see?"

Brandon and Sally looked over to see Mary jogging down the trail to them. She slowed, wiping her sweating brow with her wristband. "Hey Brandon. And Sally, I haven't seen you in so long. I'd hug you but I'm all sweaty."

"Hi, Mary. Good to see you."

"What the heck you doing jogging in the heat of the day?"

"I was going to this morning but accidentally slept in. Since I had a hour now I thought I'd take it."

"Well, be careful. Have you got any water on you?"

"In my pack on my back, Dad."

"Just looking out for you for Trevor. Where is he?"

"Had some business to take care of. Listen, we're going to the Italian restaurant tonight and would love some company. You guys up for it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to intrude. It's a family thing."

"Nonsense, not at all. We've just been locked up with work for several days now and want some company. And I want to hear about camp. So how about you two meeting us there around seven?"

Brandon thought it cute how his sweet sister-in-law could finagle a dinner date for him. If she only knew the impossibility of anything happening between the two of them. Still, he wouldn't mind spending a couple more hours with Sally.

“What do you think? I haven’t made it to the Italian place yet. Heard it’s good.”

“Oh, my, it is. They have the best calzones on the planet and their salads are really yummy.”

“Great. Since you seem to know what’s good on the menu, Trevor and I will see you there later.” Before Sally could protest, Mary took her hand. “I’d really like to catch up with you. Please say you’ll be there.”

With a sigh, Sally said, “Okay, sure. I’ll be there.”

Mary’s face beamed. “Great, see you both at seven. I’d better finish my run now. Goodbye.”

They watched her run off, Brandon shaking his head. “She can be a real force of nature, can’t she?”

“I always liked her. She came from money but was never snobbish about it. She always treated me with kindness.” They started walking back toward town. “I hope you’re okay with tonight.”

“I am if you are. I mean, it’s just a dinner with friends. Good food, good people. What’s not to like?”

CHAPTER SIX

She stood in front of her mirror staring at a blue dress. It was a simple sheath. Was it right for tonight? She'd meant what she said about Mary's kindness. The woman would probably compliment her on anything she wore.

So why was she having trouble?

The idea that having dinner with Brandon was the reason she was having trouble deciding on her clothes was laughable. They were merely co-workers for the summer. They'd had similar life experiences. That was all.

Besides, she'd rather shoot herself than to embark on another romance.

Maybe the red with the flowers. That was summery, happy. But it dipped low in front. Did she want to give Brandon a view of her bosom? No. Not that it was that impressive, but still the answer was no.

She shifted through her closet and found a white dress. No, not wearing a white dress to a place that serves spaghetti sauce. A brown dress? No, she'd been meaning to give that one away since she looked like a blob in it.

A pastel caught her eye. It was a blouse and matching skirt in shades of the summer. It always made her smile to wear it. Okay, tonight she needed a little extra cheer so that was the one.

And if she wore a little extra makeup, took a little more time with her hair, it was only because the Italian place was a nice place, with candlelight, cloth tablecloths, ambiance. She wanted to look nice.

The expression on Brandon's face when he saw her automatically made her heart soar. Not that she was trying. His eyes held interest and she couldn't seem to catch her breath. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you," she said a little more breathlessly than she wanted. "So do you. Ah, where are the others?"

"They just texted. Said for us to get a table and they'd be along."

He escorted her inside and they were seated at a quiet table in the back. "You're going to have to tell me what to get for dinner, since I've never been here before."

"Practically everything is good. When his practice or performance was over, Paul and I used to . . ." She wanted to pound her head. You never talk about the ex when out with someone else.

Not that she was out with someone else.

Brandon put a hand over hers. "It's okay. You're allowed to mention his name. You did have a life with him, after all."

Her eyes met his and she saw complete understanding. "Is it wrong that I still like to come here to eat even though we used to come all the time?"

He chuckled and squeezed the hand. "I think you're probably healthier than you think." He picked up the menu to read.

"What was her name?"

With a slight smile on his face, he said, "Lorraine."

“Well, feel free to talk about her around me. I won’t mind.” His eyes found hers again and in that second they seemed to communicate a bond, an understanding. It caused her to shiver slightly.

“I guess this is the place.” The moment was broken when Trevor walked up. “Have you two ordered or are you waiting for us?”

“We’re waiting for you. Although if they’re out of what we want because we had to wait, you’ll have to cook it for us.” Brandon winked at Sally.

“I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.” As Mary spoke, Trevor helped her in her seat. “I got a phone call just before we were to leave. A glitch in a party that our company is handling tonight at The Waldorf Astoria.”

“Nothing wrong, I hope.”

“No. Just a little mix-up in scheduling. Quickly solved. Thank God.”

“I don’t know how you do it, handling big parties for the elite.”

Mary chuckled. “I don’t know how you do it, handling big groups of children. That’s amazing to me.”

Yes, Sally liked Mary. The woman was always encouraging. It was so good to see her in love with a nice guy. The interaction throughout dinner between the two was respectful, playful, and intimate. At times, she worried she and Brandon were in the way.

Trevor and Brandon had that brother communication going on. They joked about the family, made fun of each other, told funny stories. They had her and Mary crying with laughter. Before she knew it, she was relaxing with a good glass of wine in her hands, thoroughly enjoying the company.

They told Trevor and Mary about camp and she was delighted when Brandon bragged on her expertise. He had no idea how much that meant to her.

When they finished dinner and said goodnight, Brandon and she walked up the street toward their respective buildings. Things were winding down in the little town, the streetlights were on low, giving the street a dreamy cast. She was feeling loose from her two glasses of wine. It was nice to have a handsome man walking next to her.

“Did you have a good time tonight?” he asked.

“I did. I love Mary. And you have a wonderful brother.”

“Oooh, don’t let him hear you say that. We don’t want him getting a big head over a pretty girl saying that. He gets enough of that from Mary.”

“You think I’m pretty?” It slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“Well, yes. Of course.”

“I’ve never liked my looks. I’m too tall, too angular. My eyes are too wide and—”

“You can’t possibly believe any of that. You’re perfect, just the way you are. And if Paul was too stupid to realize it, he’s an idiot. It’s his loss he wasn’t dining with you tonight. I’m glad it was me.”

She stopped and looked at him. His words were like a balm to her soul. She’d told herself the same things over and over but hearing them from someone else, someone who didn’t have to say them meant the world to her.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” He glanced around and said, “I guess this is where we part ways. I’ll see you on Monday. If not before.”

“Okay.” He smiled and turned to walk away. “Oh, Brandon. Lorraine is over the moon stupid.”

His eyes looked up as he thought about it. “I like that. Over the moon stupid. Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

She went into her apartment, dropping her purse and shoes by the door. The whole day ran through her head, everything Brandon had said to her. The insults and accusations from Paul warred in her brain, causing her, as always, to doubt herself. In the kitchen she got a glass of water, dropped a few ice cubes in, and drank. Her reflection in the microwave seemed to call out to her.

Was she what Paul had claimed—too touchy, too tall, too friendly? Or was Brandon right. She was perfect as she was. The lines fanning out from her eyes made her look older than she was. It had been a long six months. The fall-out from the divorce had taken its toll on her. When had she developed that hard edge, the one that had been so rude to Brandon when she’d first bumped into him? It wasn’t how she wanted to be. But in her heart she knew the hard edge was to protect her from ever loving with her whole heart again. No way she could go through that again.

She took her glass of ice water and walked through her living room to her tiny balcony. Needing the fresh air, she stepped out, breathing deeply. She sat in her chair and closed her eyes, needing the moment to ground herself. The calm of the moment filled her body and soul. She laid her head back and enjoyed. The words of

Brandon again came to mind, drowning out Paul's ugly words. A smile curved her lips.

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw that Brandon was standing out on his balcony, looking right at her. Her smile widened. He lifted what looked like a beer in salute, which she returned with her ice water.

No, she wasn't going to give her heart again, but maybe she could use a good friend that understood her.

She was beautiful. Sitting on her little balcony, relaxed, her head back, a secret smile on her lips, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

It was scaring him.

The day had been one of the best in years for him—working with the kids, celebrating with co-workers at the luncheon, working with Sally in his classroom, walking and talking with her, dinner with her and his family. It was close to a perfect day. Because she had been a part of it.

Was he losing it? He'd been down the road of love before and had decided never to take that route again. And here he was mooning over a pretty redhead after knowing her for only a short time.

When she opened her eyes and found his, his heart simply stopped. He could only lift his bottle to her and smile. The return smile had that heart thudding in his ears.

This was ridiculous. He took a sip and went back into his apartment, determined to think of something else besides lovely blue eyes, wavy auburn hair, soft looking lips.

He put his beer down and picked up his clarinet. The instrument had been his salvation for more days than he could count, it would help him now. He settled at a stool at the breakfast bar and softly began playing a jazz piece that always helped him feel better. The music flowed through him, filling all the empty pieces, warming all the cold places. Before he knew it, his mind was clear, his purposes set.

It was the weekend and he had no plans. He'd drive over to Cocoa Beach, stay the night, soak in some rays. And rest up for Monday when he'd face the kids.

And one very beautiful volunteer teacher.

The next week was less stressful since everyone was getting into the schedule. There were fewer tears from little ones and fewer questions from others. Until Wednesday. As if something had been dropped into the water supply, the kids were overly rambunctious. All the volunteers were thankful for games time so the kids could let off some steam.

Sally and Brandon were glad to cooperate. They ran the kids a little harder sensing it was what the other volunteers needed. By the end of camp when they were putting up cones and balls, they both sighed.

"Remind me never to want to have a bunch of kids," Brandon said, bouncing a ball.

“Why is it that some days they all seem to want to bounce off the walls and challenge any authority? It’s like they all get together for some secret meeting and say, ‘Okay on this date, we’re going to give the adults all kinds of trouble.’ What’s up with that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the air pressure.”

“Any hurricanes in the forecast?”

“Not that I know of. Hey, I’ve never been through a Florida hurricane. What’s it like?”

“The building shakes, trees fall, lots of rain and wind.”

“Hmm. Sounds like a concert in Central Park.”

She laughed and then got quiet. “Do you hear that?” They both ran out of the gym and onto the soccer field. A group of kids had congregated, all yelling.

“This doesn’t look good,” he said running to the scene with Sally following him. “What’s going on?” he yelled trying to get their attention. When that didn’t help, he pushed through kids getting to the middle of the conflict.

Sally gasped at the scene. Sweet little Ben Hamilton was in the middle of a fight with a boy she hadn’t seen before. Both boys were bloody as they continued to go after each other.

Brandon reached in and with his big hands pushed each head back and away from the other. Seeing an adult, the others grew quiet or scattered. She couldn’t hear what he said to them but taking an arm of each, walked back to the gym, his eyes serious as they met hers.

Inside the gym, he had each boy sit down with five feet between them. He stood before them, arms folded, feet separated and planted. Sally thought it was the perfect authoritative stance.

“Now that I’ve got your attention, let’s get to the bottom of this. I don’t know either of you personally so you know I won’t play favorites. At the moment I am equally mad with each of you.

“You, on my right. Name?”

“Ben Hamilton.”

“All right, Ben Hamilton. I want you to tell me the story of what happened, in your own words. I don’t want any exaggerations, any lies. Only truth. Begin.”

“I was walking along, looking for my sister. We’re supposed to meet on the soccer field but she’s late. So, this kid bumps into me and I wait and wait for him to say he’s sorry. When he doesn’t I say, ‘Isn’t there something you want to say?’ and he says, ‘Yeah, you talk like a girl.’ It made me so mad and I . . .” Tears filled Ben’s eyes. “I pushed him hard. It kinda got worse from there.”

“Okay. Good job, Ben Hamilton. Concise, to the point, and hopefully truthful. Now you, on my left. Name?”

“Justin Carrington.” Sally’s eyes widened. It must be Kelsey’s brother. Had to be. This wasn’t good.

“Okay, Justin Carrington. Let’s hear your side of the story.”

“Pretty much what he said. Except for the fact that I didn’t mean to bump into him and I didn’t know he was waiting for me to say I’m sorry. Guys bump into each other all the time. It was nothing.”

“I see. What led you to bump into Ben? Were you looking on the ground for something? A lost penny, a spider, an archeological artifact?”

“No, sir. I was just thinking. My dad was picking us up on the other side of the soccer field and I was just planning what I was going to do when I got home.”

“Hmm.” Brandon studied each boy.

Sally decided to intervene. “It seems to me that we have a simple misunderstanding.” Her voice soft, she bent to face Justin. “I know you didn’t mean to bump Ben. I’m sure if you just told him you were sorry, he’d be man enough to accept your apology.”

“You think?” She could see the fear and uncertainty behind his sad eyes and her heart went out to the young boy.

“I’ve known Ben here for a long time. He’s never been unreasonable before, but always intelligent.” From the corner of her eye, she could see Ben’s chest puff with pride. “How about it?”

“Sure.” Justin rubbed a hand under his nose and shyly turned. “I’m sorry Ben. I really didn’t mean to bump you.”

“Ben?” Sally said, her brows high.

“It’s okay, Justin. I probably wasn’t looking where I was going either.”

“Gentlemen, you’ve restored my belief in the future of our species.” Both boys snorted at Brandon’s comment. “Now, before we let you go, can I safely assume that there will not be anymore fighting between the two of you?”

“You can assume.”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“And by the way,” Sally said. “I don’t know if you know this or not, but you guys are neighbors. You both live on Eastern Way. It’s always smart to get along with your neighbors.”

“You live on Eastern Way? Cool. We’ve got a good community pool at the end of the road. Have you been to it?”

“Not yet. Dad’s taking us this weekend.”

“Okay, boys. I think you can leave and find your—”

“Justin? Are you in here?” A handsome, dark-haired man came running into the gym, followed by a little girl and Kelsey. “Are you okay?” He went to Justin and took his arms into his hands. “What happened?”

Justin’s eyes went to Brandon and Sally. She could see his thoughts as he wondered how much trouble he was going to get into.

Sally stepped forward. “There was a misunderstanding.” Smiling at the man, she stuck out her hand. “I’m Sally Forester, head of games at camp.”

“Hello. I’m Marcus Carrington. Justin’s father.” He narrowed his eyes. “Wait, you’re Sally? Kelsey’s friend?”

“Yeah, Dad. That’s her,” Kelsey called out.

“Thank you for . . . well, I’m sure you know. You’ve been a big help to Kelsey.”

“No problem.”

His eyes went back to Justin. “Now, tell me the truth about my son.”

Before Sally could say anything, she heard a familiar voice. “Ben?”

“In here, Faith.”

Ben's mother entered, followed by a young boy and Rachel. "Ben, we've been waiting. One of the other kids said you were in the gym because you were in trouble." Faith's eyes went to Sally. "What happened?"

She shook her head. "Just a misunderstanding. Like I was telling Mr. Carrington, here. Oh, and let me introduce Brandon Crane. He broke up—I mean, he brought the boys in here so we could get to the bottom of the . . . ah, misunderstanding."

Clearly, Faith understood. More than Sally was saying. "Ben? Did you get into a fight with this boy?"

"Justin?" Marcus said. "Is that true? You were fighting?"

"Really, folks, it was nothing. And since we've been talking, Justin and Ben have discovered they live on the same street. Isn't that great? I know it's always good to meet new friends."

Both parents seemed to be suspicious. Over her shoulder, Sally heard Rachel and Kelsey chatting. This was a good thing, she could feel it.

Brandon walked over and said, "You're folks are waiting, guys. You can head out now if you want." The boys' twin expressions were almost comical, glancing at Brandon as if they weren't sure it was safer to leave with irritated parents.

Sally took compassion and said to the parents, "You two probably haven't met. Faith, this is Marcus Carrington. He and his children have just moved here. In fact, they live on your street. Marcus, Faith Hamilton. She is our resident piano instructor. If you want your kids to learn music, there's none better."

"Thank you, Sally."

“Weren’t you at Hal’s one day, sitting at a table next to our booth?”

“I could have been. We go to Hal’s a lot.”

“I understand why. It’s already become my kids’ favorite. It’s really nice to meet you.” They shook hands and they motioned their kids over to meet each other.

Seeing they were not needed any longer, she motioned with her head for Brandon to join her in putting everything up for the day.

“Well, that turned out well,” he whispered as they got busy.

“Yes.” She hesitated before saying, “You did well. With the boys. Let them preserve some dignity. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” He shrugged. “I remember being a young guy, feeling when you had to fight but didn’t want to. I think both kids were scared.” He bounced a ball once and said, “And for someone who hasn’t gotten her teaching degree . . . yet . . . you have an innate kindness that kids can feel. It’ll make you a good teacher.”

She felt her face heat with the unexpected compliment. “We just are full of compliments for each other today.” She stacked the cones, her eyes not meeting his.

“It’s a lot better than when we first met. If looks could kill, I’d be a heap of ashes on Main Street.”

Chuckling, she said, “I guess you’re okay.”

“Wow, another compliment. You’d better stop or I’ll get a big head.”

The Hamiltons and Carringtons called out goodbyes as they left the gym, bringing the quiet back.

They continued clearing the space and her mind went back to his words.

“You really think I’ll be a good teacher?”

“No doubt.”

She huffed out a sigh. “If I could only get my degree.”

“You will.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” she said under her breath.

She felt his eyes on her as she worked. “Why do you doubt yourself so much?”

Her hands stopped working and she thought about his question. “It just seems that I have trouble accomplishing anything really important in life. I . . . keep messing things up.”

“Sally. It takes two people to make a marriage.”

She put the cones back in the closet a little too enthusiastically, mad for again blaming herself for her failed marriage.

“Yeah. But while I was trying to make that marriage work, I lost a lot of time working on my dream of teaching. Now it feels even further away.”

He leaned against the wall next to her, crossing his arms. “I’ve found in life that if you want something, really want it, you work hard, fight for it. Without that focus it’s just a pipe dream. But with it, it’s a sure thing.”

“Maybe.” She knew he was right but still had trouble believing.

“Why is it so important for you to be a teacher?”

“What?” He was staring at her, as if he could see through to her soul. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“There’s a reason being a teacher is so important. Tell me. Since I’m a teacher, I’m sure I’ll understand.”

Could she share with him? Maybe it might help to talk about it. Maybe he could give her new perspective, new encouragement. "I think it would be easier to show you. Let's clean up, first."

She took him to her apartment. Thankfully, she'd cleaned Sunday night and hadn't messed up too much since. She led him to a shelf against her wall in her small living room and pulled out the clock that stood in a place of honor in the middle of the unit. "This is why I want to be a teacher."

The large red apple clock gleamed and the sight made her sniff. The soft tick-tock always made her smile.

"I don't understand."

Of course he wouldn't if she didn't explain. "When I came to live with my grandparents, they were both teachers. At Charity School. They thought teaching was the best occupation there was. Every night they happily helped me with my homework, taught me that learning could be fun. They enjoyed their careers, filled me with love."

"And the clock was theirs." It wasn't a question.

"It's the very best memory I have of them. We'd work on homework to the sound of this clock. It was a constant in my life, a reminder that even if my mother didn't, my grandparents loved me."

His hand came to her shoulder. "That's a wonderful memory. They must be great people."

Her heart felt like an anvil when she said quietly, "They died. Years ago."

He squeezed her shoulder. After a moment, he said, "I know they'd be very proud of you."

How did he know the best thing to say? She looked up at him, pleased that he really did seem to understand. His gray eyes were locked onto her, intense and concerned. His expression was serious, his lips firm and . . . inviting.

When her eyes went back to his, she could see he was feeling the vibrations between them.

Before anything happened that she'd be sorry for, she took a step back. "Well, we are full of compliments today."

"Have dinner with me. Friday night."

"I have to work Friday night."

"Saturday, then."

"Brandon, I don't know—"

"Say yes." The softness of his voice hypnotized her. Her mind went back to how competently he'd dealt with Justin and Ben. How he'd let her take over when the parents arrived. How supportive he'd been and understanding of her clock.

And she couldn't say no. "All right."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Grace was ecstatic that Pauline had made a triple layer chocolate cake. The object of her fantasies, it proudly sat under a glass dome on the soda fountain counter. As soon as she could take a break she'd get herself a huge slice.

After she finished her double order of cheese fries.

"You want any ketchup with those?" Tom, fry cook extraordinaire asked her.

"No thanks. It'll dull the taste. Hey, how's my burger coming?"

Tom leaned against the counter and cocked his head. "You feeling okay, Grace? Never known you to eat so much."

"Well, it's your own fault. You're such a good cook."

"Mm-hm." He walked back into the kitchen to finish her burger, shaking his head. "You might want to check on that daughter of yours, Pauline. I think she's been eating the entire time I've been on shift. And the look she was just giving your cake? Whoo hoo, I think that look from my wife got me my last child."

"Really?" She glanced up from chopping onions. "That's interesting. Last month she was sick with the flu. She's been tired, going to bed early every night. Now she's eating more than usual." Pauline chopped some more, her eyes tearing up. "I have a feeling . . ." She sniffed. "I might know why." Sniff, sniff. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Could it be? Was it possible?

"Pauline? What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, it's these darn onions." Not really. She had the feeling she was going to be getting some incredible news soon from her baby.

She couldn't wait to tell Little Jed.

Sally was nervous all Saturday. Brandon had told her it would just be casual. He was making dinner for her in his apartment. And wasn't that amazing. Paul would never have thought to cook for her.

Shaking her head, she'd have to remind herself not to talk about Paul. Sure, Brandon had said she was allowed to vent to him about her ex but she didn't want to sound petty.

After deciding on dark jeans, a royal blue silk shirt, and heels she figured she was ready. Glancing in the mirror, she wondered what Brandon saw. Her wavy red hair was piled on her head. Her makeup was light, her blue eyes smoky. Was it too much? It was no more than she'd probably wear out on any date so she took a breath, grabbed her keys and the small plant she'd bought for his apartment, and walked across the street to Brandon's apartment.

Her curiosity was piqued as to what it would look like. It would be larger than hers, a better kitchen, and wider balcony. But more important, she was interested in seeing how the man lived.

She took a few calming breaths before knocking. And then lost her breath again when he answered the door. Dressed in a white buttoned-down shirt, brown slacks, Dockers, he smiled and she couldn't help her heart from flipping over.

"Hi," her voice squeaked.

"Hi. You're right on time. Come on in." He held the door wider and she walked in.

It was what she'd pictured, clean lines, minimal, neat. In what she thought of as male colors—browns, black, and blues—the shades went together to create a calm, comfortable dwelling. "You've got a nice place."

"Thanks. Is that for me?"

She saw he was staring at the plant. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry. Here you go."

He took the plant and chuckled. "Thanks. Very considerate of you." He walked to the kitchen, her following.

"My grandmother said whenever you're invited to someone's house, you always take a small gift."

"Well, thanks to your grandmother. I don't have very many plants." He set the plant on the counter and went back to stirring a mix of vegetables in a large frying pan.

"I think it adds life. What are you making?"

"Stir fry. You didn't say if you were allergic to anything."

"No. I pretty much will eat anything. Can I help you with something?"

He gave the vegetables one more stir and went to pull out a glass. "Nope. Got it all under control. Would you like a glass of wine?"

So much! "That would be nice, thanks." He poured two glasses and handed one to her. The first sip cooled her throat, helped calm her.

"I'm almost done here. You want to pull up a chair and talk to me? Or do you want to sit in the living room and scope out what my apartment looks like?"

She smirked at him. "I can tamp down my curiosity, thank you." She pulled up the chair. "I'll keep you company and keep a watch over what you're going to feed me."

"I promise I will not spit into anything on our menu."

She quickly looked down at her wine and took a sip, deciding not to answer.

"I noticed the Hamiltons and Carringtons walking together yesterday. Looks like some friendships have been forged."

"I'm so glad. It's not fun being the new kid in town. I wished I would have had sweet kids around me like the Hamiltons."

"I guess I was always in the Hamiltons' position. My parents live in the same house they brought all seven of us home from the hospital. We went to the same elementary school, same junior high, and same high school. My poor baby sister, by the time she went through school, there wasn't a secret the Crane family had from the teachers. She couldn't get away with a thing."

Sally chuckled. "Are you still close?"

"Pretty much. Mom complains we haven't given her enough grandchildren. I've got two sisters married, two kids each. Then Trevor married Mary. The rest of us are single. I suppose I disappointed everyone by going backwards—getting divorced instead of having children."

"But isn't it good you didn't have children? How would you have shared custody in Germany?"

He shivered. "Thank God for that. So, why didn't you and Paul ever have kids?"

“Now it’s my time to shiver.” She shook her head. “He was totally focused on his career. He’s a musician, not big on children.”

“And yet, you want to be a teacher.”

“Yeah, funny, isn’t it? When you breakup with someone you start to realize how you were flawed from the start. At least, I do.”

“That’s true. I can still hear my mother questioning me about Lorraine. Hearing her concerns that I totally ignored.” He stirred the vegetables and grabbed his wine. “How about we drink to making smarter choices from now on.”

“Something to drink to.” She clinked her glass to his and took a sip.

He got out the marinated meat and added it to the frying pan. “So do you cook much?”

She relaxed back in her chair, enjoying the casualness of the evening. It was nice to sit in the kitchen, with a nice man, talking about nothing important, drinking a very fine wine.

“Not much, since it’s just for me. Grandma made sure I knew all the basics. I grumbled when she was teaching me but I’m thankful now. In fact,” she said, lifting an eyebrow. “I make the best chocolate chip cookies anywhere.”

“Really? Well, you’ll have to let me determine the validity of your claim since I happen to be the best chocolate chip cookie tester anywhere.”

“Maybe I will. I haven’t made a batch since our town’s Christmas lighting party.”

Brandon took another sip and turned to her. "That's one of the big reasons I moved here, simple things like the town's Christmas lighting party. I look forward to it."

"Oh, we have lots of reasons to get together. And eat." She chuckled. "The next time will be the Fourth of July Parade."

"No kidding, there's a parade?"

"Right down Main Street. You could sit on your balcony and watch the awesomeness of the Charity marching band or the local twirlers or gymnasts."

"Interesting. I'll mark my calendar."

"And afterward we'll have a big party at the park by the lake. Of course, my chocolate chip cookies will be the favorite. I might make several batches." She sipped more wine.

"I feel like I should bring something. Any suggestions?"

The wine was undoubtedly loosening her tongue. "You could help me with the cookies."

"You mean, you'd let me discover your recipe for the best chocolate chip cookies anywhere?"

She looked at the ceiling, as if to calculate her answer. "Hmm. I guess you can be trusted. This is good wine."

Frowning, he studied her eyes, taking her glass to set on the counter. He reached into the fridge for a bottle of water and handed it to her. "You don't drink much, do you?"

“No, I never have. I enjoy working at the tavern but I’ve never been tempted to overindulge or even to try the hard stuff.”

“Good for you. Well, I think I’m about ready. You want to pull out the salad from the refrigerator?”

“Sure.” She got up and opened the fridge, smiling at the opportunity to take a peek of what Brandon Crane had in his refrigerator. Didn’t he know every woman on a date yearned to get a glimpse?

It was about what she would have guessed. There were a dozen eggs, juice, soy milk. Huh, maybe he was allergic to the real stuff. Orange juice, beer, soda, wine, water.

“You taking survey, there?”

Embarrassed that she was caught, she pulled out the wooden bowl filled with a pretty salad and set it on the table.

“So?”

“So . . . what?”

“What did my refrigerator tell you?”

She took her wineglass and, knowing she was about to eat, took another sip.

“That you’re a guy.”

“Okay.”

“In your freezer you’ve probably got frozen dinners, pizza, ice cream, and maybe something Mary cooked, a casserole or something.”

“Incredible. Oh, you did forget the fully cooked roast that I keep to impress women with.”

“Have a lot of them looking in your freezer, do you?”

“You’re the first in Charity.”

“I’m honored.” How much she had missed joking with an interesting man. For so long she’d been with a man that was so serious, so totally focused on his career. And other women.

He pulled out her chair and she felt a flutter in the heart. He helped her plate with salad, stir-fry, and sliced Italian bread. Her breath caught. It was all nice, comfortable. And she couldn’t help expecting the worse to come.

No, she’d put him back in the category of friend. They were both teachers, in a sense. Both residents of Charity. They’d share those things, without the problems of romantic involvement.

She kept to that mantra until they’d cleaned up after dinner.

“Would you like another cup of coffee, sit in the living room?”

“Sure. I have to get your recipe for those cannolis. They were excellent,” she said as she sat on the plush sofa.

“It’s easy, really. You walk down to the street, turn right, go over two stores and enter the bakery. Pick out what you want and pay, cash or credit. Easy.”

She laughed. “I think I can remember that recipe.” Her eyes surveyed the room, seeing the pieces of Brandon Crane—a few family pictures framed, an antique abacas, books on mathematics and teaching. And on a side table was an instrument on a stand, shining, ready to be played.

“Here you are. You said one cream, right?”

“You play?” she asked pointing to the instrument.

“Yes. First clarinet in the high school band. Do you?”

“No.” She took a sip of coffee. “I don’t play anything.”

“Well, let me play something for you.” He set his coffee down and picked up the clarinet. “Let’s try this.” Comfortable, he started a mellow piece, one she didn’t recognize. The notes flickered over her, mesmerizing in their clearness, in the bright melody.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, listening to the music, enjoying the resonance. The tune changed and morphed into something she did know. Suddenly she was back in a dark, smoky bar listening to Paul play his sax. Her breathing became shallow and her eyes filled, feeling the pain of betrayal again as she realized Paul wasn’t watching her, but playing to another woman. A prettier woman in the back. The stab of hurt, the agony of her soul returned and her stomach clenched with pain.

“Sally? Sally!”

She looked up to see Brandon sitting next to her, concern clouding his eyes. “I’m sorry, I . . .” She couldn’t verbalize the grief she was experiencing.

He put his arm around her rubbing her shoulder, saying nothing.

She felt like an idiot but didn’t refuse the comfort. Had she really had anyone to confide in since the divorce? It wasn’t fair to say she didn’t have any friends. There were many people throughout Charity that she could have called on during her darkest times but how could they understand? Most of her friends were happy in their own relationships.

But Brandon understood. She’d accept his comfort.

After a while, he softly said, "I didn't think. Did Paul play the clarinet?"

She sniffed. "Saxophone. He . . . played that song."

Brandon sighed and leaned his head against hers. "I'm sorry." After another moment he added, "I will forever take that song off my repertoire."

She smiled, grateful for his support. "You play very well. I'm sorry I . . ."

"No need to be sorry." He rubbed her shoulder again. "For months after Lorraine left, even when I felt better, occasionally something—it could be a scent, a picture, even food—something would surround me, making me think of her. It was like a sword sticking into my gut. Sometimes the pain was so real, I checked to see if I was bleeding."

She turned her face into his chest and sighed. He knew her hurt.

"I can't say that I never hurt anymore but thank God that overwhelming, debilitating grief is gone."

"So you're saying it gets easier."

"It does. There are some things you can do to help the process."

She sniffed. "Like what?"

"Well, I think you've already accomplished the first. You're going on with your life plans, being a teacher. You have something to focus on."

"Okay. What else?"

"You have a community behind you. That's huge. Everyone here in town adores you and is on your side."

"Everyone but Jillian, you mean."

“Even Jillian. She was just annoyed with you because she was trying to flirt with me.”

He said it so easily she couldn’t help chuckling. “Okay, community support. Anything else?”

It was quiet for so long she wasn’t sure he was going to answer.

“One more thing. You need to think of someone else.”

She lifted her head to ask him to explain and her eyes met his. And she didn’t need any explanation.

Slowly, as if in a dream they moved toward each other. When their lips touched, she felt a jolt go through her body. It was as if she’d never been kissed, she thought as her lips melted to his. Her hand on his chest felt the heavy thud of his heart and she thrilled that she was causing it. His hand went to her cheek and held her so he could angle his head, take the kiss deeper. His other hand pulled her closer and a shiver worked down her back.

The kiss ended, and Brandon let his forehead drop against her. “That was . . . unexpected.”

She couldn’t help giggling. “Well, that’s not the most flattering thing I’ve heard after kissing someone.”

He glanced up. “I didn’t mean to offend, Sally, I—”

She put a finger over his lips. “I’m not offended. I’m just as surprised as you are. I don’t want us to examine or discuss this, please. Let’s just . . . enjoy.”

He took her finger and kissed it. “Agreed. And FYI, it was an incredible kiss. Just so we’re clear.”

“Yes. It was. Now I’d better go. I’m scheduled to help in nursery at church in the morning.” She stood and walked to the door, Brandon following her.

“Oh, yeah? Which church.”

“Charity Community. Over by the hospital.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll check it out.”

“You should.” She smiled. “Another good place to find support, right?”

He returned the smile. “Right. Well, I enjoyed tonight. Very much, Sally.”

“Me, too. Thank you for dinner. You know, you may just work out as a local after all.”

“Thanks.”

She walked back to her apartment, her feet not touching the ground. To be honest, a part of her had wondered if she could ever be interested in a man again after Paul. And if she had the potential to interest anyone.

Now she had her answer and it was wonderful.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As June came to a close, the town settled into the easy rhythm of summer. Tourists were flooding the area, visiting the attractions and adding to the coffers of the Charity businesses, which Mac wasn't going to complain about.

He was called in to help at Hal's since Grace was sleeping in this morning. She'd also gone to bed before him last night. Was she still dealing with the effects of the terrible flu she'd had that lingered a couple of months? He could still hear her retching in the bathroom early in the mornings. He'd felt so bad for her, trying to help her by holding her hair out of her face and bringing her crackers and tea.

Now she was just tired. And hungry. She was going to be so angry with herself when she stepped on the scale. Mac didn't care. He'd love her no matter what size she was. Ever since she'd thought he was a transient and she'd given him a slice of cake for free. He smiled remembering. She'd been beautiful, with the saddest eyes he'd ever seen.

Not anymore. His Grace was a happy person, content in the life they made together in Charity—him with his photography business and her pretty much running Hal's Place. He loved his life, wouldn't change a thing.

But if she wasn't back to normal soon, he was taking her to the doctor himself.

He recognized one of the two girls coming into the restaurant and smiling, went to them. "Hey, Rachel, how's it going?"

"Good. Is it okay if me and Kelsey go sit at the counter?"

“Sure. Oh, yeah, I met you and your family here. Good to see you again, Kelsey.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you girls know what you want or do you need menus?”

“Could we get chocolate chip milkshakes, please?” Rachel asked.

He leaned in and whispered, “It just so happens that is my specialty. Extra whipped cream on the house.” He winked at them and they giggled.

Good young people. Just one of the reasons he liked Charity. Which reminded him of one of his favorite people, Noel Jackson, Holly’s brother. The young man was in college but off for the summer. He was scheduled to be in soon. Mac always enjoyed working with him, ever since the first time he’d come to Charity.

As he got busy working on those milkshakes, a man entered who looked vaguely familiar to him. He sat next to the girls, who he heard saying, “Hi, Mr. Crane.”

Crane? He did look a lot like Trevor Crane.

Mac finished the shakes and set them in front of the girls. “There you go, the best shakes in the place.” He turned to the man and wiping his hands on the towel tucked in his waistband, said, “I’m not sure we’ve met. You must be Trevor’s brother Brandon, I’m Mac McCrae.”

“So nice to finally meet you, Mac.” The two shook hands. “I’ve heard a lot about you. And have one of your prints hanging in my living room.”

“That’s nice to hear. Welcome to Charity. I hear you’re our new junior high math teacher.”

“I am. News travels fast around here.”

“That it does.” Mac’s eyes went to the front door. “Oh, and I don’t know if you’ve met two of our most important citizens but here they come. Big Jed. Little Jed. I’d like for you to meet the new math teacher at the school.”

A seventy-ish man with a few gray strands of hair and a wide smile sat next to Brandon. “Well, hey there. You must be Brandon Crane, Trevor’s brother. We shore think a lot of him. Married our pretty Mary. Showed good sense there. Welcome to the town.”

“Good to meet you, Brandon,” Little Jed said from the other side of his father. “I hear you’re doing good work at the school’s camp.”

“I don’t know about that. I think I’m just there for crowd control. Sally Forester is really doing the hard work. She’s done all the lesson plans, executed them brilliantly.”

The Jeds shared a look with Mac. Big Jed said, “Do tell.”

“I never thought Sally was doing her best work as a waitress. Although she did that well enough when she was here at Hal’s,” Little Jed said.

“She’ll make an excellent teacher when she gets her degree.”

Clearly surprised that Big Jed knew about Sally’s aspirations, Brandon’s brows rose. The Jeds chuckled at him.

Mac explained. “There’s not a lot of secrets here in Charity. We all know how much Sally wants to teach. She’s even had offers of financial help but she’s refused. She’s determined to do it all on her own. Especially determined since Paul took off on her.

Little Jed moaned and Big Jed grimaced and said, "I never did think that musician knew what he had. Never treated her right. Poor thing was bending over backwards trying to please him. If Sven there at the tavern hadn't worked with her to adjust her schedule, she wouldn't have had any income at all. That musician weren't nothing but crap as far as I'm concerned. Seeing the two girls watching and listening, Big Jed blushed and said, "Pardon my language, ladies."

"What'd I miss?" Noel Jackson, eyes bright and hair shaggy, came in from the back, standing next to Mac behind the counter.

"Noel, my boy. Glad to see you've decided to grace us with your presence. It's been busy today," Mac said.

"I'll get busy then." He smiled at the men and went to the back to get an apron and bin and start bussing tables.

The bell over the front door rang and Mac was glad to see Grace walking in. The exhaustion was out of her eyes and she smiled widely when she saw her husband.

"Excuse me fellows. Be right back."

He hurried over to Grace and kissed her. "Feeling better?"

"I am." She hugged him. "Thanks for letting me sleep this morning. I must have needed it."

He sighed, wrapping his arms around her. For some reason, he couldn't put his finger on it, her body felt . . . different to him. "I hate to see you feeling bad. How about I take you into the doctor on Monday."

"It's Fourth of July. Everything's closed."

“Tuesday, then. I want to get to the bottom of why you’ve been so sick for a while.” He kissed her head. “I want my sweet, energetic wife back.” His voice lowered as his lips went near her ear. “I missed you last night when I came to bed.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but I’m feeling better, really.”

He leaned back and studied her face. “You seem to be. But still, we’re going to the doctor’s on Tuesday.

Brandon loved the feel of the diner. It wasn’t retro as much as what it really was—a community restaurant that served good food. He was enjoying his bacon cheeseburger and salad, listening to the Jeds tell him everything there was to know about Charity.

The men were fascinating. They knew everything from the various utility agencies times and rules to the calendar of events for the little town. He bombarded them with questions about the weather, walking trails, and stores.

While he was taking a last bite of his sandwich, Big Jed surprised him by saying, “How did Sally like the dinner you cooked for her last week?” He choked down the last bite and carefully took a big swig of water.

“Yeah, Sally’ll eat most anything. What’d you cook for her?”

Brandon studied them for a moment, not sure as to what to say. “How . . . how did you two know I cooked dinner for Sally?”

They chuckled like it was a funny question.

“Son, it weren’t hard. Sally went into the hardware store to buy a plant. Bernard that works there asked her what for and she said she was going to a friend’s

apartment for supper and wanted to give it. Then Candace over in the toy store was changing the window display and saw Sally come out of her building and go across the street carrying the plant. Clyde over at the new rental office told me a few weeks ago that Trevor's brother was renting an apartment in the building that Sally was walking into."

"Yeah, but how did you know she was coming to my apartment?"

Big Jed smiled like a Cheshire cat. "You just told me, son." Little Jed chuckled.

Brandon shook his head. "You guys are tricky. I can see I'm going to have to watch out for you."

"Now we don't spread tales and we don't say nothing to hurt anyone. But Charity is our home and we feel the obligation to keep a watch on it." Big Jed sharpened his eyes and looked down his nose at Brandon. "And if we had an 'idear' that our pretty Sally was about to get hurt again, we'd intervene, you can bet your bottom dollar about that."

That brought a smile to Brandon. "It's good to know that Sally has friends like you looking out for her. I'm glad."

The Jeds looked at each other. "That was a good answer." Big Jed took a sip of his coffee, obviously pleased.

Little Jed stuck out his hand to Brandon. "Welcome to Charity."

Just a little gesture but Brandon felt like he'd been accepted. He couldn't wait to tell Sally.

Which is what he did after he left Hal's. Calling her on his cell, he said, "Hey, you busy?"

“Not really. I’ve got to go into the tavern in a few hours.”

“Come go on a walk with me. I’ve got to tell you the neatest thing that just happened.”

“Okay. Give me a few minutes. I’ll meet you by the fountain at the top of the street.”

“Got it.”

CHAPTER NINE

He walked up to the street to the fountain to wait. A grin formed on his face as he thought about the part the fountain had played in his brother's romance with Mary. He sat on the edge and watched the water flow into the base. The more he lived here, the more he could see that moving to Charity had been the right decision. The people were nice, he worked in a good community, and—

“Hi.”

He looked up to see a lovely redhead smiling at him, waiting to go on a walk with him. Yes, it had been a very good decision.

“Hi. You look nice.”

She chuckled, looking down at her jeans and “Imagine Dragons” tee shirt. “Okay, if you say so. Now tell me, what's happened to put that smile on your face?”

So much! “Let's walk and I'll tell you.” He took her arm and wrapped it around his as they started down the street into one of the beautiful neighborhoods of Charity.

They walked and talked, Brandon telling her all about his conversation with the Jeds at Hal's Place. She laughed, leaning into him, squeezing his arm. It felt good.

Brandon hadn't thought much about the kiss last week. Well, that wasn't exactly right. He's *tried* not to think much about the kiss. It had been nice, wonderful, but he wasn't looking for anything other than friendship. Nothing like an ill-advised romance to ruin things.

They talked about camp, about the kids, shared stories of their past with each other. Nice and comfortable. But she seemed, like him, not to revisit the kiss. Thank God.

“If you got the seal of approval from the Jeds you’re golden in town. One thing I know about them, they are loyal to the death. I could tell you stories.”

“I believe it. They mentioned the town sorta shuts down for the parade on Monday. Why’s that?”

Sally chuckled. “Everyone’s involved with the parade—either participating or watching. It’s a big deal here.”

“All the participants from here in town, then?”

“And the surrounding area. I think the twirlers studio is from down the street. And the local Chic-fil-a is technically outside of Charity. They hand out coupons for free sandwiches so they’re a real popular float.”

Brandon laughed. “Sounds great.”

“It really is a sweet parade. Are you going to watch from your balcony?”

“Hmm. Not sure. I could, but I might rather roam the streets, be in the midst of the activity. Where are you going to be? Are you a participant or attendee?”

“I was a participant one year, helping out the cheerleaders from the school. I didn’t like it.”

“Why not?”

Serious, she said, “I couldn’t see the parade.” He laughed again. “I discovered I’d much rather watch the parade than walk in it.”

“So you’ll be watching?”

“Yes. Then later that day I’ll go into the Tavern but I’ll finish work just before the fireworks at nine. I don’t want to miss those.”

“Wow, fireworks. Where do they shoot them?”

“Over the lake. It’s beautiful. But you’ve got to get to the banks of the lake early to grab a seat. It gets crowded really fast.”

“Sounds great. How about I meet up with you?”

She gave him a little grin. “You sure? You’re not afraid the Jeds will find out and question you about our being together?”

He knew she was joking but it didn’t stop his heart from thudding. Were they becoming a couple? Did he want that? Was he even ready for it? He took a deep breath and reminded himself, one day at a time. “Well, like they said, they don’t spread tales or say anything to hurt people.”

“Okay. You wander about during the parade and enjoy yourself. I’ll see you at a quarter until nine. I usually put a blanket down by the lake, on the side by the movie theatre.”

“Great. I’ll look forward to it.” They stopped, their eyes meeting. The desire to lean in and kiss her was strong. He could tell from her sharpened eyes she was dealing with the same trouble.

“Well. I’ll let you get ready for work.”

“Okay. If you’re not busy tonight, come in. I’ll give you the employee discount. And all the bar nuts you want.”

“What a deal. We’ll see. I promised Trevor and Mary I’d see a movie with them. Maybe afterward.”

They stood back at the fountain. She smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

Sweet. "See you."

"Yeah. See ya."

What had he gotten himself into?

She looked for him all evening. She knew it was crazy, he had his own life, he was spending time with his family. That was important.

The front door opened and her eyes searched for . . . not him.

"You okay tonight?" Sven asked.

"Fine. Nice crowd tonight."

"Yeah. The town's filled with people in for the holiday weekend. Nice for business." The front door opened again and she glanced to see who was coming in.

"You sure nothing's wrong? You seem to be looking for someone."

"No. Not at all, it's just . . . Yes. I am."

Sven grinned and she again wondered why she couldn't fall for the good-looking, sweet man. "Is it that guy whose drink you spit into when I wasn't looking?"

"I . . . I . . . I need to take this order out."

He chuckled. "Just be careful, honey. It's a fine line between hate and love."

She thought about his words for the next hour. The idea of ever falling in love again was not in her plans. Was she doing just that?

No, they were friends. Associates. That's all.

The door opened and there he was. She reprimanded her fluttery heart and took a breath. His eyes found hers and he smiled. More flutters. *Stop it!* She waved and at her first free moment, walked over to greet him.

“Hi. Where are Mary and Trevor? They didn’t come with you?” She’d half been hoping they’d serve as a buffer between them.

“No. They’re going back to New York in the morning and wanted to get a good night’s sleep.”

“Why are they going before the fourth?”

“They have a few parties they need to check on.” He frowned. “And Mary didn’t seem overly thrilled to see the parade.” Sally smiled. Had to be because Mary’d been in charge of a memorable Christmas parade a few years back.

“Well, I’ll just go and get your drink. And your bar nuts.”

When she approached Sven, he was grinning from ear to ear. “Hey, look who’s here. How about I get his drink and you take your break. You could sit with him for a while.”

“I don’t want to leave you in the lurch.”

“No problem, sweetness. Shari can take over your tables. Besides, you haven’t had a break since you clocked in. I didn’t mention it because you seemed so full of nervous energy.” His eyes went to Brandon’s table. “Now I see why.”

“Will you stop it?” She took a breath and waited for Brandon’s drink. He slid it over to her, that same smug grin on his face. “I think I will take that break after all. My feet are killing me.”

“Have at it.”

She waited a beat and said, "Next time, I'm going to spit in your drink." He had the nerve to laugh out loud.

After setting the drink and nuts in front of him, she surprised him by sitting on the other side of the booth. "I get the drink, nuts, and the waitress? Wow. I really like this place."

"It's my break. Do you mind?"

"Absolutely not. Here, have some nuts."

"Thanks. We've been busy tonight. I've got another hour yet and I'm already tired and hungry."

"Really? Well, here. Take a sip." He handed over his beer and she couldn't resist taking a deep drink. "Hey, not all of it."

"Oh, sorry." She took one more sip and smiling handed the drink back over. "So how was the movie?"

"Good. I guess. It was one of the comic book movies. I can see the appeal but the stories all seem so formulaic."

"I think that's the attraction of them. Good versus evil. The good guys have to learn to get along. They do and save the world. Perfect comic book stuff."

"You sound like an expert." He leaned over the table. "Who's your favorite comic book character?"

Her smile was slow and wide. "Who do you think? Wonder Woman."

"Hmm." He narrowed his eyes, studied her. "You remind me a little of her, actually."

Sally laughed. "And who's your favorite character?"

He took a minute to think. “Probably Ironman. He’s smart, savvy. Uses a lot of mathematics, actually.”

“I never thought about that. I guess he does.”

Brandon took a sip and nodded to the bar. “I thought you’d say Thor since you, in fact, work with him.”

She followed his gaze and laughed out loud. “Oh, Sven will get a kick out of that. I call him the gentle giant. He’s so much nicer and kinder than Thor would ever think of being.”

“You and he ever dated?”

“No.” To his raised brows, she said, “No sparks.”

“Ah.” He took another drink. Shrugging, he said, “Would you like to see the movie tomorrow night?”

Her eyes widened. “You just saw it. You want to go again?”

“With you? Yes. Wonder Woman isn’t in it but there are a few other strong women you might like. We could get a slice of pizza afterward if you—”

“Yes.” Her heart practically leapt in her chest. “I’d like to.”

“Great. How about I come by your apartment around six tomorrow night.”

“I’d love it. Now I’d better get back to work.” She stood and watched him take one more sip.

He stood as well, leaving a bill on the table. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow night, then.”

“Yeah. See you then.” She watched him leave, feeling as giddy as a young schoolgirl with her first crush. Chuckling at the bar caught her attention and she turned to see Sven laughing, shaking his head.

“You are so not Thor,” she mumbled under her breath.

She waited for Brandon to buy the tickets and was happy to see Kelsey and her family walking up. “Hey, how are you guys doing?”

“Great, Sally. Dad’s taking us to the movies. Then an ice cream cone at Hal’s.”

“We’re seeing the new superhero movie,” Kelsey’s little sister Bella said, her pretty blue eyes bright with excitement.

“So am I. I can’t wait.”

Marcus slapped his hand on his son’s back. “We’re celebrating. Justin made it on the local swim team.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Yeah. Ben showed me some moves that helped me shave some time off. Hey, there he is now.” Justin pointed to the family crossing the street, walking to the theatre.

“Well, how about that,” Sally said. “I guess great minds think alike. Hi, Faith. You guys going to the new Marvel movie?”

Faith pushed back her mass of hair out of her face. “Yes. I’ve had a hard time keeping them away until I could bring them.”

“Hey, Kelsey.”

“Hey, Rachel.” Kelsey walked over and started talking to the girl.

Justin and Ben fist-pumped. Faith's youngest Josh eyed little Bella.

"Faith, I hope you know Ben helped Justin get on the swim team. You should be real proud of him," Marcus said.

She smiled and said, "I am. Thanks."

"Hey, you guys better get your tickets before it's sold out," Sally said.

"Thanks. Hi, Brandon. Good to see you."

"You too, Faith. Hi, Marcus. You guys seeing the Marvel movie?"

"Yeah, but I guess we'd better get in line fast. See you inside." Marcus and Faith walked to stand in line, their kids following them.

"Hmm," Sally said, watching as Marcus and Faith spoke in line. She turned to see Brandon smirking at her. "What?"

"Are you going to tell the Jeds all about this? I'll bet you're part of their Intel."

She chuckled. "No, I just think it's interesting. Faith is a widow and Marcus is divorced. Their children have seemed to bond, which I think is a good thing. Whether anything between them develops, I think it is good for both families to be friends."

"I agree with you there. You ready to go in?"

"Sure." He took her hand and led her in.

They bought a large popcorn and set it between them. She bought a small bottle of water and he a small cola, which was humongous. They smiled and waved at the Hamiltons and Carringtons as they entered the theatre, sitting together.

The movie started with a bang, lots of explosions and battles. Their hands went back and forth into the tub of popcorn, several times touching each other.

About midway through the movie, they stopped making a pretense of brushing against the other's fingers and just held hands. Sally was supremely happy, not really paying attention to the rest of the movie.

The only places open when they left the theatre were Hal's and the Tavern. They walked slowly down the street, hand-in-hand, neither speaking. The lights were dimmed, the music low.

He walked her to the door of her apartment and stood staring at her, Sally could hardly breathe. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. Her hands automatically went around his neck, pulling him closer. They kissed again and again, Sally wishing it never had to end.

Finally, they had to come up for air. His eyes went to hers and he swallowed hard. "Sally. I . . . you . . ." his lips went back to hers, this time hungry, as if he couldn't get enough of her. Her head spun, her body tingled. It was more, more than she'd ever had and she felt the fall as surely if she had been on one of the local theme parks' rollercoasters.

"I want to see you again . . . socially. Regularly. Do you have a problem with that?" His gray eyes were intense, serious. Sincere.

She couldn't speak. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She shook her head.

"Good. I'll look for you tomorrow night. Before the fireworks." They kissed briefly before he gave her a last smile and walked away.

And Sally knew. She'd gone and fallen in love again.

CHAPTER TEN

The fourth day of July dawned bright and hot. Brandon took out a chilled bottle of water to take with him outside. Glancing out from his window he saw people already setting out chairs along the parade route. Children and dogs dressed in their red, white, and blue best. Flags flew everywhere and patriotic music played on the speakers. He had a momentary thought he was living in a real Mayberry.

Walking outside and through the crowds, he could feel the excitement building. He saw a few of the kids he'd met at camp and greeted them and their parents. He saw the Carringtons and waved to them.

As he was admiring the roving ice cream wagon that Noel Jackson was manning, he heard his name called.

He turned and froze. "Cammie Edwards, is that you? What are you doing here?" He went to the woman and hugged her warmly.

"The school isn't going to be the same without you. Thought I'd take a few days to come and check out what you've found."

Cammie Edwards taught biology at the junior high school he'd come from. They'd had a mild flirtation. She'd wanted more, he had not, but had parted as friends. He'd admit she was pretty, a petite brunette with stunning hazel eyes. Her heavy southern accent, so strange in New York, could always put a smile on his face.

"You'd fit right in with your accent. You came at the right time. They're having a Fourth of July Parade."

"I see. It's all real down home kinda stuff."

Brandon chuckled. "That's what I'd call it too. Come on, let's find a good spot to watch it." He took her hand and found a spot on one corner as the parade moved onto Main Street.

"When did you get here?"

"Last night. I'm staying at the hotel here in town. Maybe we could get together later. Unless you have other plans."

His mind went to Sally. He couldn't wait to see her tonight, to hold her in his arms again. With a friend in from out of town, he wasn't sure what to do. "Ah, well, I have plans tonight but I could show you around Charity after the parade."

"I'd love it." She smiled her pearly whites at him and took his arm. "I can't wait to see this little ole parade. It's a charming town, Brandon."

"Just wait. You ain't seen nothing yet."

At precisely nine o'clock, Mayor Scott welcomed everyone, his sweet wife Ellen beside him. Sally sighed at the two of them, so in love. She hadn't told Brandon but she preferred to watch the parade from her balcony. It was the best view in the house without the pressure of being around people. She'd get enough of that later at the tavern.

The national anthem was played and everyone joined in singing. The mayor officially started the parade and a local dignitary took over, giving a play-by-play as the parade made it to Main Street.

As always, the boy scouts led the parade and she chuckled at the younger ones, proudly waving. Faith's youngest child, Josh was walking with them and she

smiled. Knowing Faith, all three of her kids would be in some part of the parade. She wondered how the single mother did it.

Sally surveyed the cheering crowd, picking out friends and acquaintances. She wondered where Brandon was in the masses. Surely, he'd enjoy wandering, soaking up the ambiance.

Then a man caught her attention, near the corner of Main and Birch. It looked a lot like Brandon but this man was with a woman. A very pretty brunette who seemed enchanted with her date. The man turned to her and smiled. His sunglasses hid his eyes and Sally looked closer.

Frustrated, she went back inside and grabbed a pair of binoculars. Her heart raced and she told herself she was getting excited over nothing. The way he'd kissed her last night, there was no way that he'd be with another woman this morning.

She focused in with the binoculars, trying to see if she knew the man. He put his arm around the woman and laughed at something she said. Still, Sally couldn't tell who he was.

The local senior citizen group went by waving, every one of them using fans with mists attached. Apparently the mist went on the guy she was watching and he took off his glasses to wipe. His head was bent and all she could see was a sandy-haired top. "Come on, come on. Look up."

Her heart was almost pounding out of her chest because she knew. She just knew. And because she knew, she didn't feel bad about spying.

The brunette reached up and kissed his cheek and he raised his head. Her heart stopped. She froze. A lump formed in her throat.

It was Brandon, snuggling up with a strange woman on the streets of Charity. Before nightfall she'd probably get the scoop from any number of people. She could already feel the sympathy from her friends and neighbors.

Just like when Paul left, she felt the emotion rise up in her. A sob wanted to escape and she forbade it. She shook her head in confusion. Ever since they'd started working together at camp, she'd thought he was different. He'd been kind, considerate. He'd genuinely seemed interested in her and her world. Was it all an act? What did she really know about the man? Just that he was Trevor Crane's brother. That didn't mean anything.

She had to sit down before she collapsed. The overwhelming sadness began to swirl in her and she was afraid she was going to faint. This was ridiculous. She'd been with Paul for over three years so of course she would have been filled with grief when he walked out.

But Brandon was . . . She sighed. The man was perfect, or so she'd thought. He was everything she could have ever wanted in a man, the exact kind of man she should be with. And when he kissed her, to say angels sang was an understatement.

How could he cuddle up with another woman? Suddenly, a flurry of rage took the place of grief. She was not going to be a victim again. If he wanted to see other women he'd have to tell her in person to her face. Not get a phone call ending their relationship, like Paul.

She brushed her hair, her teeth, put on a little makeup, and headed out. The noise was loud when she exited the building, the crowd thick on the sidewalk. With great care she moved through the hordes of people until she'd made her way to the

curb of the street. Unfortunately, the parade was going down the street so she didn't see how she'd be able to cross it. But if she waited until the parade was over, she might miss them.

Officers from the local police department were coming down the street on horseback. The big, sleek animals pranced to the delight of the crowd, the policemen holding their reins tightly. Maybe she could cut behind them while the crowd was watching the horses. She'd have to be fast because coming up behind them was a group of cheerleaders, excited, doing cartwheels and handstands. She saw Rachel Hamilton among them and remembered Faith was a volunteer with the group.

The horses took a few more steps forward and she saw her chance. She edged onto the street and started crossing when one of the horses backed up, almost hitting her. She gasped and jogged back, almost hitting a cheerleader that was finishing off a roundabout.

"Hey, Ms. Forester," Rachel called out.

She waved and wasted no time in running to the other side of the street, slightly missing being creamed by a girl doing a multitude of flips. She held a hand over her heart and took a few extra breaths. Then meshed back into the crowd and walked down to the end of the street.

At the corner, the crowd was heavier and she found it harder to edge over to where Brandon and his "date" were standing. The toy store float was passing and several employees were throwing out miniature brightly colored balls. The crowd around her grew more animated, cheering to have a ball thrown to them, reaching

over and in front of her. She continued her quest, ignoring when one of the balls bounced off her head.

She edged the last couple of feet until she was right behind Brandon. And then didn't know what to say or what to do. Should she just casually bump into him? "Oh, how are you? Didn't see you there." Or should she take a more offensive stance? "I was just going to meet a friend at the restaurant at the end of the street. My handsome, French male friend." No, petty. And an obvious lie.

When she heard the brunette's question, she nearly attacked the woman. "Brandon. Why don't you show me your apartment?"

Her hands went up and she had to hold herself back from pulling the woman's perfectly coiffured hair from its roots.

"Sure, Cammie. Right after the parade."

Sure? He was taking her to his apartment? Her hands dropped and her heart sank into her shoes.

"The town is amazing," he said. "I have a great bakery close to my place. You know how I like croissants." The brunette did. She didn't. And that made her even more miserable.

"They have a nice little diner across the street there. If you want to find out anything about Charity, that's the place to go." Brandon smiled. "And the Town Tavern serves great drinks. I especially like to go there."

"Why? I've heard they spit in your drink if you're an idiot to the servers."

Brandon jerked around and saw Sally standing behind him. The smile on his face grew wider. "Hi. I thought you weren't going to be here."

"Apparently."

His smile faded at the anger mixed with sadness on her face. "Sally? Something wrong?"

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend here?" Sally stepped forward, her height towering over Cammie's.

"Yeah, sure. This is Cammie Edwards. She's a teacher from the school in New York that I used to work at. She's—"

"How nice. I'm Sally. A barmaid at the Town Tavern. Come over sometime and I'll give you a mimosa you'll never forget."

What was going on here? Why was she so mad? He dropped his arm from Cammie and wondered if Sally was possibly jealous. Maybe if he let them get to know each other. "Cammie, Sally's studying to be a teacher. She's great with children."

"Yeah, great with kids. Unfortunately, not so great with adults. I have the habit of choosing the wrong men. My husband of a few years? Left me for another woman, younger and prettier. He didn't even have the guts to tell me face to face. He called me. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Sally, what are you doing? Wait, I thought you said it was mutual."

“It’s been hard getting over him. I mean, who wants to be dumped like that? Then I thought I’d met a nice guy but again I was completely mistaken. I guess some people aren’t meant to have relationships.”

“Uh . . . I suppose.”

“Sally. I think maybe you and I had better have a talk.”

“No need. You’re entertaining a woman. You wouldn’t want to leave her alone. One of the many handsome men here in Charity may steal her.”

Cammie looked around, her eyes wide. “Really?”

A slow burn was building in Brandon’s gut. “Sally, we’re going to have that talk. Now.” He took her arm and as the parade continued he pulled her back into an alley before letting go.

“Now, will you please tell me what’s going on?”

“Me? Tell you? You’re here on Main Street canoodling with another woman and you want an explanation from me?”

“Canoodling? Canoodling?” He couldn’t help laughing. “Wow. Don’t think I’ve ever heard that word in a real conversation. I never realized standing on the street talking with a woman could be described as canoodling.”

“Call it what you want, I could see you all the way from my balcony. You and that . . . brunette, your eyes on each other, touching each other. I don’t need anyone to tell me what that means.”

“It means we’re friends. Talking. I had no idea she was in town. We ran into each other and she wanted to know about Charity.”

Sally's hands went up as if to wipe a chalkboard clean. "Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. A woman. Friend of yours. Just happens to show up in a small Central Florida town. You just ran into each other and she's asking you to show her your apartment. Nothing about that sounds the least bit questionable to you?"

"She's a friend."

"There was never anything between the two of you?"

He hesitated. She'd never believe that they had been involved but parted as friends. It was a losing conversation. "What does it matter, it's in the past.

"And while we're talking about the past, why didn't you tell me the truth about your divorce? You couldn't trust me with the truth?"

"Trust? Trust! You want to talk about trust, which, yeah I'll admit, comes hard for me. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you my husband cheated on me, that somehow I wasn't enough for him, but it's not something I like to share.

"Then I see you, someone who just last night says he wants to date me, and you're with another woman so if I make comparisons to what Paul did to me I think it's only normal. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I've had enough of people for a while."

"Sally."

"No, your date is waiting to see your apartment. Be sure to give her a tour. Play a few songs on your clarinet. Hopefully she's not scarred by a former husband."

"Sally, don't go away like this." Before he could reach out and stop her, she'd blended back into the crowd, out of sight.

He felt like scum. She'd completely gotten the wrong idea.

“Brandon? Is something wrong?”

He turned to see Cammie standing near the alley. “It’s just . . .” He glanced in the direction Sally had left.

“You should have told me you had a girlfriend. I didn’t know.”

“Well, she’s not exactly . . .” He couldn’t finish the sentence. Because he knew. Somehow during their contentious first meeting, the working at camp, the walks through the streets, the kisses, she had come to be special to him. Not an acquaintance, not just a friend, but something unique. When he thought of her, his mind conjured up a redheaded Wonder Woman, braving the world, reaching for what she wanted, fighting all the forces that would come against her.

“Yes. Yes, she is. She is my girlfriend. And I may have just blown it with her.”

“Is it me? Do you want me to talk to her?”

“No. Thanks. I’ve got to figure this out on my own.”

“Well, okay. In the meantime, I’m going to wander through the town.”

Cammie kissed his cheek. “Good luck, honey.”

“Thanks.” He watched her walk away and when he turned, almost walked into Big Jed, Little Jed, and Pauline.

“A word with you?” Big Jed’s expression left no question as to what he wanted to say.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brandon remembered being taken to the wood shed by his father. That feeling was similar to the looks all three were giving him.

“Look, it’s not what you think. She’s a friend from New York. I had no idea she was coming. I wouldn’t hurt Sally, you’ve got to believe me.”

“Wish I could. But it’s hard when we all seen her so upset,” Little Jed said.

“Couldn’t you see what she was feeling for you?” Pauline asked.

“After what she’s been through I hate to see her go through it again,” Big Jed added.

And that was like a spur in his shoe. “Speaking of which. Sally said it was a mutual agreement between her and Paul. She didn’t trust me enough to tell me he left her? She lied to me.”

“What difference does that make?”

“It makes a huge difference. I don’t like to be lied to. My ex-wife did plenty of that. Why would I be okay with the woman I’m involved with lying to me?”

“Brandon, she just wanted to save face,” Pauline said.

“When we first met, maybe. But she’s had plenty of opportunity to tell me about it and hasn’t.” He shook his head, put his hands on hips. “You know, I was all set to go over. To apologize for upsetting her by being nice to my friend but now I don’t think I should. I can be upset for being lied to. Maybe she’d better think about that. Now excuse me.” He walked away, making his way through the crowd to his building.

He had to clear his mind but how. Usually exercise was the thing. He had to get out of the hordes of people downtown so he pulled out his bike and took it out the back entrance to his building. He set a course for the north part of the town, where the larger estate homes were.

After a half hour, he rode past his brother's in-laws' house. To his surprise, he saw Trevor leaving the house and setting a suitcase in the trunk of a car.

"Hey! Thought you guys left yesterday."

Trevor glanced over and waved. "We were going to but we decided to hang out today and take a later flight. Should get there in time to hit the parties tonight."

"That's great. Just awesome."

He leaned against the car and studied Brandon. "Something bothering you?"

"Why would you say that?"

" 'That's great. Just awesome'? You look stressed. And it seemed to me that when you were bothered by something you always went for a long bike ride."

Irritated, he scowled. "That's not always true. I like to ride."

"Uh-huh. What's wrong? Something about Charity?"

"You could say. A female member of the community to be specific."

Trevor folded his arms and grinned. "What happened? Did you and Sally have a little spat?"

"How did . . . oh, stupid question. I suppose you and Mary are good friends with the Jeds."

"The best of friends. They told us first. Thought it was their civic duty to let your brother know you were interested in and I quote 'pretty Sally.'" Brandon

groaned, dropping his head. Trevor chuckled. "Hey, don't let it get to you. You should have been here when I was, in their opinion, sniffing around their 'pretty Mary.' It was awful. So, brother, I feel your pain." His voice softened when he said, "What happened?"

Brandon sighed and standing his bike on its kickstand walked over to lean against the car next to his brother. "I'm confused. I come to Charity to start over. To find a good school, pursue my passion of teaching. I thought maybe sometime, years from now, I might find someone that I'm compatible with, someone that I could make a life with."

"Uh-huh."

"I did not expect to meet a beautiful, snarky redhead that invades my every waking hour. And most of my dreams at night."

"Snarky, huh?"

"All of a sudden, I'm kissing her like there's no tomorrow. Then wanting to kiss her again. I want to spend time with her, whenever, doing whatever, it doesn't matter."

"Sounds okay so far."

"Then out of the blue, I'm just showing a friend around and this beautiful redhead turns on me like I've committed some kind of unpardonable sin or something. And during our argument I found that she lied to me. Lied about her divorce. Not really important the specific details but you know how I can't stand to be lied to."

"I see. Now what—"

Trevor stopped talking when the front door opened and Mary came out with another suitcase. She stumbled when she saw Brandon and her thoughtful expression changed, her eyes narrowing, her lips thinning. She didn't say a word but handed the suitcase to her husband and with one more scowl at Brandon, went back inside.

Brandon sighed. "I guess she's already heard."

"That would be a good guess."

He leaned his head back. "What am I going to do, Trev? The whole town is going to hate me because I somehow hurt Sally."

"Is that your biggest worry? That the town won't like you?"

He sighed deeply. "No. I hurt her. And I still can't figure out exactly what happened."

"Let's review. You were showing a . . . 'friend' around town. Someone that you were once romantically involved."

"Yes, but a friend that I have absolutely no interest in being involved with again."

"Okay, but does Sally know that?"

"I tried to tell her."

"So let's see it from her perspective for a moment. Her husband left her for another woman, just took off after several years of marriage. He didn't even have the guts to face her. Now she sees you, the man she's . . . what are you two exactly?"

"I suppose you could say we're seeing each other."

“Okay. She sees the man she’s seeing with another woman. She hasn’t been told that said woman would be in town or hanging out with said man.”

“I didn’t know, how could I tell her?”

“Again, we’re looking at this from her perspective. When she saw you with this woman, could she have possibly remembered the betrayal of her husband?”

Brandon hesitated. “Okay. But I’m not that guy.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“Well—”

“Did you take her in your arms and tell her you’d never betray her. Not like that?”

“No.” He sighed. “But she should have trusted me. Just like she didn’t trust me with the truth about her divorce.”

“Like you didn’t trust the rest of us about your divorce.”

That thoroughly shut him up.

“I remember how it went. First it was, ‘Lorraine is taking a trip to Germany. She’s always wanted to go and I couldn’t get away.’ Then it was ‘Lorraine is staying a while in Germany.’ After several months you avoided questions about Lorraine until Mom finally cornered you and you had no choice but to say you two were separated. I suspect you were probably already divorced at that time.”

Brandon didn’t say anything.

“Why didn’t you tell us the whole truth to begin with? Didn’t you trust us? Your family, the people who cared most about you?”

“Okay, you’ve made your point.”

“What’s the difference between what you did and what Sally did?”

Brandon looked to the skies as if seeking answers. “This is all so confusing, Trev.”

“I don’t think so. Seems pretty clear to me. You didn’t expect to have feelings for Sally but you do. Big time. She has those same feelings for you and now is doubting herself, wondering if she was foolish to.” He crossed his arms and waited a beat.

“Seems to me that perhaps the answer to the problem would be if you both just came out and confessed what you’re feeling.”

Brandon’s gut tightened with the thought. “I don’t know, Trev. I’m not sure I can.”

“Well, think about it. You know you don’t have to rush into anything. But you do need to figure out a way to work with her, see her in town and get along. That’s going to take a good sit-down discussion.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Trevor slung his arm around him. “She knows you’re not Paul but don’t forget. She’s not Lorraine.”

When Sally was depressed, no make that devastated, she had the terrible habit of turning to sugar. So she headed to Hal’s for one of their famous milkshakes. As the parade was just ending, she avoided the crowds coming in the front door and using her position as former employee and personal friend of the owners, went in the back service door.

The kitchen was busy. The morning cooks Sal and Loretta Spinucci were busy scrambling eggs and frying bacon. As tempting as that was, she was craving the sweet, creaming flavors of a thick, rich chocolate shake.

When Loretta turned to place a plate for pickup, she saw Sally and smiled. "Look who is here. You need breakfast this morning? Pancakes are good, just hint of cinnamon." Her thick Italian accent always made Sally chuckle.

"Hmph. Should be hint of garlic," her husband Sal muttered at the stove.

Not wanting to start a war between the two, she said, "No thank you, guys. Is anyone on the fountain yet?"

As if in answer to her question, Noel came from the front carrying a bin and washrag. "Morning, Sally. Did you see the parade? It was great, wasn't it?"

A pain shot through her heart. "Yeah. Great. Hey, I know you're busy but do you suppose you could make me up a chocolate shake?"

His eyebrows shot up surely wondering why she wanted a shake at just before ten o'clock in the morning. "Sure. Let me just put this down."

She could feel eyes on her. Loretta took her hand. "What is wrong, *caro*?"

"Nothing, I . . ." She blew out a breath. "I'll be okay. I just need a little boost for the day." She glanced through the kitchen window out to the busy street. "It looks like the town will be packed today."

Loretta studied her for a moment, then took her hand. "You know, *caro*, I am here if you need anyone, both Sal and me."

Sally squeezed her hand. "Thank you."

“Hey, you want that shake to go or for here?” Noel asked, striding toward the fountain.

“To go, please.” If one were drowning her sorrows in sugar, one would definitely want to be alone in one’s apartment.

She sat at a table to wait and Loretta went back to cooking. She watched the actions between the couple, married for almost thirty-nine years. They moved in sync, hardly speaking but communicating in other ways. Sal handed the salt to Loretta before she asked for it. She squeezed his shoulder as she passed him, going to the refrigerator. He handed her a plate to put on the pass-through and winked at her. They argued over the amount of olive oil for the Bolognese sauce they were making for dinner. But even in the argument there was a respect, a love that dominated.

Voices sounded as the kitchen door swung open. Mac and Grace entered, having their own . . . discussion.

“I’m fine, Mac. I don’t need a doctor.”

“Yes, you do. And I’m not going to relax until you see one. Oh, hi Sally.”

“Hey, guys. Hope you don’t mind. I’m buying a milkshake. To help me get through the day,” she added in case she got a look from them.

“Can’t blame you for that. It’s a madhouse out there,” Grace said. “Great for business but makes for a tiring day.”

“Another reason I think you shouldn’t be waiting tables today.”

“Mac, there’s absolutely no reason I can’t work. I’m feeling fine.”

“You went to bed at eight o’clock last night, exhausted. That’s not normal.”

“It’s probably just the lingering effects of that bug I had.”

Mac seemed to consider and said, “Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. You can work today if I can take you to the doctor tomorrow.”

She rolled her eyes at him and said, “Deal. You happy?”

“Not completely.” He grinned at her and kissed her gently.

A longing started in Sally’s soul at the sweet interaction. To have someone care so much about you, to love you, what must that be like? Without thought, her mind pictured Brandon. He had been sweet with her, tender. Would he insist she go to a doctor if she wasn’t feeling well and then kiss her when she agreed?

The pain of seeing him with another woman returned. Thank goodness Noel returned with her shake and as she pulled out a bill from her pocket to give him, she thanked him. She should have left to go to the loneliness of her apartment, to complete her pity party, but the atmosphere in the diner kitchen was so warm, so loving, she couldn’t bring herself to leave.

Mac and Grace stood closely, going over the week’s work schedule, occasionally chuckling, speaking in quiet tones. Sal and Loretta continued their own secret communication.

When Ellen and Howard Scott came in the back, their eyes holding each other, she thought the love would simply explode, pushing her clear out of the room. What did these couples have that she seemed incapable of having in any relationship? It was never there with Paul, she’d admit that. She’d been so blown away by his talent, his singing, the beautiful songs he sang to her. It had been all superficial.

There was nothing superficial in these couples. All had weathered storms to their relationships and had determined the relationship was more important than anything else.

And she wanted that.

When Paul had called to end things, she'd been blindsided. But not totally surprised. There hadn't seemed any reason to pursue him to work things out. It just seemed to be over. The horrible truth hit her, she hadn't fought for the relationship. Not that it could have been saved, but she'd just given in.

Like she seemed to be doing with Brandon.

She took a deep sip of her milkshake, letting the richness coat her throat. He wasn't Paul. During her time with Brandon he'd been completely respectful. Kind. Honorable.

Did that jive with him seeking another woman to share the parade with this morning? No. She'd listened to his explanation but did she really listen? No. She'd set him in the same category as Paul. Was that fair to Brandon? Of course, no.

But what should she do about it? She'd made a complete fool of herself in front of him. Maybe she just wasn't ready to have a mature, serious relationship.

And that was probably the most depressing thought of the day.

She took another deep sip through her straw and left the diner to go back to her apartment for that pity party.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sally was on her feet for four hours before she could even think about taking a quick break. The tavern was packed with a line waiting outside. Good for business but completely exhausting. Maybe she'd skip the fireworks and go straight to bed.

Turning to a clean page on her pad, she hurried over to a small table to get another order. And came to a sudden stop when she saw a pretty brunette waiting for her. Cammie.

"Uh . . . good evening. What can I get for you?"

"Hello. It's Sally, right? I've heard so much about the clam chowder. I'd like a cup, please. And a glass of wine to go with it. Whatever you'd suggest."

"Okay." She turned to get the order, too tired and sad to even contemplate doing anything to her drink.

When she set the soup and drink in front of the woman, she said, "Have you got a few minutes, Sally? I'd love to talk to you. Just for a moment."

That was the last thing she should do but being the masochist that she was, she couldn't resist hearing all this woman had to say about her and Brandon. "Sure."

She sat, ready to hear about her and Brandon's plans. "You having a good time in Charity?"

"Yes, I am. It's a lovely town. I know now why Brandon's been so excited about it."

"Yeah. It's great."

Cammie took a sip of her wine. "That's wonderful." She set the soup away and folded her hands on the table. "Sally, I think you've got the wrong impression of things."

"Oh? And what would be the true impression of things?" This should be good.

"While Brandon and I . . . spent time together in the past, it was never serious. There was never that special spark, connection between us. Pity. Anyway, I know it probably seems odd my just showing up today." Sally inwardly laughed. "I wanted to see this town that Brandon had left New York for. And I'll admit, I wanted to make sure there couldn't be anything between us." She chuckled sadly. "Brandon is such an incredible man, I'd probably leave New York and come here if he were interested in me. But two minutes after I saw him I knew he wasn't."

"Why would you say that? It looked pretty chummy from my point of view." She winced. "Not that I was . . . spying or anything, I was just looking at the people from my balcony and saw you." It wasn't sounding any better. "Not that I watch people from my balcony. I mean, I do but it's not . . . well . . ." She sighed. "Okay. I saw you from my balcony and was insanely jealous."

Cammie chuckled. "Believe me, there was no reason. It was just two friends watching a parade."

As much as it pleased her to hear that, Sally wasn't so sure it changed anything between her and Brandon. "Well, thank you for clearing that up. Now I'd better get back to work."

"You can't possibly think Brandon would betray you."

She sighed heavily. "No. Not really."

“Sally. I don’t know you well. I’m a stranger, really. But if I may give an outsider’s viewpoint.”

She narrowed her eyes, wondering what the woman saw. “Okay.”

“I think you should think about two things. Why you were jealous. And Brandon’s reaction.” Her sad smile returned. “He didn’t waste any time in trying to make things right with you. And telling me that you two were involved.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes. I’ve known Brandon Crane for years. Saw him go through the insanity with Lorraine. I know when he’s totally committed, totally in. He feels that for you. Whether he’s admitted it to himself yet or not. Believe me, that would be a terrible thing to waste and if I were you, I wouldn’t be foolish enough to throw it away.”

The conversation with Cammie stayed with her for the rest of her shift. Did she and Brandon have something that could grow into what she’d seen in the couples at Hal’s Place? Her heart beat rapidly with the thought.

But they had to talk first.

So, she’d go grab a spot for the fireworks and hoped he showed up. As she was setting down her blanket, she saw a huge quilt next to her with familiar faces. “Hey, there,” she said to the Hamiltons and Carringtons.

“Hi, Sally,” Faith called back.

“I saw Josh and Rachel in the parade. Where was Ben?”

Faith laughed. “He was on the Charity School booth, dressed like a scientist with his beakers, vials, tubes, and dry ice pouring out smoke. It was great.”

“I’m sorry I missed it. Hey, Kelsey. How’d you like the parade?”

“Fun. Mrs. Hamilton showed us the best place to stand. She’s letting us sit here to watch the fireworks.”

“It’s the best spot. You’ll love them.”

Faith walked over and sitting next to her, touched her arm. “You okay?”

Sally shook her head in wonder. “This town. Yes, I’m fine. It was . . . just a misunderstanding.”

“Good.” She rubbed her shoulder and then went back to her children and the Carrington family.

All Sally had to do now was to wait and see if Brandon showed up. To be honest, she didn’t hold out much hope. He was mad she hadn’t told him the truth about her and Paul, and he had every right to be. Well, if he didn’t show she’d find him first thing in the morning and . . . apologize. For everything.

In the meantime she was going to enjoy the amazing fireworks that Charity put on every Fourth of July.

A glance at her watch told her it was five minutes before the show. She swallowed hard, trying to push away the disappointment that he wasn’t there. Her eyes went to the dark skies, watching the stars twinkle above. She’d not think about what she didn’t have but what she did have—a home, friends, a goal, health, the stars above.

“Is this spot taken?”

Her head lowered to see Brandon standing in front of her, a hopeful expression on his face. Her heart gave a leap of hope. “Ah, no. Please join me.”

“Thank you.” He lowered to the blanket, obviously careful to give her some space. “How was work?”

So they were going to have idle chitchat. Okay by her. “Busy. Crazy busy.”

“I’m glad you didn’t just go back to your apartment and turn in.”

How did he know she’d been thinking that? Her eyes went to his, so gray, intense, studying her.

“I told you I’d be here for the fireworks. I . . . hoped you’d come.”

A slow grin started on his face. “I wanted to.”

They both sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, then both talked at once.

“Sally, I’m sorry—”

“I should apologize—”

They laughed and Sally said, “I should start. I apologize for what happened this morning. And for not telling you all about Paul and me. I’m still embarrassed by the divorce. An excuse, I know, but still—”

“You don’t have to apologize. And about this morning. I’m sorry I hurt you and couldn’t communicate to you that Cammie means nothing to me more than a friend.” The grin returned. “But I will tell you I’m glad you were jealous.”

She sat up straight and scowled. “Really? You’re glad I made a fool of myself because I was jealous?”

He took both her hands and held them. “Yes. Because it let me see what you were feeling. And made me realize that I was feeling the same for you.” She wanted to reply but suddenly her throat clogged.

“Sally. You hit me like a hurricane. Your spirit, your dedication to the kids, your innate kindness and loyalty to the people of Charity. I was blown away.” His eyes roamed her face, her hair. “And the fact that you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever met only added to my interest.”

“The most gorgeous?” Her throat unclogged at that nugget of information.

He chuckled. “Absolutely. Now, I’ve got to tell you, Lorraine really did a number on me. I hadn’t thought to date only one woman for a long time. But that was before you.” He scooted closer so only she could hear what he was going to say. “Sally. I love you.”

All the air seemed to whoosh out of her. She stared at him, watching his eyes intensify, deepen, like a storm on the ocean.

Swallowing hard, she whispered, “Brandon. I love you, too. I didn’t plan it, ask for it. It just is.”

He nodded, understanding perfectly. “Incredible, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Incredible.” She couldn’t stop staring at his eyes, her heart pounding as he leaned forward to give her a tender kiss.

His forehead touched hers and she delighted in the fact his breathing was as labored as her. “We’ll take it slow. So each of us is comfortable with what’s happening. So we’ll know for sure.”

In her heart she already knew, but she loved him more for not rushing things. She nodded.

“And we’ll be truthful with each other, even when it hurts.” Another nod.

His hand went to cup her face, his eyes pinning hers. "I won't compare you to Lorraine and you won't compare me to Paul."

"Agreed," she whispered. Their lips met in a kiss to seal their bargain and to begin their journey. As the fireworks blasted overhead and the crowd "Oohed" and "Aahed" over the rainbow of colors, they continued to kiss, knowing that it would be the first of many fireworks they'd share together.

The next day, Brandon and Sally walked hand in hand to Hal's for lunch after camp obligations were finished. Pauline seated them in a quiet booth in the back, where they sat on the same side, his arm around her. Sally giggled happily.

Pauline sighed at the sight as she stood behind the front counter.

"Hey, pretty Pauline," Big Jed said as he and Little Jed came into the restaurant.

She couldn't help her smile when she saw them. "Hi."

"We'll just sit at the counter. Hey, I see Sally and Brandon sitting together in the back. Heard they made up at the fireworks last night."

"Really? That's wonderful."

Big Jed frowned. "Thought you'd have heard about it by now. Funny, Jed here didn't know about it either. Didn't you two see them last night? You went for the fireworks, didn't you?"

She and Little Jed hesitated, mouths open but nothing coming out.

Finally, she said, "I didn't see them. We must have been on the other side."

"Yeah, the other side."

“You two go on and sit. I’ll get your waters and iced tea.” Before she could do just that, the door opened again and the Hamilton family entered with the Carringtons behind them. “Afternoon, everyone.”

Faith was all smiles. “Hey, Pauline. We’re here for a celebration.”

“Do tell,” she said, gathering up menus.

Faith and Marcus exchanged smiles. “Marcus and I have come to an agreement.”

“Really?” Where had she been to miss this new development? Of course, they were perfect for each other, but so soon after meeting and with all the kids between them?

“Marcus has been looking for help with his kids and I need help with my boys’ activities. What do I know about sports and scouting? So, we’re teaming up to assist each other. I’ll watch the kids after school and he’ll help with extracurricular activities. The kids like each other and are all for it. Isn’t it the perfect solution?”

So, no romance. Pauline smiled warmly and said, “Yes, it is perfect. I’m so glad you two families found each other. It is cause for celebration.”

She led them to a big table to accommodate eight and handed out menus. Then hurried to get them and the Jeds water and tea. She couldn’t help the tingle when Little Jed grinned at her.

She took their order and went to the kitchen to put it in. The Spinuccis were finishing their shift, Bruiser, the prep cook, was busy at the stove. Tom was already in, working on the dinner special. Pauline sighed with contentment. Everything in her little world was perfect.

Then Mac and Grace came in the back door and their twin shocked expressions had her running to them. “Kids? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Mac stared straight ahead, not seeing her.

Grace opened her mouth several times before anything came out. “We, ah, just went to the doctor’s.”

A chill ran through her. “Grace.” She grasped her daughter’s arm. “Nothing’s wrong, is it?”

Her eyes met Pauline’s as if fully comprehending the question. “Wrong? No, what could possibly be wrong.” She giggled, a little hysterically to Pauline’s mind.

“We’re going to have a baby.”

Everything in the kitchen stopped. All the cooks turned, eyes wide, mouths opened.

Looking around her at the rapt attention, Grace giggled again. “Yes, you heard right, everyone. Mac and I are pregnant.” Before she could finish her sentence, she and Mac were enclosed in a group hug, with kisses and hearty congratulations.

The cooks went back to their work, several sniffing. Loretta gave a tissue to Bruiser. Pauline kept her arms around her daughter.

“Oh, honey.” Pauline’s tears overflowed. “Grace, Grace. I’m so happy for you.”

She pulled back and studied her daughter. “You’re all right? The doctor checked you out and everything’s okay?”

“Everything’s wonderful, Mom. Just perfect.” Grace brushed away tears from her mother’s face as her own fell.

“This is so wonderful. What a happy day. How did Mac react . . .” Seeing that Mac still hadn’t spoken, Pauline said, “Mac? You okay?”

He just nodded, his eyes still looking at nothing.

“He’s been like that since the doctor told us,” Grace said. “Do you think I should slap him or something to bring him out of it?”

“Mac, honey? You okay because Grace needs you to be okay?”

That seemed to do the trick as he turned to Grace, placing his hands on her middle, his eyes as big as a curious child. “Grace.” His voice was a whisper, only for her ears. The edges of his lips lifted in a wide grin.

Grace put her hands over his. “Are you happy, Mac? Really happy?”

He nodded, swallowing hard. Then he started laughing, loud and deep, pulling her into his arms and swinging her around and around. “We’re going to have a baby. We’re going to have a baby! Me and my baby are having a baby!” With each sentence, his volume rose until he was shouting.

Her laughter joining his, Grace said, “Mac. Put me down.”

The patrons in the dining room were all looking through the pass-through now, obviously wondering what was going on. Mac took Grace’s hand and hurried into the other room, Pauline following him.

“Everyone, Grace and I just found out. We’re having a baby!”

Loud cheers sounded from every corner of the diner and friends and acquaintances came up, shaking Mac’s hand, giving Grace hugs.

Last were Big Jed and Little Jed who gave the happy couple hugs and best wishes. “So,” Big Jed said. “When’s the little one due to arrive?”

Grace and Mac looked at each other smiling. “When else would we have our first baby? Christmas.” Since Grace was known in Charity as “Christmas Grace” it made sense and everyone laughed.

Pauline couldn’t stop smiling and crying. It was a dream come true to see her daughter so happy, with a wonderful husband and a baby on the way.

She glanced around, seeing Brandon and Sally smiling at each other, The Hamiltons and Carringtons happily chatting, Grace beaming in Mac’s arms. Little Jed looking warmly at her.

And a baby on the way. She couldn’t wait.

No doubt about it, it would be a most memorable Christmas in Charity. But weren’t they all?

THE END

Coming in November, the next installment in the Christmas in Charity Series,

Faith, Hope, and Mistletoe.

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