

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired.

The
Heart
of a Man

DEB KASTNER



Deb Kastner

The Heart of a Man

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Money wasn't the answer, as far as Dustin Fairfax was concerned - not unless you could use it to help others. Of course, there was the little matter of his trust fund to contend with - who would have thought his late father would demand he be "made over" before he could receive it? It was the biggest challenge of personal-image consultant Isobel Buckley's career - turn a flower shop owner into a polished, urbane man. Image was everything, after all, particularly to this high-strung beauty. Her new client's carefree life was certainly not the "in" thing, but the kind heart beneath his pinstripes might just convince her that love was back in style.

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“You sure don’t look like any Sunday school teacher I know.”

“I probably would have gone to church more often as a kid if I’d had a teacher as pretty as you.” Dustin winked at her.

Isobel blushed a bright, becoming pink, though Dustin had only been voicing an opinion he’d had since the moment he’d first seen her.

Dustin was perplexed. She obviously wasn’t used to compliments, yet Isobel was a beautiful woman, inside and out. It made him wonder what her past had been like.

At length, she smiled at him. “And here I am standing here staring at you like a constant reminder of your troubles with your brother. Like a porcupine rubbing against you.”

“A porcupine?” he repeated, sounding stunned.

He looked her over with an amused grin, his eyes twinkling with merriment. “I don’t think so. Not in a million years.”

“But it bothers you to have me here,” she hinted.

“No,” Dustin answered definitively. “You, my dear Isobel, are the best thing that has happened to me in a long time. Maybe ever.”

DEB KASTNER

is the wife of a Reformed Episcopal minister, so it was natural for her to find her niche in the Christian romance market. She enjoys tackling the issues of faith and trust within the context of a romance. Her characters range from upbeat and humorous to (her favorite) dark and brooding heroes. Her plots range widely from a playful romp to the deeply emotional.

When she's not writing, she enjoys spending time with her husband and three girls and, whenever she can manage, attending regional dinner theater and touring Broadway musicals.

The Heart of a Man

Deb Kastner



Then Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” So the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.”

—Exodus 4:10–12.

To my sweet middle girl, Kimmie, who is the absolute last word on fashion in our house. This incredibly talented girl can make anything with a piece of fabric and some thread. My own personal image consultant, she continues to remind me fashion can be comfortable, just as I continue to break that rule by wearing sweats when I write.

Much thanks and gratitude to my oldest daughter, Annie, who transcribed much of this book for me onto the computer, as I am one of those dinosaurs who still prefer to create in longhand.

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Chapter One

“How do you do that?”

The question came from her best friend since childhood, Camille O’Shay. They had grown up together in a tiny rural Texas town, attended the same college and now were sharing living quarters in the heart of downtown Denver.

“Do what, Millie?” she asked absently, her eyes carefully scrutinizing the gentleman under her authority, her eyes taking in every seam and pleat as she tucked and pinned.

“Completely change people’s appearances, Izzy, like someone’s fairy godmother or something,” Camille said with a laugh. “I’m completely astounded by your ability to wave your wand and work wonders.”

Isobel Buckley shrugged. “It’s my job to dress and press these gorgeous gals and pretty boys and get them looking their best for the boardroom. The final product depends on me. It’s hard work, not waving wands, that yields a final product I can be satisfied with.”

She wasn’t telling her friend any new information—Camille was well familiar that Isobel was a personal shopper and image consultant for a select, high-end clientele. And Camille likewise knew Isobel was every bit the perfectionist she sounded.

“You know, when you think about it, it doesn’t really take much to make high-quality fashion look good on those pinup model hunks you work with,” Camille observed wryly. “Although, of course, dear heart, you do it better than most.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Isobel was busy straightening a silk tie on one of those so-called pinup model hunks who wanted to look his best for a national conference, and was only half paying attention to her friend’s happy chatter.

“Turn around for me,” she told the man, who willingly complied.

“Oh, nothing,” Camille replied, not sounding the least bit convinced as Isobel turned her attention back to her friend for a moment. “I was just wondering if you could do the same kind of work with an average man, someone who hasn’t ever read a men’s fashion magazine.”

“What are you talking about?” Isobel said, throwing a quick glance in Camille’s direction. “You’re babbling nonsense.”

“Am I?” she shot back, her grin reminding Isobel of a cat crouched to pounce on a helpless mouse. “What do you think about adding a run-of-the-mill variety guy to your clientele? The kind of guy I usually date, as opposed to the kind of guy you could date if you weren’t so caught up in your career?”

Isobel rolled her eyes. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“So are you up for it?” Camille actually sounded excited, as if she were taking the idea for real.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Making a normal slob of a guy into Mr. Right. Blue-collar material, ya know? It would be fun.”

Camille was definitely warming up to the idea, while Isobel was beginning to cringe. Her friend was sounding all too serious about this fanatical, half-baked scheme.

“Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll pick the guy, and you’ll have six weeks to make him into a real man. The man of every girl’s dreams.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Isobel took a deep breath and held it. She could only hope.

Camille shrugged, a noncommittal gesture. “Maybe. Maybe not. But don’t be surprised if I come knocking on your door with a fellow who desperately needs your help for a makeover.”

Isobel pinched her lips, deciding to ignore her friend’s obviously off-the-top-of-her-head twaddle. It would come to nothing in the long run.

She hoped.

Not more than two days later, her dear childhood confidant made good on her threat. Bursting into Isobel's office, Camille announced in a loud, triumphant voice, "I've found him!"

"I'm sorry," Isobel said, distracted by the pile of paperwork she was muddling through, piece by agonizingly slow piece. "You found whom?"

"The guy, of course. The one you're going to wave your magic wand over." She looked disappointed for a moment. "Our average guy, remember?"

Isobel smoothed her thick, long brown hair with her palm and sighed, desperately wishing she didn't remember. "I would ask if you were joking, but I know you better than that. What possessed you to go through with this crazy scheme? This isn't even remotely close to real life, Camille."

"I wasn't even looking! I'm telling you the truth. No one could have been more shocked or amazed than I. All I was doing was talking with a regular patron at my hotel—a rich, quite handsome, very well-connected patron, I might add."

"All the people who spend time at your hotel are rich," Isobel reminded her friend blithely. "And well-connected. Handsome, though. Since when is that a requirement for hotel patronage?" she teased.

"Oh, Isobel. You have no idea. This guy is out of this world!" She stopped suddenly and clapped a hand over her heart, sighing loudly and dramatically, even as a dark blush stole up her cheeks. "Addison Fairfax."

"But that's not the point." She faltered for a moment, and Isobel found a bit of humor in the fact that her dear friend was actually flustered over this Addison Fairfax. It took a lot for Camille to show interest in a particular man, preferring in general the whole of mankind.

"Go ahead, Camille," Isobel encouraged with a smile and a sly wink that let her friend know she was on to her. "Handsome and...?"

Camille placed a hand on her reddened cheek and continued. "We were making our usual small talk, you know, and I was telling him about my brilliant idea for you to make over some regular guy—not anything like Addison, of course. He dresses divinely."

She followed her high-speed discourse with another long, drawn-out sigh.

Isobel chuckled.

"Well, the next thing you know, he's telling me all about his problems. You are the answer to his prayers, Isobel, I kid you not. Neither of us could believe it!"

"I might as well hear it," Isobel said with a groan. "Go on."

"Okay, I'll tell you," she agreed, casually stringing it on with a laugh. "But Izzy, you have to promise to listen all the way through before you jump to any conclusions."

Isobel smiled. She was certain she'd be jumping to conclusions long before her friend was finished telling what was sure to be a wildly fantastical story—but she could promise to keep her thoughts to herself, at least until she'd sorted the whole wild, bizarre idea out in her mind.

"So, it's like this," Camille began with a flourish of her hand.

"Once upon a time," Isobel teased.

Camille threw her a mock glare. "If you're going to keep interrupting every time I speak, I'm never going to get through this."

Isobel chuckled. "Sorry. It won't happen again." She made the motion of zipping her lips closed with her thumb and index finger.

"So there's this man I was telling you about, Addison Fairfax, who often uses our hotel for his meetings and conventions," Camille said, her voice growing with excitement at every word. "He's the CEO of Security, Inc. You know it?"

"I've heard of it," Isobel replied. Of course she knew the name. It was only one of the most prestigious financial firms in Denver, probably on the continent.

Everyone had heard of Security, Inc.

“You can only imagine how successful Addison is, not to mention how wonderfully handsome he looks. He’s always polished, precise and dressed meticulously.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Isobel asked, wondering how she could help such a high-and-mighty being, and why on earth he would think to pay her for it. Sounded to her as if he had it made.

Unless, like many of her clientele, he was simply too busy to worry about fashion. But then, where would be the challenge in that? He was the type of man Isobel worked with on a regular basis in her business, not something out of her league.

“Oh, it’s not Addison,” Camille said, holding her hands up, palms out. “You can trust me on this. That man is perfect just the way he is.”

Isobel laughed. “It sounds as if you have a genuine, fully loaded crush on the man.”

“A crush?” Her friend sounded mortified. “I would never stoop so low. I haven’t had a crush on a man since ninth grade.” She sniffed, her nose in the air like a cat who’d been offended.

“Tenth grade. Mr. Monahue, our history teacher,” Isobel reminded her with a smile.

Camille chuckled. “Oh, he was cute, wasn’t he? If I recall, I wasn’t the only one who thought he floated over the ground.”

Isobel shook her head, smiling at the memory. Every tenth-grade girl in Mr. Monahue’s class had had a crush on the charming teacher.

She shook her head again, her mind returning to the present dilemma. “Okay, so Addison Fairfax is interesting,” she said, rephrasing for her friend’s sake and to keep the conversation on line. “But I still don’t understand what that has to do with me.”

“It’s his younger brother, Dustin. Now, Dustin is a mess—a regular slob, in Addison’s words. And Addison actually wants to pay you to whip him into shape. Six short weeks of work and an enormous salary tacked on as a bonus. Think of it, Isobel! You don’t even have to stop your own work to help him.”

“Why would I want to do this, again?” Isobel asked, crossing her arms and tipping her executive-style black leather chair as far back as it would go, wishing for a short moment it would crash backward, sending her down through the twenty-two floors below and away from her glassy-eyed friend and the half-cocked ideas spouting from her lips.

“Remember our conversation from the other day?” Camille reminded her, dangling the thought out before her like a carrot to a rabbit.

“I remember you saying a bunch of stuff. I don’t remember me saying anything at all. Most particularly that I wanted to participate in such nonsense.”

“Oh, but you do, Isobel, whether you want to admit it now or not. Think of the tremendous challenge involved. I know you love the idea, deep down. Admit it!”

Isobel crossed her arms and shook her head. Vehemently.

“Don’t you see? Dustin Fairfax would be a test of your true strength as an image consultant.” Camille raised her hands to emphasize the mental marquee board. “I mean, they make gorgeous hunks into ugly bums all the time in the movies. Don’t you think you could do the opposite for one poor man who needs what only your special brand of fashion sense can bring to him? He’ll be a new man!”

Isobel admitted—in her heart, anyway—that she was intrigued, despite every bone of sense in her body screaming to the contrary. Something about the whole setup just didn’t seem right, though she wasn’t sure what was bothering her.

It sounded innocent enough on the outside, but something...

“How old is this man?” she asked after a slight but pregnant pause.

“Dustin?” Camille asked, her eyes gleaming with the victory she sensed was coming.

Isobel was quite aware Camille knew her better than anyone. They’d spent their whole lives together, been best friends forever. Camille would know that once Isobel capitulated in the least, she had her bagged and roasted for sure.

Camille certainly looked like a tiger hunter in full triumph, stripes sighted down her scope.

“Well, I know Addison is thirty-three,” her friend supplied thoughtfully. “And since Dustin is his younger brother, I would guess he’d be about thirty, give or take a year.”

“And what, exactly, is wrong with him?” she asked, feeling as if she ought to be taking notes. “I have to know the truth, here, if you want me to help.”

“Oh, nothing’s wrong with him, really,” Camille exclaimed with a high laugh. “Addison said he’s just—flighty. That’s the word he used.”

Isobel raised one eyebrow. Here, she suspected, was where the roof caved in.

“At least by Addison’s standards, Dustin doesn’t dress very well. He’s not sophisticated. That shouldn’t be a huge challenge for you.”

“He’s not a homeless man or something like that?” Isobel was still cautious. Too much about this story still didn’t mesh. Something was off just a little, though she couldn’t put her finger on just what it was.

She gave Camille a hard, serious stare. “Dustin is aware this is going to happen to him? He has agreed to work with me?”

“He happens to own a small flower store on the 16th Street Mall. Retail, you know? He’s successful, in his own way, I guess, though he’s a long way from the clientele you’re used to working with.”

Camille paused, running her tongue along her bottom lip. “And as for your other question, he hasn’t exactly been told. Yet.”

Isobel opened her mouth to argue but Camille held her hands up to cut her off.

“As soon as you agree, Addison will make sure Dustin knows to expect you. It’s all been arranged, but Addison didn’t want to speak to his brother about it until I’d finalized things with you.”

“What if Dustin says no?”

“He won’t,” Camille said with a firm nod. “He might want to, but he won’t. You see, there’s money riding on this venture. Apparently quite a lot of money.”

“He will get a lot of money if he learns to dress well?” Isobel asked, stymied. “But deep down he really wouldn’t want to do this. Is that what you’re really telling me?”

“It’s complicated,” Camille explained with a patient sigh. “Addison was left to execute his father’s will, and Izzy, the poor man is beside himself, with the situation being what it is. I feel so sorry for him. What a predicament!”

“Go on,” Isobel urged, not at all certain she wanted to hear more.

“Apparently their father was afraid Dustin would squander his inheritance away instead of doing something useful with it. Addison is terribly worried about his brother. I guess he’s kind of stubborn, and he’s definitely his own man. Marches to the beat of his own drummer, so to speak.”

She paused, clasping her hand over her heart in the melodramatic way that was uniquely Camille’s. “Can you imagine the tremendously heavy burden their father left on poor Addison?”

“How so?”

“Addison was named Dustin’s trustee in the will, even though Dustin is a full-grown man. You can imagine how Dustin felt. And Addison certainly didn’t ask for the formidable task of bringing Dustin into line. According to the terms of the will, Dustin has certain obligations to meet—delineated by his father—in order for Addison to release the funds to his brother.”

“He has to learn to dress well?” Isobel asked again, befuddled. “In order to get his hands on his rightful inheritance?”

None of this made the least bit of sense, and Isobel was beginning to feel very much as if she’d stepped into another dimension.

What kind of a man was Dustin, that his father would put such insane demands on him?

One thing she knew for certain—she would balk at such radical and unusual demands being placed upon her. If Dustin were half the independent spirit Camille had described him to be...

Camille laughed. “No, of course not, silly. He has to make a splash in society or something outrageous like that, and of course clothes make the man, right?”

“It’s a good start,” Isobel said with a laugh and a shrug. I’d be looking for a little more than that in a man.

Camille giggled. “After I told Addison about you, he thought you’d be the perfect person to bring Dustin around. You, of all people, can guide him in making a true contribution to society. Those are the exact terms of the will. Can you believe it?”

“I see,” Isobel said under her breath, though she wasn’t sure she did. The idea was intriguing, of course; definitely intriguing. The thought of transforming a scalawag of a man into a prince would be a challenge, but it also sounded kind of fun.

“Okay,” she said after only a brief pause to consider the short-and long-term ramifications of her decision. She didn’t want to examine her own motives too closely. “I’ll do it.”

She didn’t ask how much money she would make. She was taking on this project for the challenge, and she trusted Camille that the time she spent would be worth her weight in gold. Literally.

And she was surprised by how excited she was at the prospect of making over the erstwhile Dustin. It had been a long time since she’d done something truly stimulating, and her heart was pounding with anticipation.

“I knew this was something you’d want to do,” Camille squealed, throwing her arms around Isobel’s neck and dancing her around in dizzying circles. “Oh, how wonderful for you!”

“Wonderful for me?” she asked, laughing at her friend’s excited antics. “I thought Dustin was the one to benefit from this deal.”

“Oh, he will,” her friend agreed immediately. “He most definitely will. But won’t it be such fun for you, as well? Admit it. You love the idea. Pygmalion at its best.”

“I suppose the idea has merit,” she agreed. “I do have one condition, however, and I refuse to take on this project unless it is met unconditionally.”

“What’s that?”

“This Dustin guy—he has to go into this experiment with his eyes wide open. If he doesn’t agree to the makeover, if he is not comfortable with the idea of working with me or if he expresses doubts or disinterest, I do not want to move forward with this.” Isobel listed items on her fingers. “The project must all be conducted on the up-and-up, with everything laid out up front for Dustin and for me. No surprises and no reluctant subjects. Do you understand what I’m getting at here?”

“I’ll speak to Addison immediately,” Camille assured her, obviously trying to rein in her high, excited tone and appear more businesslike and reserved. It didn’t fool Isobel for a moment.

Her friend continued, gulping in air to remain calm. “He said he would be the one to speak to Dustin about it and firm up the final details. After that I’ll be able to let you know when and where you two can meet and get the ball rolling toward Dustin’s new look. He’s got to agree. He just has to.” She winked. “Especially when he meets you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Isobel squawked, feigning offense and pressing her lips together to keep her smile hidden.

“Why, you’re so pretty you’ll knock his socks off. And then, my dear friend, you can replace them with preppie argyles.”

“Oh, I just love it when I get to play fairy godmother,” Isobel teased, waving an invisible magic wand through the air. “But this sounds just a little too weird to be real.”

Camille laughed and whirled about on her toes like a ballerina. So much for her businesslike demeanor, Isobel thought, smothering her grin. She didn’t know where her friend got all her energy, but she wished just a little of it would rub off on her.

“There’s a first time for everything, Izzy,” Camille said, clapping her hands in anticipation. “And you, my dearest friend in all the world, are going to be the best thing that ever happened to Dustin Fairfax. He won’t even know what hit him.”

Chapter Two

Dustin lifted the drumsticks into the air, adjusting his grip on the wood so he could play the drum set that curved around the stool on which he sat. He closed his eyes and with a flick of one drumstick, adjusted his backward black-and-purple Colorado Rockies cap to keep his curly black hair out of his face.

His music of choice, at the moment, anyway, was a trumpet-licking jazz CD he'd picked up over the weekend. Eclectic was the only way to describe his taste—in music, or in anything else he had a strong opinion about.

The drum set was new—or at least, new to him. A friend who had been a drummer in a high-school band was getting rid of it to make room for a baby crib.

Dustin had grabbed the opportunity and bought the set for a song. He'd never played a percussion instrument in his life, but he figured now was as good a time as any to learn.

It wasn't the first instrument he would have taught himself to play in his life.

How hard could it be?

He made a couple of tentative taps on the snare drum with his sticks, and then pounded the bass a few times with the foot pedal.

Smiling with satisfaction, he began pounding in earnest, perfect rhythm with the beat of the jazz CD. He didn't care at the moment whether or not he sounded good. He was only trying to have a good time. Technique would come later, with many strenuous hours of practice, he knew.

He sent a timely prayer to God that the insulation in his house would be sufficient to keep his neighbors from knocking his door down with their complaints about the horrible din.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone clamped his hand tightly on Dustin's shoulder.

Dustin made an instinctive move, standing in a flash, turning and knocking the man's hand away in one swift motion of his elbow and then crouching to pounce on the unknown intruder.

"Hey, take it easy," Addison said with a deep, dry laugh Dustin immediately recognized. "I didn't mean to startle you. I tried knocking, but you couldn't hear me over all that racket. Sounded like the roof was caving in or something."

Dustin chuckled.

Addison shook his head and laughed in tune with his brother. "The door was open, so I just let myself in. I hope you don't mind."

Dustin wiped his arm against his forehead, as his hands were still tightly gripping the drumsticks. "Naw. Guess I was pretty distracted, messing with this thing." He popped a quick beat on the snare drum for emphasis, then clasped both sticks together and jammed them in the back pocket of his jeans.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his suit-clad big brother. "What are you doing here, Addy boy?" he asked in genuine surprise.

Addison rarely visited Dustin's small house, which was located in Wheatridge, one of the many sprawling suburbs of Denver. In fact, he'd never been there without a direct invitation first.

He had shown little interest in Dustin's hobbies, or anything else for that matter. They had never been close, even as children. Addison was the jock, and Dustin the artist. It had always been that way.

Addison wasn't fond of anything artistic, from drama to Monet. Football, baseball, soccer—these had made up Addison's teenage world.

And Addison had always been the brains in the family, in Dustin's estimation. As the CEO for a major financial corporation, and an important person in the Denver social scene, Addison didn't have time to dabble with anything beyond the walls of his chic, downtown penthouse condo and lush corner office. His only interest in the arts as a successful adult was as his business required, and nothing more.

“I’ve come about Dad’s will, Dustin—specifically, the terms of the trust fund,” Addison said tersely and abruptly in the crisp business tone he always used. Dustin sometimes thought Addison hid behind that tone in order to keep his emotions on a back burner. The two brothers certainly weren’t as close as Dustin would have liked, though he put the blame for that more on his father than on Addison.

Dustin clasped his hands behind his back. His father’s will was not something he really wished to discuss, though he knew it was inevitable. It had to be done, and sooner rather than later. Addison was right on that one point, anyway.

Their mother had died when Dustin was fourteen and Addison was sixteen. He remembered her as a sweet, delicate woman who always smiled and always had an eye and an open hand for the poor and needy. She had kept the house full of laughter and singing, and always had a prayer or a song of praise on her lips.

His father, on the other hand, was as cold as stone, a strict disciplinarian who practiced what he preached—that God helped those who helped themselves.

Never mind that that particular “verse” wasn’t really in the Bible.

Addison Fairfax, Sr., had worked long hours establishing the firm Addison Jr. now led and held a majority interest in.

Dustin knew his father had wanted him in the company, as well. Addison Sr. had been bitterly disappointed when, as a young man following his own strong, surging creative impulses, Dustin took a different career path.

To Dustin, being boxed up in an office all day would be like caging a wild beast; and the thought of spending all day crunching numbers—especially anything to do with money—made him shiver.

It was enough just to balance his checkbook every month. That was not the kind of life for him, caged behind a desk with nothing but figures on paper for company.

He wanted to help people, but in another, more creative fashion. One on one, where he could reach out and touch his customers, smile and encourage them to smile back at him.

He pinched his lips together to keep his smile hidden from his brother’s observant gaze. It was an understatement to say that math had never been one of Dustin’s better subjects.

And so now it came down to his father’s last wishes, laid out plainly, literally in black and white. Dustin had been at the formal reading of the will. He knew what it contained, especially in regard to what he was expected to accomplish in order to win the coveted trust fund, which Dustin desperately wanted, but for reasons he would disclose to no one.

At least not yet.

And that was no doubt why Addison was visiting him today. It was up to his big brother, as trustee of the fund in Dustin’s name, to see that Dustin cleaned up, became a pillar of society and made a real contribution to the world in some way not explicitly drawn out in the will, but legal nonetheless.

Dustin knew Addison wasn’t thrilled with the job. He had enough responsibility with his own work without burdening himself with his younger brother’s supposed faults. But there was one thing Dustin knew about his older brother—he would follow his father’s dictates to the letter without question.

Even if Addison didn’t necessarily agree with the terms. Besides, it was legal, drawn up and finalized by their father, who’d known exactly what he was doing.

“You want the money, don’t you?” Addison asked crisply, his golden-blond eyebrows creasing low in concern over his blue eyes, all traits of his father.

Dustin had his mother’s curly black hair and green eyes. It was a startling contrast between the two brothers, and just one more way they were different from one another.

Dustin took a deep, steadying breath. “Yes, I do,” he said solemnly. “You know I do.”

That was as much information as he was willing to offer, which no doubt perplexed his older brother.

“Hey, Addy boy,” he said, cheerfully changing the subject, “you want a soda or something?”

“I’ve asked you repeatedly not to call me that,” his brother responded through gritted teeth, shaking his head in warning.

“Why do you think I do it?” Dustin responded with a laugh.

“You little punk,” Addison said affectionately. He grabbed Dustin around the neck and scrubbed his knuckles across Dustin’s scalp, just the sort of roughhousing they’d done as kids. “Don’t forget I’m bigger than you. I can still knock your block off anytime I want.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Dustin challenged, grabbing his brother by the waist in what amounted to a wrestler’s hold.

Addison sighed and abruptly released his hold on Dustin. “As much as I’d like to monkey around with you, bro, I just don’t have time today. I’m behind on my schedule already just by being here. Can we just get this painful business settled as quickly as possible so I can return to work?”

This business. Was that all it was to Addison? Another piece of business to settle and then move on? It was only Dustin’s life they were talking about.

And so much more. If only Addison knew. But Dustin wasn’t ready to trust his brother with more information than he’d already given.

Dustin felt like no more than a thorn in Addison’s side at times, a trial to be borne through and just as quickly forgotten.

Addison was staring at him. “I’m sorry to say this, little brother, but you need a makeover,” he said soberly, though his eyes were gleaming with amusement at the prospect.

Dustin grinned and crossed his arms over his chest in an instinctively protective gesture. “Oh, like a facial and a mud bath, right? You want me to get a manicure and a massage?”

Addison cleared his throat and looked out the nearest window, gazing for some time before speaking. “This is a very serious matter. You joke about everything,” he said softly.

Dustin shrugged. “Of course. In my book, it’s better to go through life with a smile than to be grouchy all the time.”

“Grouchy? Is that how you see me?” He sounded genuinely surprised.

Dustin shook his head. “I was speaking in relative terms.”

“Yes, well, I’m not sure I believe you, but let us get back to the subject at hand. As it happens, per the will, I’ve hired a girl—”

“No way.” Dustin cut him off with his voice, and concurrently made a severe chopping gesture with the flat of his hand. “My personal life is mine. I won’t be set up, even by you.”

“I’m not talking about your personal life, Dustin,” Addison said, sounding as if he were straining to be patient, and yet with the hint of laughter to his voice. “I’m talking about your image. Who you know, where you go and especially how you dress. A change you and I both know would make our father happy.”

Dustin looked down at his old tennis shoes, faded blue jeans and worn gray T-shirt. “What’s wrong with the way I dress?”

“That’s exactly the point, my man. This woman I hired, Isobel Buckley, knows what’s in fashion and helps people change their image. She does it for a living, and I’m sure she could advise you better than I. Honestly, baby brother, you don’t have a clue. Admit it. You’re a world-class chump.”

Dustin felt pressure building up in his chest. Addison was forcing his hand, and they both knew it.

And they both knew he would cave, eventually, before it was all said and done.

He had to cave. For the sake of the money. There was no other way.

For a moment, he considered tackling his older brother and wrestling him to the ground, as they had often done as youngsters. It would serve his big brother right to give him the good pounding he had threatened and that he was now certain Addison deserved.

With deep restraint he denied the urge, knowing it would do nothing more than prove Addison's point. Bad clothes and bad manners.

A chump.

"Frankly—" Addison continued in his best, solid business voice "—and you know I'm right in saying this, Father was concerned about the way you would spend your inheritance."

Addison paused, leaning one hand against a nearby table and pulling his brown tweed jacket back to put his hand in his slacks pocket.

To Dustin, it was like seeing his father all over again.

"You have no vision, Dustin. You own a small flower shop, you bang like an Aborigine on this drum of yours in the name of fun, and that's all you have to show for yourself. For your time. For your life."

"Is that you or Dad talking?" Dustin goaded through clenched teeth.

It wasn't a fair question, and Dustin immediately regretted his hasty query. It was clearly his father's intention to make Dustin into a different man. Addison was merely the messenger.

The urge to pounce on his burly brother and mess up his fancy suit was growing by the moment, but he knew better than to shoot the messenger, no matter how tempting it might be. It wouldn't solve anything in the long run, and he needed access to that trust fund.

"It's my life," he complained, sounding as surly as a little boy. "What's wrong with my flower store?"

"Nothing is wrong with your little shop. But have you ever thought about opening up a chain of stores? What about making a real name for yourself in the Denver social scene? Why not cater to a higher-level clientele, boost your own income?"

"You spend as much time gallivanting around town, and who knows what else, as you do putting your strength and effort into your business." Addison took an extended breath. "What you need is to go to the right parties and rub elbows with the right people. Build up relationships that mean something. Really make something important of yourself."

Addison rubbed his palms together like sandpaper on wood. "I'll help you. I have the connections, Dustin. But you can't meet the right kind of people in jeans and a T-shirt."

Dustin shook his head and grunted in disdain. "Relationships that mean something? Mean what, exactly? More money? More prestige? A nicer car? I'm never going to be like you, Addison. That's not what I want out of life."

"Perhaps not," Addison agreed with a curt nod. "You and I have traveled different roads. Nevertheless, I do think Ms. Buckley can help you with this trust-fund issue, and I insist you meet with her."

Dustin balked inside, but he didn't let it show. He didn't like being ordered around, especially by members of his family. "How long?"

"Six weeks. That shouldn't be too much of a strain, even for you." Addison began to pace, a sure sign he was losing his patience. Dustin knew his brother didn't like this any better than he did.

And why should he? Dustin knew Addison wasn't a bully at heart, childhood pranks notwithstanding. He was as pinched by their father's will as anyone.

Better to wrap things up and let Addison get on his way. Back to work in his posh office, where he was more in his element.

"At the end of the six weeks, then, I get my inheritance money?"

Addison met his gaze straight on, staring as if trying to read his soul. Dustin let him look, knowing his own expression was unreadable. It was something he'd practiced.

"You know I'm taking a calculated risk here." Addison cleared his throat and continued pacing back and forth in front of Dustin, his arms clasped behind his back. "And I expect a full return on my investment."

"Meaning?"

“I want you to cooperate with Ms. Buckley fully. If she gives me a bad report, I will put your trust fund on hold and you won’t be able to touch it.”

Dustin opened his mouth to protest against these rules, but Addison held one hand up, palm out. He clearly didn’t want to be interrupted.

“If, however, you make a genuine effort toward your reform, the money is yours, with no limitations from me or anyone. I know that’s what you want. You just have to make an effort.”

He gave Dustin a genuine smile, but Dustin just winced at his brother’s stilted effort.

“This will work, Dustin, if you just give it half a chance.”

Dustin clenched his jaw tightly, still hardly believing his brother had set up such a scheme. Addison wasn’t married—he was as careful in dating as Dustin himself was. And for good reason.

Every woman in the world wanted to change a man; it was in their very nature to meddle that way. Every man alive knew that, and ran from it with his whole being until he inevitably got caught in some woman’s snare.

It was the extraordinary, seesaw-like balance between men and women that Dustin didn’t even try to comprehend, and generally attempted to steer away from.

That was at least partly the reason Dustin remained single at age thirty. His experience with relationships with the opposite sex had, frankly, made him more than a little world-wise when it came to women.

He liked being on his own, being his own man and answerable to no one but himself and God.

And for some strange woman to get paid for meddling in his private affairs, pushing her ideals on him—what kind of woman would take such a job?

This Isobel Buckley must be on a real power trip. He could only guess at what kinds of torture she would concoct for him.

Still, it was only six weeks.

What could happen in six weeks?

Chapter Three

Isobel was more than a little anxious about meeting the man she'd heard so much about. With all she'd been told, she had absolutely no idea what to expect when she actually met the real person.

Dustin Fairfax.

She had thoughtfully recommended a public venue for their first meeting, knowing both of them would feel a bit more comfortable with other people around, especially at this first encounter.

She admitted being nervous herself, at least inwardly, which was silly, really. She did this for a living, after all.

But this was different. The nuances weren't lost on her, and she was certain they weren't lost on him, either. Dustin wasn't coming to her for her expertise and help—or at least it was not his idea to do so—and she wasn't even certain he was coming willingly.

Camille and Addison had made the arrangements, and here she sat, in a quiet deli on 16th Street, waiting for Dustin to show up.

If he actually materialized.

She still wasn't convinced he was a willing guinea pig in this experiment, and that fact was something she meant to establish before this day was over. She wouldn't blame him if he found somewhere else to be and didn't make their meeting at all.

He was already twelve minutes late to their appointment, not that she was counting. She tried to distract herself by watching the people around her, the usual eclectic hodgepodge of faces and accents that made Denver so interesting. Coffee shops were the best for finding interesting people to view.

But no matter how hard she tried, her gaze kept straying back to the front door, her adrenaline rushing every time the bell indicated a new customer was entering or exiting.

She had purposefully taken a seat at a corner table where she could easily see the entrance. She wanted to have a moment to watch Dustin before they were formally introduced.

She wiped her palms against her conservative navy blue, calf-length-split rayon skirt, ostensibly to straighten it—for at least the tenth time. She straightened her back and adjusted her posture, an incidental habit she was hardly aware of but often performed.

Suddenly a man burst through the door like a Tasmanian devil, lifting his hat and scrubbing his hands through his thick black hair. He looked around, his eyes sweeping across the tables with a glazed, harried look.

He was obviously searching for someone, and he definitely fit the profile she'd been given for Mr. Fairfax—six feet tall, medium build, black hair, green eyes.

Isobel froze, not giving any indication she saw him at all. She lowered her eyes to the table and pinched her lips.

She was afraid this was how it would be.

Her first impression wasn't good.

Dustin's black hair, what she could see of it from under a backward-faced, navy newsboy cap, was long—nearly shoulder length—and thick and curly. She wondered if anyone had ever told him his hair-style had gone out in the eighties.

Way out.

The thought made her laugh, and she politely covered her mouth with her hand.

His big green eyes were friendly, though, and he was smiling. Those were immediate pluses, in her book. Not many people faced life with a grin these days. It was a rare blessing to see.

Polishing up the outside of a man would be a piece of cake for her, but how could she ever hope to turn some weirdo into a socialite?

Apparently, that was one worry she could cross off her list. Kindness showed in every line of his face. Somehow, after seeing him in person, she felt in her heart she could work with him.

His clothes were another matter.

He was attired in faded, holey blue jeans and a navy blue T-shirt that had seen better days. She couldn't even decipher the writing on the front. And his old tennis shoes—once white, as far as she could guess, but now a scuffed gray—were abominable.

She bit her bottom lip thoughtfully. Part of her screamed to duck under the table, however ungracefully, and hide from the man. Back out of the plan. Get away from it all.

But then she remembered her purpose here, and with this thought came resolution. This was a job like any other job, however different in form it—he—presented itself.

It was time to buck up and do what she was hired to do.

Of course, Dustin was an unconventional scalawag who was continually late to his appointments. Hadn't she discussed this very thing with Addison and Camille? Why else would Addison feel compelled to hire an image consultant to clean him up and generally organize his life for him?

And how hard could it be, really?

Her mind was already envisioning a sharp pair of scissors in her hand, lopping off great handfuls of his thick black hair. Her smile widened.

"Mr. Fairfax," she called, waving her hand. "Over here."

The man turned at her voice and smiled as he approached. "Please, call me Dustin," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "All my friends do. And you must be Iz-a-belle," he said, pronouncing her name with a crisp Italian accent. His emphasis was strongly on the last syllable. "Belle. It has a nice ring to it." He laughed at his own joke, but Isobel just shook her head.

She stared at him for a moment, trying to get her bearings. No one had ever, in the whole course of her life, called her Belle before.

Everyone, even her mother, called her Isobel. Camille called her Izzy sometimes, but they had known each other forever.

"Isobel Buckley," she corrected subtly, hoping he'd take the hint.

"Dustin Fairfax," he said, turning his chair around and straddling it. "But of course, you already know my name."

"Yes," she agreed mildly, linking her fingers on the tabletop to keep from fidgeting. It was important that Dustin have confidence in her dignity and refinement if he was going to take any advice from her. It wasn't his problem she was feeling as if she were walking on shaky ground at the moment.

"Don't feel awkward on my account," he said with a wink.

Despite herself, her heart fluttered. The man was certainly a charmer, if a badly dressed one. And how had he known she was feeling off-kilter? Had he seen it in her expression? She determined then and there to take better control of herself and the situation.

She cleared her throat and looped a lock of her deep brown hair around her index finger, twirling it in lazy circles. "Let's start at the beginning," she suggested.

"Sounds reasonable," he agreed. That he was genuinely amicable was clearly apparent to Isobel and worked immediately in his favor. He appeared unusually relaxed and free of the usual stark brassiness most men his age wore about themselves like a cloak.

Dustin was simply himself, and he offered that openness willingly to her; and, she suspected, to all those he encountered in the—what was it?

Oh, yes. Flower shop.

If she was successful in her endeavor, she very well could be about to change all that. It was one of the things his brother had mentioned—in the negative category of Dustin's life.

One small shop was all he owned. He didn't even have a second one located across town at one of the many available malls and outlets.

She felt a shiver she couldn't identify as anticipation or warning.

"You were late," she said without preamble. She had to start somewhere.

"I had the worst time finding a place to park," he explained with a shrug and an easy grin. "You know how Denver parking can be."

"You drove your car?" Isobel asked, surprise seeping into her voice.

"Doesn't everybody?"

She knew he was teasing her, but she couldn't resist answering him. "I assumed—well—that you could walk here from your shop. Or take the mall bus, although I admit that doesn't appeal to me, either."

His grin widened. "I did walk. My shop is only a few blocks down from here. But what would have been the fun in telling you that?" He chuckled. "I drove my car to work, though, since I live in the suburbs. I'm telling you this in case you want to tool around in it later." He gave her a wide, cheesy grin.

Dustin was clearly on the far side of sense. What had she gotten herself into?

"As I'm sure you'll quickly learn," he clarified, "I'm not everybody. Run-of-the-mill does not apply to me. I often walk, but I have a nifty little sports car and I like to drive it."

"Oh," she said lamely.

"And you came in...?"

The question dangled before her, taunting her silently for an answer.

She blushed. "A Towncar."

"Yeah? Huh. Well, what do you know? That doesn't surprise me in the least. You look the type. You wouldn't catch me dead in a Towncar, though."

"Why is that?" she asked, intrigued despite wondering if his attitude might be condescending to her. It didn't show in his tone or facial expression. His smile was genuine and kind. He had a strong, masculine smile that made her heart beat faster in response.

He was pulling her under his spell and she knew it, but she was helpless to stop herself. Maybe that was exactly what he wanted, and she was playing right into his hand, but she'd never been as cynical as she oftentimes thought she should be.

She immediately decided to take Dustin at face value unless he proved her wrong. It was only fair, and he seemed nice enough.

She cupped her chin in one palm and leaned forward to better hear his answer.

"Well, I can't afford it, for one thing," he said. "At least, not until I get my inheritance." He laughed at his own joke. "And for another, I think fancy cars give off kind of a hoity-toity attitude to the general public, don't you?"

Isobel nearly choked. Towncars were a regular, accepted part of her existence as an image consultant, and something she'd taken for granted. She had been raised in a small Texas town and had not grown up with such luxuries, yet she admitted now she'd never given a single thought to how a person on the streets of Denver, perhaps someone less fortunate than herself, would consider the mode of transportation she chose.

"But you said you drive a sports car," she countered tightly as it occurred to her. It was an accusation, and she knew it sounded like one.

"That's true. I do," he said, smiling. He didn't look the least bit offended, but he offered no further explanation.

"And that's okay with you."

His grin widened. Then he lifted his dark eyebrows and shrugged.

"Are you hungry?" Dustin asked, meeting her gaze squarely. She had the feeling he knew exactly what she was thinking and was playing rescuer to her own guilty conscience.

It was an unnerving feeling. She shook her mind from the thought and said, "No, thank you. I try not to eat much after noon."

He glanced at his watch, as if he weren't already aware it was well after the noon hour. "You're kidding. That can't be good for your health."

Isobel chuckled. Ten minutes into their first conversation and he was already trying to change her. What an amusing paradox.

“A drink, at least?” he coaxed in a warm, rich voice. “You aren’t going to sit across from me with nothing while I stuff my face, are you? I missed lunch and I’m starving.”

“All right,” she said, giving in gracefully to this one small concession. “I guess I might enjoy a good cup of hot tea. Herbal. And make sure it has no caffeine or sugar.”

He stood and saluted. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll bring you just what you ordered.”

“Thank you, Dustin,” she said with a sigh as she watched him approach the counter. She wasn’t sure if he’d heard her or not, for he didn’t turn or acknowledge the comment.

“Dearest Lord, what have I gotten myself into?” she prayed under her breath as she stared at Dustin’s broad back. “I’m feeling a little overwhelmed here. This is a new one for me. A little help? Please.”

Actually, she could use a lot of help. She felt she was way out of her league where Dustin Fairfax was concerned.

He quickly returned to the table with a loaded tray, placing it on the table before turning his chair around properly and seating himself.

“One cool-mint hot tea for you, and two large, completely indigestible pastrami sandwiches with extra jalapenos and onions, extra-large French fries and a large cola for me.”

With a cheeky smile he leaned on his elbows and began unwrapping his first sandwich.

“Are you trying to give yourself a heart attack?” she quipped.

He burst into laughter and had to cover his mouth to keep from spitting food. Putting his index finger in the air in a gesture for her to hold on for a moment, he chewed and swallowed his large bite of sandwich, then chased it down with a big drink of cola.

“This stuff doesn’t bother me,” he assured her. “I’m as healthy as a horse.”

She eyed his meal in disbelief, then twisted her lips and met his sparkling gaze. “Right. Tell me those same words again in ten years.”

“I had my cholesterol checked when I turned thirty. Honest.”

She shrugged. “Eat whatever you want. They’re your arteries.”

With a grin, he picked up his jumbo-sized sandwich and took another big bite, right out of the middle of the bread.

Etiquette was evidently going to have to be added to Isobel’s list of things to go over with Dustin in their six weeks together.

She was amazed at how fast the sandwiches and fries disappeared, especially since Dustin was doing most of the talking during the meal.

He cheerfully talked about his childhood—about growing up in the Fairfax household, how he had felt having a controlling father and a competitive older brother like Addison around.

He glossed over the death of his mother, though Isobel thought it must have made a huge alteration in the life of a considerate, impressionable young man, both then and now. Certainly such a tragic event would have had a great deal of influence on the man Dustin had become.

Addison was Dustin’s only sibling, and according to Dustin’s many laughter-filled stories, they had done their share of fighting and wrestling when they were young. Addison had always been bigger, but Dustin was slick, smooth and, he told Isobel with a smile that could spark up a lighthouse, he could run faster. So the disputes had remained fairly even, and Dustin spoke of his brother with affection.

He asked Isobel about her family, but she said as little as possible, other than that she was an only child and grew up in a small town in Texas.

Since Dustin’s parents had been together forty-five years until his mother’s death, Isobel felt awkward discussing her own parents’ divorce when she was an infant, and the many ways that had affected her.

Besides, everyone’s parents got divorced these days. Why should she have been any different?

She didn't remember her father, and though she'd made peace with that, it rose up to haunt her now. She felt overly emotional trying to discuss her childhood, though Dustin had been open about his.

Not that she'd had a bad life—her mother had become a Christian soon after her father had left, and Isobel had been raised healthy, happy and loved, with plenty of hard work to bind them together in strength and lots of support from their home church.

Still, she didn't like talking about it, especially to a man she hardly knew. She didn't even want to think about it.

When she said as much, Dustin seemed to take it in stride, though he tried time and again to engage her in talking about herself; if not her childhood, at least what she was doing now.

"I have a small condo in the city that I share with my best friend, Camille. Have you met her?" she asked inquisitively.

He shook his head vigorously. "No, but I've heard she's a great girl."

"Camille would have a fit if she heard you calling her girl," Isobel replied. "We're both twenty-eight, you know."

"Oh," he said, frowning as he strung out the syllable. "Old ladies, then."

She couldn't help it. She kicked him under the table, and thought she made good contact with his shin.

He didn't even acknowledge that he'd been kicked at all, except perhaps in the tiniest widening of his all-male grin.

"I have the rest of the afternoon off," he said with his usual casual bluntness. "If you want to take advantage of me, that is."

Isobel choked on her tea. She knew her face was flaming, and it didn't help that Dustin only chuckled mildly when he realized what he'd said, or rather, how it had sounded.

He shook his head and cuffed the side of his head to indicate he hadn't been thinking. "What I was really trying to say was—"

"I know what you were trying to say," she said, surprised she could speak. "And I'm going to surprise you by taking you up on that invitation, however awkwardly it may have been worded," she teased, enjoying the way his attractive smile widened when their eyes met.

She fought a grin as she considered her plan. Oh, she would take advantage of Dustin, all right—or rather, of his easygoing nature.

Isobel was certain she could make him a changed man in a single afternoon. She thought even Addison would be impressed, not to mention pleased, with such a feat.

Maybe Dustin would get his inheritance after all, if she had anything to do with it.

And she did.

Chapter Four

“Do you want to take a ride in my sports car?” Dustin offered, jingling the keys in his pocket as he held the deli door open for her and gestured her through ahead of him.

She glanced up at the dim sunlight. At least it didn’t look as if it was going to rain, or worse, snow. Colorado winters were unpredictable. “Tempting as the offer sounds, a ride won’t be necessary. We can walk where we’re going.”

As soon as they stepped out onto the sidewalk, he automatically repositioned himself so he was walking closer to the curb. The sign of a true gentleman, Isobel thought. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all.

Dustin kept his hands in his pockets and whistled as he walked, glancing at her from time to time and genuinely smiling, although a bit as if he had a secret he wasn’t yet ready to share with her. He seemed in no hurry, but rather content just to walk slowly and casually, as if they were old friends.

And he was certainly taking this well, having to make sudden changes in his life dictated by another person he had only just met and had no reason yet to trust.

If she were in his position, she knew she would be balking and pulling at the reins at such outrageous and uncomfortable demands.

Then again, maybe he didn’t really know what he was getting himself into.

Yet.

She stopped and gestured at a shop door. “We’re here.”

Dustin glanced up at the sign and froze.

“No way,” he said, his voice low and guttural. “No possible way.”

“Now, Dustin, be reasonable,” she pleaded, reaching up to place a hand on his shoulder, hoping he would take the hint and look at her.

He did.

And when their eyes met, Isobel felt exactly what he was feeling—the shock, the panic, the desire to run.

Truth told, she felt like running, herself, and pulling him along. But that wasn’t what she was here to do, and Dustin had to start somewhere. Here was as good a spot as any.

She would not back down, no matter how his bright green puppy-dog eyes implored her to do so.

“It’s not as bad as all that,” she assured him, not certain how committed she sounded.

He shook his head. “Says you.”

“Trust me?” she urged.

His gaze asked, Why should I? His jaw was clenched, but he stepped forward and opened the door for her. “After you.”

She grinned in triumph, her heart pumping at the battle of wills she had just fought and won. This was a big victory for her—her first—and would no doubt be one of her best. It would pave the way for other small successes and triumphs.

The end result, of course, would be a final product of which she could be proud—and more importantly, of which Dustin could be proud.

“Ricardo, please meet my friend, Dustin,” Isobel said as her regular hairdresser rushed forward and kissed both her hands.

Ricardo was unique and not a little odd with his spiked purple hair and dozens of gold necklaces that encompassed his broad, hairy chest, not to mention his bombastic personality and shrill voice.

His personality and flashy looks took some getting used to, but when it came to hair, Ricardo was the best in the industry.

Dustin, his eyebrows raised and his expression one of pure panic, was halfway out the door before Isobel caught him by the elbow.

“No way,” he whispered in her ear. “Look at that guy’s hair. I’m not letting him anywhere near me with a pair of scissors. He obviously has no clue what he’s doing.”

She laughed. “Hairdressers don’t do their own hair,” she said, nudging him back into the room. “Haven’t you ever heard the elementary-school logic problem about the small town with only two barbers?”

He looked at her as if she’d gone mad. She smothered a smile.

“Obviously not.” She burst into laughter at the horrified, stubborn look on his face. He was adorable when he was being mulish.

With a flourish of her arms, she continued with her story. “So, then. There were only two barbers in this small town. One of the barbers had a neat trim, and the other’s hair was chopped at odd edges. Now think about it, Dustin. Which of these two barbers would you rather go to?”

Delighted, she was aware of how his eyes immediately began to sparkle with understanding and his amused gaze turned on her.

He chuckled and shook his head. “I’ve never heard that one before, and I’ll admit you have a valid point. But then again, I have no reason to trust Ricardo, despite your clever stories.” He winked at her. “I haven’t seen the other barber, so to speak,” he reminded her, his voice grave but his eyes alight with humor.

“Oh, yes, you have,” she countered, grinning back at him. She ran her fingers through the thick lengths of her long, chocolate-brown hair, circling the ends with her fingers. “You’re looking at her.”

“That man does your hair?” he said in an incredulous whisper. “Surely not.”

“Oh, but he does. Ricardo is a genius. He not only cuts my hair, but he has a clientele list that would blow your mind. The best haircuts in Denver are provided by this man, I assure you.”

Dustin yanked off his newsboy cap and scratched the top of his head, still looking as if he might bolt. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he muttered.

Isobel wordlessly took his arm and led him farther into the hair studio. Ricardo, who had no doubt heard most of their conversation, elegantly gestured to a barber chair and indicated Dustin should sit. Isobel was surprised the hairstylist’s expression didn’t betray a thing.

He drew a smock around Dustin and directed his gaze to Isobel. “What would you like done with the young man, my dear?”

“His hair,” Isobel joked.

“Really?” Ricardo made a gesture of surprise, his hands over his mouth. “And here I was all ready to give him a pedicure.”

Dustin’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped at what he no doubt considered a threat. Pinching his mouth closed with a frustrated twist to his lips, he quickly tucked his feet under the smock, making Ricardo howl with unabashed laughter.

“Cut it short,” said Isobel decisively, and Dustin cringed, shirking his shoulders and glaring first at her and then at Ricardo.

She paused a minute to let him stew before continuing her direction to Ricardo, not allowing herself the satisfied smile she was feeling inside.

“Not too short, though. A business cut. Something to keep his curls in order. And he’s still young—keep the front long enough to comb back.”

“I’m going to look like a toddler,” Dustin grumbled good-naturedly.

“Not with Ricardo’s help, you won’t,” she assured him, moving forward to place a hand on his shoulder. “He is perfection itself.”

She turned halfway away from him and muttered, “Not like you could look like a toddler.”

“What was that?” Dustin asked immediately, sounding suspicious.

She turned back to him and grinned. “Oh, nothing. I was just thinking aloud.”

Dustin’s gaze met hers in the large mirror in front of them. He still didn’t look convinced.

“Trust me,” she pleaded. “I really do know what I’m doing.”

He gave her a clipped nod.

Knowing no amount of verbal persuasion would help, she stepped back then and let the master hairdresser go to his work.

The first thing Ricardo did, after giving Dustin a thorough shampoo and returning him to his chair, was to turn Dustin away from the mirror, which Isobel immediately understood and thought was an excellent idea. The worst thing that could happen would be for Dustin to run out before his haircut was finished.

Half a haircut would definitely not be an improvement on no haircut at all. She curled her fingers around in front of her mouth to hide her amusement, but Dustin caught her motion and glared at her anyway.

Dustin closed his eyes as Ricardo trimmed the back of his hair flush with his neckline. The more the hairdresser snipped, the curlier Dustin's hair became, but they were soft, natural curls instead of the long, frizzier style he'd worn before.

Finally, Ricardo dropped a bottle of hair gel into Dustin's lap without a word.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Dustin growled, picking up the bottle and eyeing it suspiciously. "I'm a wash-and-wear kind of guy."

"Allow me to demonstrate," Ricardo said, not taking no for an answer. "You put a nickel-sized amount of the product on your palm and then work it through the tips of your hair with your fingers. Work the hair up and out. There is no need to work it into your scalp."

The hairdresser took the bottle from Dustin and held out his palm. He squirted a dollop of orange gel in the exact shape and size of a nickel, dropped the bottle back in Dustin's lap, then rubbed his hands together and began stroking his fingers expertly through Dustin's hair.

Dustin was still staring at his lap, hardly watching what Ricardo was doing. "I've never in my life..." he said, sounding stunned, or at least stubbornly uncomfortable.

"There's a first time for everything, right, Dustin?" Isobel asked quietly, totally amazed at his transformation. "Take a look at yourself."

Holding her breath for his response, Isobel turned Dustin's chair back toward the mirror.

Dustin stared at his reflection, hardly recognizing the man staring back at him. Who was this slick-haired man?

Perhaps he had worn his hair in the same style for a few years longer than he should have. Isobel may have had a point.

Of course, that was her job, wasn't it? To find the best places to make changes in order to make him a better man?

He still wasn't completely sold on the idea, but this was one point in her favor.

That said, he wasn't at all convinced about putting sticky orange gel in his hair every morning. But he had to admit the guy staring back at him in the mirror had his own charm.

Between the haircut and the gel Ricardo had meticulously applied, the hairdresser had done an outstanding job taming the wild curls Dustin had battled all his life. Ricardo had parted his hair just off to the right side of center and combed every strand of hair neatly back into place. Only a few stray curls escaped.

As Isobel had instructed, the hair on his forehead was combed back in the current style. He had to admit it looked good, though he wasn't at all sure he could duplicate the process when he was alone in his own home.

But in the end, the score was: Isobel one, and Dustin zero.

He stared in the mirror one more second, memorizing every detail.

He looked, well, contemporary.

And though there was no way he would admit it to anyone—especially Isobel, who would no doubt report such findings straight to Addison—Dustin found he rather liked his new look.

Especially with a hat.

“Double or nothing,” he mumbled under his breath with a quick shake of his head.

“What was that?” she queried back, looking wary and more than a little suspicious.

He adjusted his newsboy cap backward on top of his new haircut, winked at Isobel and walked out the door without a word.

Chapter Five

Dustin didn't wait for Isobel to call him. Part of him—probably the sensible part—wanted to hide from her and tenaciously avoid her for as much of the prescribed six weeks as possible, but something about Isobel intrigued him. Completely apart from the stupid agreement he'd made with Addison, perhaps even in spite of it, he wanted to get to know her better.

Besides, in the long run it was the only way to get to his trust fund. He wouldn't examine his motives any deeper than that.

Isobel was certainly a beautiful woman, with her deep brown hair filled with red highlights and her warm brown eyes. She was tall and lithe. Maybe she could stand to gain a pound or two, in his opinion, but she still had the hint of womanly curves that would turn any man's head.

What caught him most, though, were her gorgeous bee-stung lips and knockout smile, especially when it was directed at him.

Perhaps it was this thought that made him hold his breath as he dialed her number.

"Dustin," she said when he greeted her. She sounded surprised, but did he hear a bit of excitement in her voice, as well, or was it his imagination and a healthy dose of wishful thinking? "I certainly didn't expect to hear from you so s-oon," she stammered.

"Well, I figured you owe me one." He waited for her response, a grin pulling at his lips.

Dead silence.

He listened to the telephone line crackling and the praise music in the background, obviously coming from Isobel's stereo.

"Look at it this way. I put up with your torture yesterday, so today you're on my terms. And that's why I'm calling." He chuckled.

"That's not how this scheme is supposed to work," she protested immediately in a high, strained voice that only made Dustin's smile widen. "We're not supposed to be having a social relationship. I'm working on you, remember?"

"How are you going to help me become an honest, hard-working citizen if you don't know anything about me?" he countered. "Granted, you chopped off my hair without even knowing my middle name, but I don't think you can turn me into the best I can become without knowing a little bit more about the real me."

"What is your middle name?" she asked, sounding distinctly uncomfortable.

"So, you want to know now, do you? After you whack my hair off?" he teased. "How fair is that?"

"Dustin," she pleaded.

"James."

"Dustin James Fairfax. That's very nice. Now I will know that crucial bit of information for future whacking and/or cutting."

"Is that a threat?"

"Oh, no," she said with a laugh. "Consider it a promise."

"That doesn't sound good," he said. "Even more reason for us to get together today, though, if you ask me. Which you didn't," he pointed out wryly.

She sighed extravagantly. Pointedly.

"What did you have in mind?" She sounded as if he were about to ask her to walk the plank.

The horrible pirate captain. That was him, all right. Fit him like an old pair of sneakers. He held in the callous chuckle that would befit his pirate status, but he was tempted.

Instead, he told her why he'd really called. "I thought you could join me at my flower shop. To see what I do all day, you know? The regular nine-to-five thing my brother doesn't really think I have going on."

She breathed an audible sigh of relief, and this time it sounded genuine. “That actually sounds reasonable.”

“And you sound surprised.”

She laughed. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be. I have an active imagination. You’ll learn that about me as we work together. I’m more tempted to believe the moon is made of green cheese than that astronauts have landed.”

“I thought so—something like me holding you at sword point as you walk the plank?”

“Mmm. Something like that,” she murmured thoughtfully.

“Aaargh,” he said playfully in his best gravelly pirate’s voice.

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