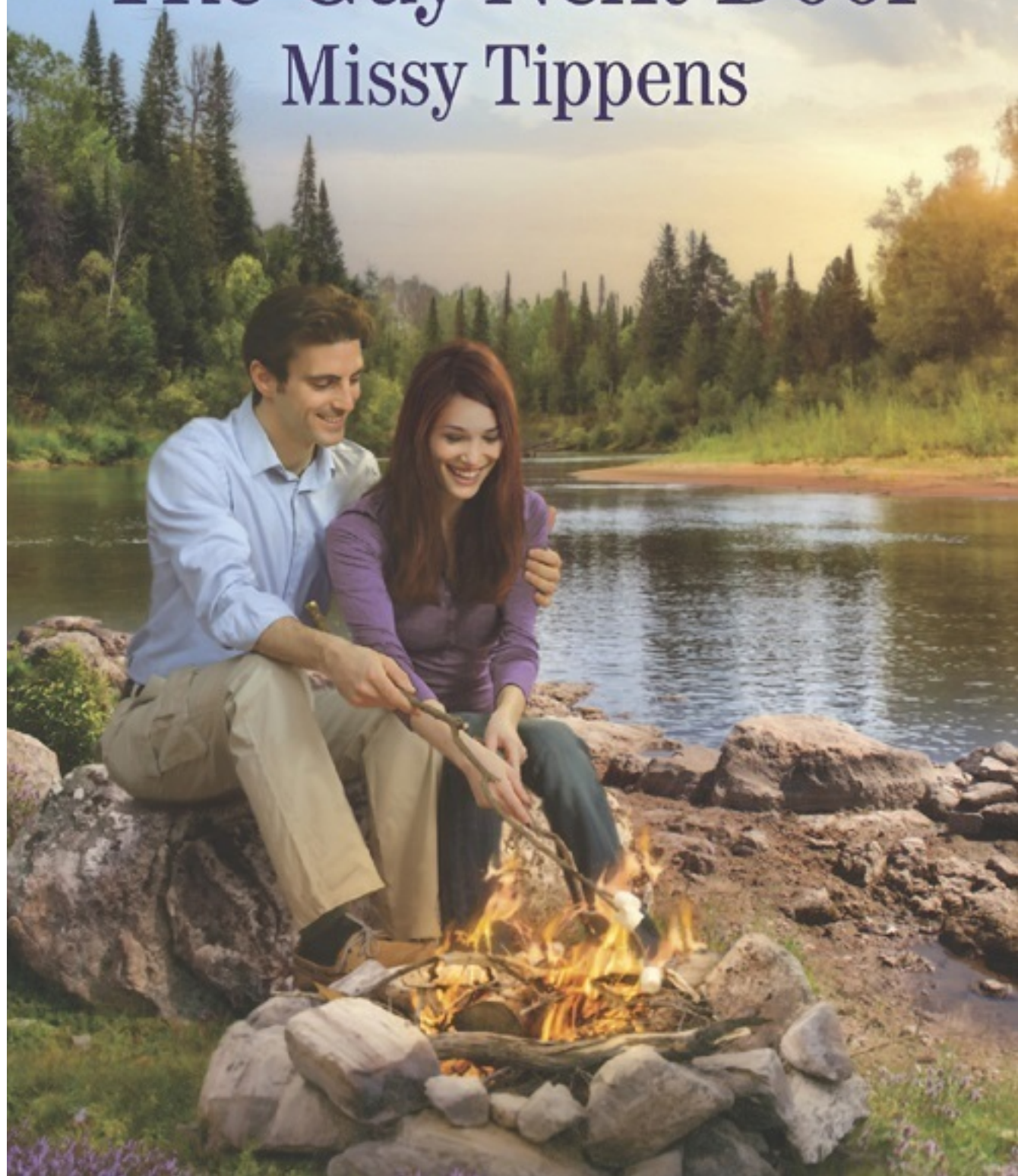


HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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The Guy Next Door

Missy Tippens



Missy Tipples
The Guy Next Door

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From Friend to...Fiancé? Stalwart and steady, Darcy O'Malley has been by Luke Jordan's side since childhood. She has seen him through trials and tragedies, romances and breakups. They've been everything to each other—except boyfriend and girlfriend. Why ruin a good thing? What Luke can't explain, however, is why suddenly Darcy's presence is making his heart beat so hard. Something has changed since he left Appleton, and it's making him uneasy. Is it possible his best friend is meant to be something more? Dare he risk their perfect friendship in the hopes of finding his perfect wife?

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"What's wrong between us?" Luke asked.

"Something's off, and it has nothing to do with our parents."

The look in his eyes—heat, frustration, determination—sent her heart racing, her breath hitching. He was going to dig until he found out exactly what had gotten into her.

A stupid, dangerous, poorly timed attraction.

She needed to say something instead of standing there struck speechless by his nearness and the rawness in his eyes.

The powerful urge to simply pour it all out, to tell her good friend how she used to feel about him, how she feared she would feel again if she wasn't careful, pulsed in her head. She reached up and laid her hand lightly on his chest. "Luke..."

His eyes sparked, and then he stepped away, his expression turning icy.

The rebuff sent a shock wave of cold through her body, cold enough to knock her back to her senses.

MISSY TIPPENS

Born and raised in Kentucky, Missy met her very own hero when she headed to grad school in Atlanta, Georgia. She promptly fell in love and hasn't left Georgia since. She and her pastor husband have been married twenty-five-plus years now and have been blessed with three wonderful children and an assortment of pets.

Missy is thankful to God that she's been called to write stories of love and faith. After ten years of pursuing her dream of being published, she made her first sale of a full-length novel to the Love Inspired line. She still pinches herself to see if it really happened!

Missy would love to hear from readers through her website, www.missytippens.com, or by email at missytippens@aol.com. For those with no internet access, you may reach her c/o Love Inspired Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

The Guy Next Door

Missy Tippens



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Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as
members of one body you were called to peace.

And be thankful.

—Colossians 3:15

To editors Emily Rodmell and Melissa Endlich—

For allowing me to live my dream.

To Melinda Meredith and Kim Botner—

For lifelong friendship, even across the miles.

To God—

For knowing me fully and loving me anyway.

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[Chapter One](#)

It's about time.

Darcy O'Malley sat on the front porch steps as the hot afternoon sun headed westward, watching her best friend's car pull into the driveway next door. She sucked in a deep breath, tension easing out with it.

Six months. Six long months since Luke Jordan had been home—the longest they'd ever gone without seeing each other. Having his car parked where it belonged brought a sense of normalcy.

Of course, these days, he called Tennessee home.

Darcy waved, but he couldn't see her from behind the overgrown boxwoods.

He climbed out of the car and stretched. As expected, his hair had grown shaggy. Unruly brown hair that begged a girl to push it off his forehead.

Darcy gave a derisive snort. It was ridiculous how many girls had held that honor. Too many to count.

She stepped out on the sidewalk. Luke spotted her and waved, his face lighting with a big goofy grin.

"Come on over," he called, motioning her toward his car.

He met her halfway and held out his arms. She fell into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck. When he lifted her off the ground and gave a brotherly squeeze, she felt as if she were the one who had come home. She'd missed him.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said against his cheek, breathing in the familiar scent of his Prell shampoo. "But you need a haircut."

"Glad to be back in Georgia where you can hound me into going to the barber." He set her on her feet and smiled, but his eyes looked shadowed.

She should have anticipated the sadness. This was his first visit home since his mother's funeral. "Tough coming back?"

"Yeah. Seeing the house..." He sucked in a deep breath and glanced up at the two-story brick home he'd lived in from birth.

She waited, knowing better than to push him to talk about his mom.

"I'm surprised to see you here in the middle of the afternoon," he said, effectively changing the subject. "Thought you'd be at one of your many jobs."

Typical of him to slip in a jab about her over-packed schedule, though Luke was simply spouting what everyone else around her had been spouting. He always joked about her overcommitment, but underneath, he was being protective, worried about her stress level and health.

"I only have two jobs," she said. "Finished one for the day and am about to head to the other."

"Only two." He shook his head. "You're finally living your dream of being a microbiologist and have the luxury of living rent-free. Why put in so many long hours?"

The muscles in Darcy's neck tightened with nagging concerns over losing that rent-free status before she was ready. "I don't remember asking your opinion," she said, snippier than she'd meant.

One corner of his mouth tilted up in a grin. He'd always loved riling her up and blaming her temper on her red hair.

“Hey, I just want you to have a life,” he said. “Maybe go out, have fun, find that Prince Charming you’ve always dreamed of.”

For now, her life was consumed by work and paying off student loans. Even if by some chance Prince Charming did show up, she couldn’t squeeze in a moment for him.

She’d missed their banter, though, and couldn’t help returning his smile. “Once again, I don’t remember asking for your opinion.”

He laughed and nudged her shoulder with his.

“So, how long are you staying?” she asked.

“A week, two at most. I brought some work, and Roger’s covering for me.”

“Not long, but I’ll take what I can get.” She hooked her arm around his and looked up. “So when can we hang out?”

Their gazes locked, and his teasing smirk faltered. “Um, I may be pretty busy.” He glanced at their joined arms, then at his parents’ house.

The action felt like a snub. Had she somehow made him uncomfortable?

“You’re not going to like why I’m here,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Dad’s been talking of downsizing. I’m here to help get the house ready to put on the market. I’m hoping he and Granny will join me in Nashville.”

Her heart stuttered. Surely Luke didn’t mean it.

He didn’t laugh. Didn’t bump her shoulder like he usually did when he was joking. Her stomach sank to the sidewalk, and the excitement that had fueled her for days tumbled along with it.

Her best friend might stay in Tennessee permanently?

* * *

Stunned, Luke looked into Darcy’s eyes—had they always been so blue? Had her auburn hair always been so shiny and silky, her fair, freckled skin so smooth? When she’d wrapped her arm around his, every inch of that smooth skin touching his ignited his nerve endings.

What was wrong with him? This was Darcy. Darcy. And she was simply acting like she always did.

He needed to get control of this sudden, weird...attraction. Hadn’t he learned the hard way that going from friend to anything beyond friend would end in a mess?

Remember Chloe, he thought, repeating his and Darcy’s long-ago mantra. Darcy’s sister, Chloe, barely spoke to him nowadays. He couldn’t imagine the pain of losing Darcy’s friendship.

“It’s been six months since you were home, Luke.” Darcy glared at him, playful, yet chastising. “Your family can’t move away. We’d never see each other.”

The hurt tone of her voice made him want to pull her close, to comfort. Instead, he eased his arm out of her grasp. At the moment, even incidental contact left him reeling. “Dad’s been depressed, so I need to do something. He’s obviously lonely, says the place is too big for him since Mom died.”

“It wouldn’t be if you moved back to Appleton.” The pleading in her eyes was all too familiar. They’d had this conversation several times.

Hands jammed in his pockets, he put extra space between them. “You’ve missed me that much, huh?” he teased.

“Dream on.” She laughed and hitched a thumb toward the house. “I can’t believe your dad would abandon so many memories.”

“Once we have a plan in motion to sell the house, I’ll ask him to come to Nashville and become a partner in what will soon be my law practice.”

She stilled. “You’re really going to do it? Stay in Nashville and ask Burt to join you? He’s been building his practice here in Appleton for decades. Why don’t you join him, prove yourself like you wanted to do when you were a kid.”

That dream had died when his dad had told him he wasn't cut out for law school. When he'd said Luke should probably consider another career. Granted, Luke had goofed off in high school, but midway through college, with Darcy's help, he had buckled down. He'd applied and been admitted into law school the following year. He'd headed to graduate school without his dad's support, and had worked hard to prove Burt wrong.

Looking into her eyes, Luke said, "You know how strongly I feel about making my own way." He nodded toward his car and headed that direction.

"Yeah, I know." She sighed and followed. "I just wish Burt would recognize how good you are at your job. And that you would let go of the past and come back here where you belong."

Luke had been working as an associate for Roger Young for nearly a year, had thrived on the challenge and done well. Once Roger retired, Luke would take over. "Business is great. There's more opportunity in the city."

She arched a brow. "Your dad has been very successful in Appleton. Together, you could be more so."

Of course she and the townspeople would assume Luke had gone off on his own and refused an offer to join his father's practice. They didn't know the painful truth. Dad himself didn't even realize how the snub had hurt. "He's never asked me to come work with him."

Darcy's face scrunched in disbelief. "What?"

Luke wished he could take the humiliating words back, but this was Darcy. He could tell her anything. "It's true. Dad never once mentioned having me join his practice, even when I told him about other job offers."

Which had been the death of Luke's dream—Jordan & Jordan, Attorneys at Law in the big Victorian house on Golden Street.

Darcy laid a soft hand on his arm. "I can't believe that."

"You know he doubted me every step of the way, which is why I plan to stay in Nashville." Luke reached in the backseat and pulled out his luggage.

"Then why ask him to join your practice?"

"I've been worried about him, have been thinking for weeks about asking him to move closer. Figured a new start might help."

She sighed. "I understand your concern. I've been there with Mom."

"I also want to bring in a partner with experience, someone who'll inspire confidence in the clients Roger is sending my way. I'd like to think Dad and I could work well together, especially if I get a chance to show him I'm capable."

As Darcy glanced at her watch, the sun shone on her hair, highlighting coppery strands that brushed well past her shoulders. Most of her life, she'd worn a ponytail. When had she started wearing her hair down? Had it been down the last time he saw her?

"Time to head to the mall job." Eyes so deep blue they sometimes looked violet sparked with frustration. "It doesn't sound as if I'll be able to change your mind about coming back home for good."

Luke shook his head. "I closed on the office building last week. Roger has sent out letters to all his clients informing them of his pending retirement, inviting those who haven't yet worked with me to drop by."

Darcy frowned. "What about your grandmother? You really think she'll move, too?"

That part of his plan didn't sit well with Luke. He hated to uproot Granny after she'd lived in Appleton her whole life. "I hope she will."

"If you ask me, dynamite couldn't blast her out of her home." Her eyes heated before she glanced away, angry. "But, you didn't ask me."

"Come on, Darcy, be happy for me."

“If anyone can persuade Burt and Grace to move, it’s their beloved only child and grandchild.” Her gaze darted everywhere except directly at him, silently voicing her disapproval, pricking at his conscience.

He hadn’t come home looking for approval, though. He’d come home with a goal to help his dad while securing his own future. And he intended to see his plan through.

* * *

Luke pushed aside his sadness with each step he took up the ladder leaning against his childhood home. He wouldn’t dwell on saying goodbye to the place where he’d grown up. The house was just brick and mortar, full of material stuff. He would always have the memories of his mom.

Darcy would probably disagree. For some odd reason, their earlier conversation had left him rattled. Probably because he’d disappointed her. He’d always hated letting her down.

“What are you doing up there, son?” Burt Jordan, home from the office, stood in the front yard in dress pants and a button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up, arms crossed.

“Trying to get a good look at the roof,” Luke said. “Probably needs to be replaced.”

“Wish you would’ve talked to me before you bothered. I’ve got someone lined up to replace it next week.”

Laughing, Luke climbed down. “Good. You’re jumping on repairs.”

“Noreen has encouraged me to get out of my cave and start living again.” Burt held out his hand. “Welcome home.”

Luke turned the shake into a brief half hug. “Thanks.” He pulled away and took a good look at his dad.

For months after Luke’s mom died, Burt had sounded despondent on the phone. The past few weeks, though, he’d sounded stronger, more upbeat. Now, Luke saw a hint of the old spark in his dad’s eyes, the way he’d been before Joan got sick. Apparently Darcy’s widowed mom, Noreen, had helped Burt begin to deal with the loss.

With a familiar stab of guilt over not being around much the past couple of years, he gave his dad one last pat on the shoulder. “I’m here to help with the house. Tell me what you need.”

His dad winced, looking off in the distance, wrinkles crinkling around his brown eyes. He’d aged a lot since Mom’s passing. “Been meaning to talk to you about that.”

“I saw the load of pine straw beside the house,” Luke said. “Want to spread some mulch while we talk?”

“Sure. Let me change first.”

Luke took the ladder to the garage and then located the wheelbarrow. In a few minutes, his dad reappeared in a pair of old jeans and a polo shirt—about as casual as he ever dressed. No faded T-shirts for Burt Jordan. In fact, he rarely wore jeans.

Burt grabbed a shovel and two rakes and handed one to Luke. “Had that load delivered a few weeks ago. Haven’t had a chance to spread it.”

Either that or he’d been so depressed he hadn’t felt up to going outside to work in the yard. “Let’s do it, then.”

They filled the wheelbarrow and made several trips dumping piles of pine straw around the shrubbery and flower beds, spreading it as they went.

“So are you still wanting to sell the house?” Luke asked.

“Well, the thing is…” Burt raked pine straw around an island of azalea bushes with white blooms almost past their peak. “I’ve been having second thoughts.”

Letting go of the house would be difficult, but if his dad changed his mind about selling, he probably wouldn’t consider relocating to Nashville.

Luke stopped raking and rested his arm on the handle. “Is it because of memories of Mom?”

Burt paused and stared off toward the house considering the question, as if unsure how to answer. “That’s part of it.”

He'd never seen his dad indecisive, but that probably went along with the grief. "Has something changed since you told me you wanted to downsize?"

A look of consternation drew Burt's brows downward. "Selling the house feels so final. It closes the door to the past, and I'm not ready for that. I'd like to do something, first, that'll be a testament to your mom, to show what Joan meant to us and to the community."

Without warning, Luke's throat tightened. "Any ideas?"

"Not yet, although, as active as she was, it shouldn't be difficult. I'm sorry if I dragged you here too soon."

"Don't apologize," Luke said. "I want you to make the right decision for you." And he meant it. No matter what happened with the potential move or partnership, Luke wanted his dad to be happy.

"Life is fleeting," Burt said. "I know I need to move on. I just don't want to rush the process."

Luke pushed the wheelbarrow to spread mulch around the boxwoods in front of the house. "Six months isn't long, and selling is a big decision. I get it."

Burt clapped him on the back. "Exactly. Noreen said you'd understand."

Why would his dad share his doubts with Darcy's mother before he told Luke? The families had been close for ages...but still.

Raking pine straw around the hedges, Luke covered dirt, the occasional weed and remnants of last year's mulch. Noreen was just being supportive. She'd been a widow for a few years. Luke should thank her for being there for Burt. That was what neighbors in Appleton did. They looked out for each other.

Neighbors...Darcy. They'd always looked out for each other, too.

Stopping to wipe his brow, Burt looked around the yard. "I should start dinner soon."

"Go ahead. I'll finish this up."

Burt thanked him and headed inside. In the fading light, Luke hefted one last load of pine straw into the wheelbarrow and pushed it to the opposite side of the house to spread around his mother's rosebushes. He'd have just enough daylight to finish the job.

As he spread mulch around the fragrant plants his mother had tended as if they were her children, Luke imagined her there beside him. The sweet smell always reminded him of her. The previous week, he'd walked into the office and thought, for a split second, his mom was there. But a vase of freshly cut flowers from Roger's wife's garden had been the trigger.

Joan had been strong and solid, a homemaker who made her family feel loved and cared for, even as she reached out to love others. She'd been the glue that held their family together when he and his dad butted heads through his high school and early college years.

Before Joan died, she told Luke and Burt they needed to be patient with each other, needed to be more supportive. Fortunately, for the most part, he and Burt had made peace. His mother would want that, would expect it.

Luke wanted to join his dad in honoring her memory. Together they would figure out a way.

Tires on the pavement of the driveway next door drew his attention. Darcy returning from her second job?

No. Noreen's small sedan. She climbed out of the vehicle, smiling as she headed his way.

With her long, light blond hair, no gray in sight, and the stylish way she dressed, Noreen had always looked younger than other mothers. Though now, a few slight wrinkles around her light blue eyes hinted at her age.

"Good to have you home," she said as she hugged him. "Burt has looked forward to your visit."

The perfume she wore smelled familiar, as if it was the same perfume his mom, her best friend, had always worn. His throat constricted, forcing him to cough to clear it. "Thanks for all you've done to help him the past few months."

"I know what a struggle it is to lose a spouse. I simply pushed him to get out of the house and back to the office."

“Whatever you’ve done has worked. He’s in a better place.”

She started to say something, but then folded her hands together, pressing them in front of her lips as if stopping herself.

“What is it?”

Shaking her head, she smiled. “Nothing at all. Have you seen Darcy yet?”

“Ran into her as I was arriving this afternoon.”

Noreen’s eyebrows drew together, and she let out a small humph. “It’s a wonder she was home at all. She’s working herself to death to pay off her student loans by a self-imposed deadline. She has no social life.”

“I happened to catch her between the lab job and mall job.”

Noreen let out a deep sigh. “I told her she is welcome to continue living with me as long as she likes. No need to push herself so.”

He couldn’t help but grin. “She always was a little headstrong.”

“Just like her dad,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Another vehicle pulled into the driveway. Darcy’s SUV. His stomach lurched in anticipation as if he were sixteen instead of twenty-six.

“There she is now,” Noreen said. “She works till eight again tomorrow night. Then Saturday, after working all day at the hospital, she’ll do the late shift at the mall.”

“Late shift?”

“The store closes at ten on weekends, which puts her home after eleven, making for a sixteen-hour day. Added to that, she takes the cash to the night deposit by herself.”

By herself with all that money? “Can’t she get a security escort?”

“She claims she’s perfectly safe.”

Darcy joined them by the roses. “From the frown on Mom’s face, I’d say she’s complaining about my arriving home late.”

How could Darcy be so careless? From the time she first moved into a dorm, hadn’t he always warned her to be cautious? “She’s just worried about you.”

Darcy slumped as if exhausted. “I don’t need a lecture right now.”

“Luke, maybe you can talk some sense into her.” Noreen rubbed her temples and then headed to the O’Malley house.

Luke turned to Darcy. “Long day, huh?”

“I’m fine. It was a slow evening.”

Gently lifting her chin, he examined her face. The shadows pooling under eyes had nothing to do with the fading daylight or harsh outdoor spotlight his dad had turned on. “You look worn out.”

“Gee, thanks.” She pushed his hand away. “You certainly know how to make a girl feel good.”

If he told her how beautiful he thought she was at the moment, she would think he’d gone off his rocker. She would not be comfortable if she found out that just this afternoon he’d seen her through new eyes.

The eyes of a man suddenly aware his best friend was a gorgeous, appealing woman.

Disdain for the out-of-character thoughts sent him grasping for a comeback, something funny, a brotherly dig. As a breeze lifted her long hair, blowing the ends across his arm, all clever thoughts fled.

“Hey, best friends look out for each other, don’t they?” he choked out, pulling the best friend card. “Maybe you need an intervention.”

“What I need is to have my priorities, my work, respected. You should empathize.”

Yeah, he did. But it didn’t mean he’d quit worrying about her welfare.

He would head over to the mall late Saturday. Maybe ask her for input on how they could honor his mother. Then he would insist on escorting her to the bank.

It was the least he could do for a friend.

Chapter Two

The next afternoon after a day of work at the lab, Darcy sat across from Grace Hunt, her co-chair for the church's upcoming missions committee auction. She and Grace, who happened to be Luke's grandmother, were working to raise money for the Food4Kids project.

The slamming of a car door outside jerked Darcy's mind away from their discussion.

Grace smoothed her fingers over short, perfectly styled salt-and-pepper hair. "I wonder if that's my grandson arriving at long last?" she said as if ready to shame Luke for waiting twenty-four hours to show up. "Had to invite him to dinner to make sure he'd come see me."

Of course they both knew Luke loved spending time with Grace, and that he could do no wrong in his grandmother's eyes.

Darcy laughed from across the well-worn, scarred oak table. "I imagine it's him. I think we've covered everything we need to do today."

"We have a good lineup of donors for this year's auction." With her tasteful makeup and up-to-date clothes, Grace looked fifty instead of nearly seventy. The energy and excitement she exuded belied her age, as well.

Darcy pushed away the last bite of the sweet, gooey pecan pie Grace had served. The sounds of birds chirping and a dog barking drifted through the back screen door, tempting Darcy to relax awhile.

She couldn't. The mall job waited. "I should go."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Grace said. "Food4Kids got an anonymous donation today that will cover the budget for the month of May, enabling us to finish out the school year."

"Oh?" Darcy fiddled with the pie plate, staring at it as if it were the most interesting thing ever. "That's great news."

Grace tilted her head toward Darcy, her speculative gaze making Darcy shift in her chair.

"Funny how the donor knew exactly how much we need right when we needed it," Grace said. "Didn't you tell me your new coworker at the hospital—Lois?—has a son who is part of the program and a recipient of the meals? I imagine you'd want to make sure he doesn't go hungry."

Steeling herself, Darcy braved looking at the oh-so-perceptive woman. "If this year's auction is successful, maybe we won't run out of money next year."

"You sure are generous, especially considering you're working so hard to pay off your college loans."

Darcy's face burned. She let out a long sigh. "Lois just graduated and is trying to get back on her feet after a divorce. She's adamant about refusing charity, especially from townspeople she knows. So please keep this anonymous, okay?"

Grace made a zipping motion over her lips, but then her grin unzipped them. She patted Darcy's hand. "By the way, I have a plan." She glanced toward the living room to make sure Luke wasn't there.

Apparently that hadn't been his car door they'd heard outside.

Darcy closed the notebook where she'd jotted a list of their project ideas. "Tell me."

Grace clasped her hands in front of her chest, looking more like an excited teenager than a grandmother. "It'll be the perfect way to get through to Luke," she whispered. "My grandson needs a push to get him to move home to Appleton."

No amount of pushing would change Luke's mind now that he'd bought the office building. Apparently, Grace had no idea what Luke planned.

"And that push involves the auction?"

A flash of sadness in Grace's eyes knocked her excitement down a notch. "Since Joan founded the Food4Kids ministry, his helping with the auction would be a connection to his mother."

"Of course."

"I'm simply going to suggest Luke work for a good cause, a cause that meant a lot to Joan."

Darcy herself had experienced moments of sadness at the loss of their committee leader. "You know, I hadn't anticipated how difficult this year's auction would be without her. Are you doing okay?"

Her friend sat straighter, pulling together the edges of her ivory cotton cardigan, taking a deep breath. "I'm fine. And hopeful. I truly think if Luke gets involved in the community, he'll realize this is where he belongs."

Which is exactly what Darcy had hoped, too—before Luke decided to stay in Nashville after law school. "Sure can't hurt to try." She scooted her folder labeled Missions Auction across the table. "He's welcome to take my place on the committee since I don't have a spare minute in my day."

Grace slid the folder back to Darcy. "No, dear. You're part of the plan, too. A reminder that he has friends here."

"Seriously, I don't mind turning over my duties to him. I've been working fifty to sixty hours a week."

"Working too many hours if you ask me," a deep voice said.

Luke filled the doorway leading to the kitchen, and at the sight of him, her heart gave a stutter.

Heart stutters were not allowed. She raised her chin and gave him a defiant look. "Butting into my business again?"

Grace hopped up and greeted him with a tight hug. "That was you we heard out front!"

"I got caught up talking to your neighbors."

"I've missed you, son. 'Bout time you came home."

"Thanks, Granny. I've missed you, too." Over the top of Grace's head he gave Darcy a pointed look. "See, Darcy. That's how you greet a man."

Darcy couldn't help laughing. "Hey, I greeted you like that yesterday, before you started handing out unsolicited advice about my work schedule."

"Come join us." Grace led Luke to the chair beside her. "I was talking to Darcy about her second job."

Grace sat and grasped Darcy's hand, her grip firm and strong. "Your mother told me you're worried about finances. Darcy, honey, you need to find a good man to take care of you. You shouldn't have to shoulder that burden alone."

Darcy almost laughed out loud. Then she remembered Grace had grown up in a different time, had married her husband at eighteen. "I appreciate the thought, but I haven't met my knight in shining armor and can't wait around until I do. I have bills to pay."

"Goodness, dear. How do you think you'll meet the man God intends for you if you're working all the time?" Grace asked.

A problem Darcy had bemoaned for months as her only life outside of work had been fulfilling church obligations.

Darcy glanced at Luke, his rakish grin proof he was enjoying her discomfort over the direction the conversation had taken.

She'd recently accepted the possibility that God planned for her to remain single. Darcy didn't need Grace shaking up a world she'd begun to settle into.

"It's not my place to doubt God's plan for my life." Darcy slid the folder back to Grace. "Now, here. Give this to Luke and tell him about your idea."

"Don't change the subject." Grace eased the folder to Darcy. "It's not your place to assume you know God's plan and give up so easily on love."

"I'm not giving up. I'm simply being realistic."

Back and forth, they'd slid the folder. With each declaration, Luke's questioning gaze bounced between the two of them.

Grace slowly inched the file toward Darcy. "You're a young, beautiful woman with lots to offer, isn't she, Luke?"

As she waited for his response, Darcy's breath froze in her lungs, and she wanted to slap herself silly over the fact that his answer mattered so much to her.

With a smirk on his face, he rubbed his chin and examined her. "She is young, yes..."

Darcy shook her head.

“And has a lot to offer...”

Why did her heart have to beat so wildly? Did she really care what he thought of her?

He leaned forward, his light brown eyes sparkling.

“And...?” She lifted her chin, staring right back, daring him to speak.

The teasing suddenly morphed into something else entirely. The laughter in his eyes heated, holding her captive. The moment seemed to last an eternity.

With one blink, he wiped away the spark between them. He sat back in his chair and looked over at his grandmother. “Granny, I have to admit, now that she’s all grown up, she’s not hard on the eyes.”

The words were something he would typically say in fun, something a brother would jokingly say to disparage his sister. But he appeared to use the words as a weapon against the connection they’d just shared.

A connection they didn’t normally have, one that didn’t fit best friends.

Fear thudded in her chest. At one time, she’d been one of the many girls with a crush on him. For years, she remained on the sidelines with friend status, watching as Luke dumped girlfriend after girlfriend, marveling at how he somehow managed to remain unscathed and commitment-free, while each new conquest cut her a little deeper. Dating her older sister, Chloe, had been the death of the crush. Falling in love with a girl named Raquel had hammered the nail in the coffin.

She could not let herself go there again even for a moment. Luke would end up stomping on her heart like he had before. Unintentionally, granted. But a stomp was painful nonetheless.

Darcy yanked up the auction folder with a huff and pressed it to her chest.

Grace belted out a delighted laugh. “You watch, Darcy. Some lucky young man will come along and snatch you up someday.” She winked, crinkles of laugh lines forming around her eyes and mouth, as if daring Darcy to try to get in the last word.

“I surrender,” Darcy said. “I’m afraid if I keep refusing this folder, you’ll make me arm wrestle Luke to see who has to work on the committee. Luke, I sure hope you don’t plan to refuse your grandmother’s plea.”

“What plea?” he asked.

“I’ll leave you two to talk about it.” Darcy tucked the auction notes into her tote bag. “I’m scheduled to work a couple of hours at the mall tonight.”

Grace made a tsking sound. “Friday night’s the time for a nice dinner date. Didn’t I hear that boy Joey up the street asked you out?”

“Joey Meadows?” With twinkling eyes, Luke looked at Darcy, a laugh so close to the surface she wanted to smack him.

“No, Grace. Joey didn’t ask me out. His mother asked for him.”

Luke’s bark of laughter bounced off the kitchen cabinets.

“Now, no more pushing me to date. Be thankful I’m leaving with the silly file folder.”

“I am thankful. I think you and Luke will do an excellent job co-chairing the auction for the kids in our community.”

“What?” he asked.

Darcy’s stomach briefly took a nosedive before launching into a fluttery dance. This was Grace’s plan? “What do you mean co-chairing?”

“Luke, honey, I need you to take over my duties for the fund-raiser. I’m simply too busy right now to do a thorough job.”

“Whoa. Wait a minute,” Darcy said. “I thought you were just going to ask him to help.” She’d imagined him picking up donated furniture, setting up tables, manual jobs that required a little extra muscle power.

Grace picked up her Bible and waved it. “I’m leading a new women’s Bible study group as well as volunteering at the food pantry this month. I’d like to completely hand over the reins to Luke.”

“Granny, I—”

She threw her hand up to stop him. “How about we talk more about it over dinner? We don’t want to make Darcy late.”

“Okay. I’ll walk her out.”

Maybe Darcy should tell Grace Luke’s plan to ask Burt to move. What if they put the house on the market and Luke left next week?

No, Darcy couldn’t bear to break the woman’s heart. How could she tell Grace that her plan to lure Luke into moving to Appleton was doomed from the start?

Darcy stood and pushed the strap of her bag over her shoulder. “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Thanks for coming, dear. The kids in the community will be blessed by your hard work.”

Darcy smiled as she waved and headed toward the living room. Luke went ahead of her and stepped outside to hold the screen door open. For some reason, the thought of working closely with him on the project made her stomach wrap around itself in a pretzel of dread. So many things could go wrong—namely, the fact that he could leave town at any moment, sticking her with the majority of the auction work.

No, worse was the fact that he didn’t seem to care they’d never see each other once he moved Burt and Grace to Nashville.

Barreling out the front door, she ran into a wall of solid muscle.

She nearly bounced off Luke, and he grabbed her arms to set her upright. “You okay?”

“I’m sorry. I was zoned out, wasn’t watching.”

“In that much of a hurry?”

She looked into his stunning brown eyes and swallowed. Nodded. “Can’t be late.”

“Working weekend evenings must cut into your social life.”

“Not everyone has a hot date every weekend,” she snapped.

His eyes widened, and he held up his hands. “Sorry. I meant no offense.”

Heat swept from her chest upward. “No, I’m sorry. Sensitive subject after that conversation with your grandmother.”

Luke leaned against the screen, trapping her between it and the front door, his lips tilted up in a semi-smile. A knowing, snarky and way-too-appealing smile. “So, no hot dates lately, huh?”

“Spoken by the guy who would date anyone in a skirt.” She laughed at his ridiculously cocky pose and tried to shove him out of her way.

His bulging biceps didn’t budge.

A growl formed in her throat, but she stifled it. “Some of us are more selective than others,” she said instead, staring him down, wondering at her breathlessness. What was wrong with her?

“Touché.” His gaze dipped to her lips.

Great. A smudge of pecan pie filling or a speck of crust must’ve landed on her mouth. She nonchalantly wiped the area, just in case.

Luke laughed and stepped back, holding the screen door open. “I’m just playing with you. So you’re heading to the mall job?”

The extra space between them gave her room to breathe. “A night of selling accessories to the teen crowd at Glitzy Glenda’s. Have to be there at six.” Still trying to gather her wits, she glanced at her watch. “It’s five-thirty already.”

“Oh, well, I won’t keep you. But I do need your input on a matter with my dad. Maybe we can get together this weekend?”

Before she could decide how to answer, he gave a jaunty salute and headed back inside, totally unaffected by their close encounter.

* * *

Luke stepped inside Granny’s house, closed the front door and let his head drop against it. Man, what’s my problem?

Darcy was acting perfectly normal, but he hadn't been able to since the previous day when she'd first smiled up at him and it hit him how badly he'd missed her.

The last time he was home, Darcy had been his rock, holding his hand through his mom's funeral and graveside service. Talking to friends and family whenever he choked up, sensing his every need. They'd been more in tune than ever.

As friends. So what had changed?

Maybe he'd been working too hard. Hadn't been on a date in ages. That had to be the problem. Easily remedied when he got back to Nashville.

Luke shook off the weirdness and headed back to help with dinner.

Bustling around her kitchen, his grandmother tried to fill the space—space his mother would normally fill—with chatter.

Everything felt wrong without Mom in their midst. Empty-chair wrong. Lack-of-her-voice wrong. And wrong for Grace to be preparing dinner without the help of her daughter.

Desperate to ease the emptiness, Luke touched his grandmother's shoulder. "Will you show me how to make your chicken casserole?"

With a grateful smile and misty eyes, she nodded. "Of course."

As Granny continued making his favorite dish, she jotted down the recipe and talked him through the preparation. Pulling boiled chicken off the bones and chopping vegetables somehow soothed both of them. Granny chatted about the townspeople and church friends to update him on all the latest news. When she finally popped the casserole in the oven, she settled him at the table next to a freshly baked pecan pie with two slices missing. His mouth watered.

"There's your dessert," she said as she sat across from him with a satisfied smile.

"You know, you're making life tough for my future wife."

"I love spoiling you, and having you back home where you belong." Her brown eyes shone with happiness. Time together was good for both of them.

Unfortunately, his ultimate goal would not make her happy. "Granny—"

"Before you tell me everything that's going on with you, I need to talk to you about heading the auction committee."

"I won't be in town long."

She pushed herself up from the table and grabbed the calendar off the wall. The month of May featured a photo of kittens and puppies snuggled up together. Typical Granny.

As she returned to her seat, she spun the calendar around so he could see the blocks of writing. "You may not know it, but I'm a busy woman. Thought my senior years would be slow-paced and relaxed, but I hardly have a spare moment."

Her scribbles on the calendar indicated committee meetings and Bible studies and luncheons. Other than Sunday, she barely had a day open each week. Had she guessed why he was in town and wanted to make it clear that she'd never willingly move away?

"Wow. Looks like you've got your hand in everything around town."

"I do. I like feeling needed. And like that I can contribute, giving back to my community and church."

He nodded and swallowed hard. Here it comes. She's onto my plan and is going to scold me for it.

"That's why I need your help," she said. "Your timing is perfect for this project." Her smile gentled. "The purpose of the auction is to raise funds for Food4Kids, the program your mother started."

He pulled in a long, slow breath, trying to control his emotions. "I remember her working on it." He'd hated to imagine kids having the kind of gnawing hunger that made your stomach dig into your backbone.

“When Joan first started Food4Kids at the elementary schools, the number of kids whose parents weren’t willing or able to provide nourishing meals on weekends was small. No more than ten children. But a growing number come to school on Mondays hungry.”

“How many are in the program now?” he asked.

“Over a hundred kids countywide. More on a waiting list.”

“And you need more funding.” His mother’s face formed in his mind. He recalled her working diligently for those children, making sure each one went home on Friday afternoons with a backpack full of food to keep them until Monday’s breakfast at school. She would be pleased to have his help on her pet project.

If Luke took over this auction and saw it through, the funds would help the community, and possibly comfort his grandmother.

Ensuring this program continued would honor his mother. Perhaps help his dad to heal. “Granny, tell me what I can do.”

Squeezing his hand, she blinked back tears. “You’re a kindhearted man, Luke. I’m proud of you.”

She wouldn’t be so proud when he offered his dad a job in Tennessee. Or when he asked Granny if she’d consider joining them.

Grace popped up out of her chair once again and grabbed a spiral-bound notebook from the small desk near the pantry. She set it in front of him. “Here are all the ideas Darcy and I have jotted so far. And a preliminary list of individual and business donors.”

“Darcy has all this info, too?”

“Yes, she’s been my co-chair and has worked on the committee for a couple of years.”

“Good. She can get me up to speed. I plan to see her this weekend.”

“Perfect.” She shoved the notebook into his hands. “The job’s all yours.”

Later, though, after Burt joined them for dinner and Luke had time to reflect on the arrangement with Darcy, he had a moment of doubt. Six months ago—six days ago, even—he would have said working with Darcy would be fun. He would have been pleased to spend time with his best friend. Content to relive the times they worked together on school or church projects.

But now, he felt uneasy.

He thought of the spark that zipped between them earlier, across the table and again at the front door. Thought of Darcy’s greeting the other day, falling into his arms, so glad to see him. The flowery smell of her silky auburn hair, the brush of her arm against his as she looked up at him, caring, trusting.

Yeah, the trusting part must be what was unsettling him.

He’d come to help his dad prepare to move. Period. He couldn’t let his thoughts run to what Darcy expected from him, or of any disappointment she’d shown over his plan.

* * *

While sitting at the workbench Saturday afternoon, Darcy’s stomach growled. Loudly.

Lois, her coworker in the microbiology lab, giggled. “Almost ready for lunch?”

“All done.” Darcy stacked petri dishes in a large bin and slid it back into the incubator. She enjoyed her full-time job at the local hospital. Loved the challenges each day offered, loved knowing her work helped patients even though she didn’t have direct contact with them.

“You want to go to lunch first?” Lois asked.

“I’ve still got to enter culture results into the computer.”

Darcy pulled over the portable keyboard to record the Saturday morning data. When she got to the last patient, she entered “Light growth beta hemolytic Strep. Isolated for typing and sensitivity.”

This particular patient had been septic. Darcy prayed the organism they’d discovered on a Gram’s stain yesterday wouldn’t show antibiotic resistance.

“Darcy, there’s someone out front asking to see you.” Dr. Violet Crenshaw, the new pediatrician in town who often came by the lab on weekends to check test results of her patients, stood in the doorway of the microbiology lab. “And he’s gorgeous,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Thanks. I’ll be right there.” The mystery man had to be Luke. She’d always gotten that kind of reaction when she introduced him to friends at college or work.

Lois popped up from the microscope and hurried around the workbench. “So? Who is he?”

“No reason to get excited. I’m sure it’s only Luke, an old friend of mine.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “Only a friend?”

“My best friend since birth.”

“Ooh, is he single?” she practically purred.

“No.” Shock jolted through Darcy at the sharp tone she’d used. “I mean, yes. I assume he is.”

Lois’s surprised expression confirmed her abruptness.

“I’m sorry. Anyway, he lives in Nashville now,” she added stupidly.

“If he’s only a friend, maybe you can introduce us sometime. I love Nashville.” Lois wiggled her eyebrows and headed back to the scope.

“Sure.”

Why did I do that? Lois and Luke would actually be a good match. She was cute and fun. A little quiet, but not afraid to belt out a good laugh when warranted. And she was a struggling single mom with a young son who could use a good man in his life. Luke would like her sweetness. Her generosity. Her dark brown eyes and wavy blond hair.

Luke had always been partial to blondes with brown eyes.

By the time Darcy reached the lab waiting area, workers whispered and checked him out. She was irked that Luke had garnered the interest of every female in the lab.

She tried to exhale her irritation as she approached, brushing her not-blond hair out of her not-brown eyes.

“Hi, Darcy. I saw you back there in the lab, looking professional in that lab coat,” Luke said.

“Yeah, it’s a real fashion statement, all right.”

“I’m serious. You worked hard to get here.”

Her stomach tumbled and twirled, pleased he’d noticed. “Thanks. So, what’s up?”

“Looks like we’ll be working together on the Food4Kids auction.”

“So you’re definitely taking Grace’s place?”

“I figured it’s the least I can do to honor my mom. And I have some ideas. Wanted to see if you’d like to have lunch to discuss them.”

Still hesitant to spend too much time with him, yet certain she could handle it, she gave a firm nod. “It’s a great way to honor your mom. I was just about to take my lunch break.”

He held up a bag from the local sub sandwich shop. “Brought your favorite.”

“You don’t know my favorite anymore.”

He widened his eyes at her, looking quite pleased with himself. “Really? You don’t give me enough credit.”

“I no longer order ham and cheddar.”

“No ham and cheddar with mayo, mustard and tomato?” he asked with a cocky grin.

She shook her head, admittedly pleased he at least remembered her old favorite. “See? You’ve been gone too long. Things have changed.”

“Then I’m glad I ordered you the turkey and Swiss instead. With light mayo, honey mustard, spinach and green peppers.”

“How on earth?”

He shrugged and glanced across the room awkwardly. “I care enough to find out what you like.”

Her stomach swooped up and around, doing a few curlicues in the region of her heart. She opened her mouth but, unable to find words, she snapped it shut.

The fact that he knew her new favorite sandwich really should not make her so happy. She was acting ridiculous.

Luke suddenly gave her a big flirty wink—a Luke Jordan trademark, as if the whole embarrassment thing had been for show. “I also had to promise Mike a place to stay when he comes up for a concert in Nashville.”

Of course. Mike. The owner of the sub shop where she’d eaten regularly for the past year.

She snatched the bag out of his hand with a laugh. “You’re incorrigible.”

“The weather is perfect. Let’s go outside.”

She joined him as they headed outside to a picnic table near a walking path for employees.

As he set out the sandwiches and chips, she realized she hadn’t been on a picnic since their college days. They’d frequently eaten together while studying, sometimes in the quad on a blanket. Of course, their last picnic had been a disaster.

“The last picnic I had was when we ate pizza outside the dorm during finals senior year,” he said.

Why did he always seem to know what she was thinking as if their brains were somehow connected? “Me, too. And you ruined that one by bringing along what’s her name.” Which had hurt Darcy’s feelings. Before that day, they’d always kept their friendship separate from dating relationships, had protected their time together.

He grinned and held his hand over his heart. “You wound me. You don’t even remember her name.”

Snorting a laugh, she reached for the can of Coke he’d sat in front of her and popped the tab. “You probably don’t, either.”

He belted a hearty laugh as he pulled Grace’s notebook out of the bag and flipped it open. Then he attacked the wrapping on his ham sandwich. “I think an auction is a great idea for a fundraiser, but I wonder if maybe we should do more this year. Maybe host a dinner or even a formal dance to coincide.”

She threw her hand up. “Whoa. I only signed on for the auction, which has always included a covered-dish dinner right after church. What you’re suggesting sounds like a ton more work. As it is, I barely have time to breathe.”

“I figured we might as well give attendees other opportunities to contribute. No matter what we end up doing, I’d like to have a special time to honor my mother.”

She envisioned table decorations, caterers, a band. “All great ideas. Honoring Joan would be fantastic. But I can’t let this project eat into my part-time hours at the mall. If you want to do a dinner or dance, maybe I could talk Chloe into taking over for me. She has a lot of business contacts in town.”

His nose scrunched. “That might not go well.”

No, he and her sister hadn’t gotten along since he’d pursued her one summer in college. Luke finally captured Chloe’s heart—breaking Darcy’s—but the big breakup later that fall ruined his and Chloe’s friendship.

“You’re both adults now,” Darcy said. “Surely you could work together for charity.” Yes, they were all adults. So how could the mere suggestion that he work with Chloe still hurt?

“I’d rather work with you.” He looked into her eyes, and like some kind of terrible magnet, his gaze tugged at her heart.

Losing herself in those amazing brown eyes was an all-too-familiar feeling. Even at twenty-five, she was still vulnerable to his charm.

She couldn’t allow it. He would distract her. Hurt her. She had to stay focused on her goals.

“We’ll have to work around my two schedules.” Darcy forced her attention to her sandwich. She needed to work the two jobs to pay off student loans early so she didn’t have to rely on her mother. Noreen was finally acting happy again, and Darcy suspected she’d been seeing someone. She needed to give her mom some space, and despite what Grace said, Prince Charming wouldn’t just show up to sweep her off her feet.

Darcy glanced across the table. Luke with his flirty winks and his flattering words would only set her heart down the wrong path.

“Let’s just stick to doing the auction and lunch. We can manage.” He slapped his hand on the notebook. “So, have you looked at the list of tentative donors?”

“I helped compile it. Now we need to call each one to confirm and arrange a time to pick up the items. We can split the names.”

“I can do the calling. I’ll be around the house helping Dad, so my schedule will be flexible.”

“Sounds good. I’ve already arranged to pick up an unassembled portable basketball hoop from Mr. Lipscomb at the sporting goods store. Can you help with that on Sunday after church?”

“Sure. I’ll see if I can arrange some other donation pickups for Sunday afternoon since we’ll already be out.”

Oh, goodness. She thought of all the hours she, Grace and Joan had spent together on this project over the years. “We need to meet soon to approve the quarter-page newspaper ad, and to try to land some radio spots. Also we have to set up the fellowship hall. We’ll have quite a few late evenings.”

“No problem.” He smiled, then, distracted by his food, he took a big bite of his sandwich.

As they finished their lunch, she told him a little something about each of the donors, and about the Colorado ski trip that had been donated, their big-ticket item. By the time he walked her back inside the hospital, they had a basic game plan.

With the notebook in one hand and the other shoved in his pocket, Luke studied her. “I know how hard you work, Darcy. You give a hundred percent to everything you do. I’ll try my best to make the auction work easier on you, to keep it from eating away all your free time.”

He looked so serious. So earnest. From flirty charmer to sweet, caring best friend in the span of a lunch break. Both equally appealing, neither safe for her heart.

But Food4Kids needed her. Needed them as a team.

For the kids, and against her instinct for self-preservation, she would spend time with her friend. She could do this. “Thanks, Luke. I look forward to working with you.”

Chapter Three

Fifteen minutes to closing time. Darcy glanced around Glitzy Glenda’s, empty of customers, hoping to make it an early night. Maybe a few minutes to read that novel that sat untouched, gathering dust on her nightstand?

She folded one last scarf and placed it neatly on top of the stack, enjoying the sense of accomplishment that came with tidying up. Saturday nights could sometimes be a nightmare, but an older crowd had hit earlier than usual. Though she enjoyed working with preteens and young teenagers, they tended to travel in packs, tearing through the place like a tornado, leaving a swath of destruction in their wake. Something Darcy couldn’t relate to at all.

She’d never had a pack of girlfriends in high school. Never enjoyed shopping for jewelry, purses and hair accessories. She’d been tomboyish, a late bloomer who’d spent all her spare time with Luke, fearing he’d see her differently if she suddenly showed up wearing dangly earrings and eyeliner.

Certain he’d never think her as pretty as Chloe.

Shaking off old memories, she headed toward the cash register. One last quick walk around the shop and—

The entrance chime sounded. A group of giggling girls set upon tables of jewelry, and Darcy’s hope for an early evening quickly fizzled. “May I help you girls?”

One, a redhead with pretty hazel eyes set off by the perfect application of makeup, fastened a double strand of faux pink pearls around her neck and admired it in a mirror. “We’re just looking.”

Two of her friends, squealing at fifty decibels, darted to a table of wristlets.

“Oh, look,” screeched one. “The exact shade of green as my new Keds!”

“Buy it. Have you got your mom’s debit card on you?”

“Yeah.”

“Ashley, wait. Come look at this one first,” called a girl from the other side of the store. Meanwhile, two others stacked bracelets up the arms of a third friend.

There appeared to be a half-dozen of them dressed in stylish clothes, their hair about the same length and all flat ironed. At some point that evening, they’d eaten at a nearby restaurant because several of them had to-go cups they’d set down and quickly forgotten.

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh as the image of that novel beside her bed faded into oblivion.

A crash sounded in the back. “Uh-oh,” said one of the girls.

Crashes followed by uh-oh’s were never a good thing.

Darcy rushed to the back and found a rack of earrings turned over and gold and silver hoops scattered across the floor.

“I’m so sorry.” The girl’s mortified expression sent her friends into a fit of laughter.

“Don’t worry about it,” Darcy said.

While the three girls meandered to the next table, chattering and playing around as if nothing had happened, Darcy scooped up packs of earrings. The chime sounded again as someone else entered. Great.

“I’ll be right there,” she called.

The last of the earrings had landed under the display case. She got on her hands and knees and, with a grunt, made one last-ditch effort to reach them.

“Need some help?”

Luke. And she heard the grin in his voice.

“Luke Jordan, if you were a real gentleman, you’d already be down here helping me.”

“You’re right. My apologies.” He chuckled as he knelt down beside her and reached underneath the display, his breath tickling her neck as he angled his head out of the way.

She bolted to her feet. “A pack of...uh...earrings. Do you feel it?” She touched her neck. How many times had they wrestled around or goofed off without her ever once thinking about the feel of his breath against her skin?

And now—

“Is this what you’re looking for?” He stood and handed her the earrings.

“Yes. Thank you.” The fact he could set her on edge made her angry. At herself. And, though unfair, at him.

She tugged her shirt back where it belonged. Straightened the collar. “I need to check on my customers.”

“Go ahead. I’ll wait at the cash register.”

She caught up with the six girls near the front and tried to feign calmness she didn’t feel at the moment. “Are y’all ready to check out?”

“I think so.” The redhead still wore the necklace.

“So you decided to go with the pink pearls? They look great on you.”

She fingered them, looking around at her friends for confirmation. “I do like them.”

“They’re too classy for you,” said one of her supposed friends with a sneer before turning to the brunette nearby and laughing.

The girl looked stricken as she removed the necklace. “But they’re kind of expensive.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here and see if the yogurt place is still open,” said the mean one. She was the obvious leader, because everyone followed without questioning her order.

They also left without purchasing anything. Instead, they all set their items on a table near the door before quickly exiting to catch up with their boss.

Darcy growled as she rolled down the metal gate that closed off the shop from the mall.

“Tough night?” Luke asked.

“A little slower than usual, but that last group was typical. I’m afraid I’m not good at sales with the younger crowd.” She nodded to the discarded items. “They were going to buy those, but the pack leader declared it was time to go.”

“Next time, tell her to back off.”

Darcy laughed. “I’m sure that would go over really well. I’d probably get reported to my boss by a credit-card-toting teen.”

His eyes sparkled with mischief, as if he’d love to see the event. “Yeah, but you might make the sale.”

The main problem was that all these girly things were new to her, something she’d always been too embarrassed to admit she loved and longed to wear. “You know me. This feminine stuff is a steep learning curve.”

He looked her up and down with an intensity that made her squirm.

“You look plenty feminine to me. A natural beauty. You don’t need all this sparkly—” he gestured around the shop “—paraphernalia.”

Stunned, Darcy looked into his eyes. He’d always complimented her on being smart, but never had he praised her looks or femininity. Even that afternoon at Grace’s, he hadn’t said she was pretty.

“Accept the compliment, say, ‘Thank you,’” he teased, his smile softening.

Flames crept up her neck. “I need to clean up this mess.” The pink pearl necklace clacked as she jerked it up and hung it on the display.

“Fine. Ignore me.”

“I’m not ignoring you.” Darcy snatched up the neon green wristlet the girl had left behind and headed to the table of spring clearance items. “I don’t tend to trust compliments from a man who’s said those words to half the female population.”

He followed, laying a hand on her arm to still her movements. “I wasn’t giving you some cheap, recycled line. I spoke the truth, a truth you need to take to heart.”

What Darcy needed to take to heart at the moment was the fact she had to be careful around him, especially when he was being kind and supportive.

Being a good friend.

Darcy was strong and capable. Why go all weak-kneed just because he said she’s a natural beauty? “I accept your compliment.”

Luke smiled, a victorious smile. “Good. While we’re having this heart-to-heart, let me add that I hate seeing you killing yourself working two jobs when you don’t need to, and then volunteering at the church on top of it.”

Picking up the last of the discarded items, Darcy headed to the other side of the store. “You’ve already stated your opinion. And as I’ve already told you, I need to pay off my college debt to prepare to live on my own.”

“Your mom is worried about you, and so am I.”

“Did my mom send you?”

“It was my idea to come tonight.”

But he hadn’t denied her mother’s involvement.

Whether or not she had sent him, Luke hadn’t come by because he wanted to spend time with her. “Ah, I see. You dropped by to make sure I don’t get robbed making the deposit.”

“Your mom mentioned you carry cash to the bank each time you close.”

Darcy shook her head. “I appreciate you caring, but I’m perfectly safe. The night deposit drop box is located inside the front entrance of the mall, so I don’t even leave the premises with money.”

He ran a hand through his hair, causing a curl to drop across his forehead. “And you refuse to call mall security to escort you?”

“I walk with employees from several other stores.” When the timing works out.

“All of you sitting ducks, targets for someone armed and possibly desperate.”

Frustrated that he didn't seem to be listening to her, she marched to the front of the store and raised the gated door. "You can either trust my judgment, or you can leave."

"I'm not leaving."

"Then don't show up when it suits you and start butting into my business. You're not my keeper."

Color streaked across his cheekbones, a sure sign he was majorly frustrated. His jaw sawed back and forth. "No, I'm not. I'm your friend. Your best friend. And that should count for something."

Of course, he had to go and play the best friend card. They rarely did, only in dire circumstances. Darcy had pulled it once when he was dating a girl who ended up in juvie. He'd used it when she'd been sixteen and made plans to attend a party where there would be drinking, and another time when an overly charming lead singer of a band had asked her out in college.

He must be truly worried about her safety.

Begrudgingly, she reclosed the gate. "Wait here."

Once again, his victory smile flashed, but at least he had the decency not to verbally gloat.

"I won't be long closing out the cash register since we hardly sold anything." She sighed. "If I can't make the sale when these hoards of kids show up on the weekends, I'm afraid my boss will fire me."

"And that would be a bad thing because...?"

His sarcastic grin made her smile, too. "Oh, hush."

Leaving him to guard the place, she batched out the credit card machine, counted the cash and checks and filled out the deposit slip. She tucked the deposit in a lockable bank bag and then placed the cash register drawer, holding a set amount of money for the morning shift, in the safe.

Darcy quickly collected the to-go cups the girls had abandoned and emptied the trash. "I'm ready."

Luke took the trash bag from her, dumped it in a large rolling bin mall management provided near the shop entrance, and then waited in the mall as she turned off the lights, set the alarm, pulled down the gated door and locked it. He looked around, alert, ready to defend her.

She laughed, but his action set up an ache in her chest that haunted her all the way to the night deposit box. She loved that he cared about her. Yet she longed for more.

Longed for something Luke couldn't provide.

With a flourish, she tossed the money bag in the bank depository and closed the door, proving her shop closing ritual was safe.

He scowled at her flippant action. "I really don't like the idea of you doing this several times a week."

"Then I guess you'll have to move back home and escort me each night." She smiled sweetly, though the idea actually held appeal. Would he reconsider coming home?

His intense stare, as if he was possibly considering that option, made her heart race.

"You could do it, you know," she said.

One side of his mouth hitched up. "Be your bodyguard each night?"

"No. Move back home. Open your own practice here."

He shook his head as he opened the mall door, holding it for her. She pointed to her car, and they headed that direction.

"Can I ask you something without you getting in a huff about it?" he asked.

Which proved how well he knew her. "Probably not."

His familiar chuckle, and the fact they'd been friends forever, made her miss the past, less complicated times.

"Why are you in such a hurry to move into your own place?" he asked. "Why not take your time, be a companion for your mom and give up the overtime?"

"I told you. I need to prepare to move out, to support myself. And having the student loans over my head stresses me out."

“I can tell you’re worried about more than that.”

How could she explain her need to be financially independent in case she never married? “Mom needs her house and her life back. Needs her privacy, because I think she may be seeing someone. I should move on soon, but with bills to pay and no one to help me, I have to first plan and save.”

“Your mom would help if you needed her to,” Luke said.

“Sure, mom would let me live with her if I got in a jam. Even so, I need to be capable of supporting myself and don’t have any backup plan like you do.”

His eyes narrowed. “Backup plan?”

“If your business fails, your grandmother would help out, like she paid for graduate school.”

He straightened, offended. “My business isn’t going to fail.”

Her heart lurched. He’d always been sensitive about succeeding despite his dad’s doubts. “Of course it’s not going to fail. I only meant—”

“There’s your car,” he said coolly, cutting off her explanation. “I want to make sure you’re locked inside before I leave.”

Oh, man. She’d really made him mad. “Thanks for seeing me out safely.” She climbed in and locked the door.

He turned and walked away.

I’m such a rotten friend.

Luke rarely got mad. And when he did, it blew over quickly. But this time he was more than angry. She’d hurt him right where he was most vulnerable.

* * *

On Sunday morning as the congregation rose for the closing hymn for morning worship, Luke glanced at his dad beside him. They were standing in their regular pew in the middle of the sanctuary. Granny stood on the other side of Burt, singing her heart out.

All Luke could think about was that he needed to find a seasoned business partner—preferably his dad—and soon. He’d checked email that morning before leaving for the church and found a message from a client who had decided to leave the firm when he learned of Roger’s retirement, wanting a more experienced trial lawyer. And he wasn’t the first. Several others had already contacted Roger with concerns the past couple of days.

Luke tried to force his mind back to the music, to words that should inspire him and prevent his mind from wandering.

Staring at the hymnal, Luke recalled Darcy’s words from the night before. Did she truly think his business would fail? That he wasn’t capable of seeing it through the transition after Roger’s retirement?

The thought stung, but with his lack of work experience, she could be right. He couldn’t control whether clients left the firm. But he could control whom he hired and how he ran his business.

As Luke stared at the words on the page, the letters running together, he couldn’t help wondering what people would think of him asking his dad to come to Tennessee to join his practice. Would they think Luke hadn’t been able to succeed on his own?

No, he would be offering Burt an opportunity to start over. Thanks to Roger, Luke would be the one bringing clients to their new partnership.

As they filed out after the service, the elderly, squat gray-haired pastor of Appleton Community Church greeted parishioners at the door. Ever since Luke had moved to Nashville, he’d missed hearing sermons. Mainly because he spent Sundays at the office.

That needed to change. He needed to put God first in his life. He should find a place he felt as comfortable as he did in his Appleton church and attend worship more faithfully.

With light filtering through the stained glass windows, Luke inched along the carpeted center aisle with his dad and grandmother, greeting old friends. He hadn’t seen any of them since his mother’s

funeral, and a few mentioned once again how sweet and fitting the service had been. Their comments made it difficult for Luke to speak.

Each time someone said something about Joan, Luke glanced at his father, wondering how he managed to hold himself together. Burt simply shook their hands and agreed.

Once they greeted the pastor and exited the church, Granny headed to speak with a friend.

“Dad, has this talk about Mom been hard for you?” Luke asked.

“It was tough when I first came back to church. In fact, I doubt I’d be back if it wasn’t for Noreen pushing me. Too many memories. That empty seat beside me.”

“And now?”

Burt stood straight and determined, chin held high. “I’m always going to miss your mother, but she wanted me to live my life. I’m pushing through, trying to keep going.”

Glad his dad was doing better, Luke nodded. Yet Luke worried his dad could be trying so hard to move on that he was in denial, not truly dealing with the grief.

“There’s Noreen now.” Burt waved to her and Darcy as they came out the door.

The way Burt’s face lit up right before he bounded toward the women set off a warning signal in Luke’s brain. Dad and Noreen?

No way.

Noreen had been his mother’s best friend for decades. Their families had spent summers together at a lake house they first rented and then purchased together as co-owners. The adults had played Monopoly on Friday nights and went to movies together. The men had gone on fishing trips. The women swapped recipes and shopped.

There was no way his dad and Noreen would get involved romantically. Like Luke and Darcy would never get involved.

That had to be gratitude Luke had witnessed in Burt’s eyes. Gratitude for pulling him out of his isolation and depression.

As Granny approached, she watched Burt. Grace was very perceptive. If anything were going on between Burt and Noreen, she would notice.

Snapping her attention to Luke, she smiled. “Ready to go?”

Apparently she hadn’t picked up on anything. Luke took his grandmother’s arm and led her to join the others.

Burt waved them closer. “Luke, Darcy told me you’re helping pick up a basketball hoop for the auction.”

Darcy’s face flushed. She looked breathtaking in her deep blue blouse that matched her eyes exactly. She also wore a slim-fitting, knee-length skirt, a far cry from her casual college attire.

He liked this new, feminine look. Liked how the skirt showed off her slim legs, how—

Cut it out, Jordan. He pulled his attention back to his father. “I’m actually going to be working with Darcy on the fund-raising committee for Food4Kids while I’m home.”

“You are?” Dad asked, a broad smile forming. “Good to hear. Your mom would be pleased.”

“That’s nice of you, Luke,” Noreen said. “Hey, why don’t y’all plan on coming back to the house this evening for dinner? Grace, you, too. And Burt, of course,” she added almost as if she’d forgotten him, her cheeks turning bright red.

Once again, alarm bells clanged in Luke’s head. Since when did Noreen blush around anyone in his family? Had she developed a crush on his father?

“We’d be delighted to come,” Dad said, totally oblivious to the undercurrents.

Poor Dad. Letting Noreen down easy would be difficult. And not something Burt should have to deal with. Maybe Darcy could have a talk with her, gently suggest she be careful with her feelings.

Grace patted Noreen’s arm. “Thank you, dear, but I’m helping cook supper for the youth group kids tonight. I’ll join you another time.”

“Luke, I guess we need to head on over to the sporting goods store,” Darcy said.

“Sure.”

They said their goodbyes and walked to her small SUV.

“I appreciate this. I know you’re probably still angry with me,” she said as she pulled out of the parking lot.

“Angry with you?”

“Oh, come on. It’s me here. Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

So much for blowing off her comment from the night before. “Yeah, well...”

“I’m sorry. I really do believe in you. You’ve worked hard, accomplished so much.” She glanced over at him, her eyes begging him to believe her. “I know you won’t fail.”

As long as he could remember, she had believed in him and never wavered. That support was one of the reasons her friendship was so important to him. How could he stay mad at her? Besides, he’d never been able to. All she ever had to do was smile or laugh and it set his world right. “Forget about it.”

“Thanks.” She glanced over and gave him one of those smiles, soothing his bruised ego.

“So what’s the deal with your mom liking my dad?” he asked.

The car gave a lurch as she pushed the gas pedal too hard. “What?”

“I think she may have a crush on him. He’s been talking about Noreen this and Noreen that, as if she’s been helping him through his grief. From the way she was blushing just now, I think maybe she’s got feelings for him.”

Flipping on the blinker, Darcy glanced at him. “That’s crazy. They’re friends.”

“Have they been spending more time together?”

“I don’t really know. I’m not home much.”

Which meant it was entirely possible. He chewed the inside of his cheek as he considered what all Burt and Noreen might have talked about, might have shared. “You know, Dad says he’s having second thoughts about moving out of the house. Could be that she’s discouraging it.”

“I don’t see why she’d do that unless she thinks it’s too soon for him to make that type of decision. I remember her having fleeting thoughts about selling the house right after Dad died. Later, she said she was glad she hadn’t.”

Which only made asking his dad to relocate more difficult. “Maybe that’s all it is, a friend advising a friend. Still, you might want to talk to her. I’m afraid she’ll end up getting hurt.”

“You don’t need to worry. Remember, I think she may be seeing someone.” Darcy stopped at a stop sign and looked over, irritation drawing her mouth downward. “What if they did care for each other? Would that be a bad thing?”

How could she even entertain the idea? “Oh, come on, you can’t be serious. That would be strange. She was my mom’s best friend.”

“She’s been talking on the phone to someone a good bit, comes in late at night without explanation. Your dad would be a whole lot better than some stranger she’s apparently hiding from me.”

“Remember Chloe,” he said, reminding her of the mantra they’d typically used when one of them kidded about dating the other. “Applies to our parents, as well.”

She gave him an apologetic close-lipped smile. “Still, weird or not, I’d pick your dad over her dating someone I haven’t yet met.”

He shook his head. Time to get back to the business at hand. “I made some calls yesterday to confirm donations. Have a pretty good-size list for us today, so we might want to drive through and grab lunch at some point.”

She pulled into the sporting goods store lot and turned off the car. Held out her hand. “Show me the list. I can set up our route for efficiency.”

Darcy had always been one to jump in any situation and get right to work. A trait he'd admired. A trait that would serve them well for the fund-raiser. He needed to set aside any difference of opinion over their parents.

"We make a good team," he said. "I appreciate you helping me."

When she gave him a self-satisfied smirk, it was as if the old Darcy had fully returned. A teasing glint lit her eyes as she leaned over the console and squeezed his biceps. "I suppose you do need my help with heavy items. Office work makes you soft."

"And microscope work is muscle-building?" Laughing, he returned the inspection, his hand easily wrapping around her slim upper arm. The delicate skin was so soft that he couldn't resist rubbing his thumb over the underside.

She sucked in a breath, and it was as if the intake changed the electron composition of the air in the car. The space sizzled with tension as they stared into each other's eyes. His heart began to thud, quick and strong.

"Um, yeah, lifting all those test tubes and petri dishes is a real workout." With a strained laugh, she pulled away from his grip and clenched her hands in her lap.

Remember Chloe.

"So. A portable basketball hoop, huh?" he choked out. "That should bring in quite a few bucks for the kids."

"Yes. Valued at one hundred seventy-nine dollars."

"Very nice, indeed." He had to get out of the car before he said something stupid. He threw open his door, allowing all the awkwardness to escape the vehicle. "Come on. We've got a lot to do today."

* * *

If Darcy didn't get a grip, this working with Luke was going to be torture. Pure torture.

She strengthened her resolve and somehow managed to get through the day. But it seemed as if every five minutes her mind would wander, and she'd recall his touch.

At dinnertime, she pulled her SUV, full of the items they'd picked up that afternoon, into her driveway. You're ridiculous, Darcy O'Malley. Ri-dic-u-lous. If not so embarrassing, she'd yell the word out loud.

Their awkward moment earlier was totally her fault. She'd jokingly reached for his arm muscle, and then spazzed at the bizarre connection. She absolutely could not let her old crush come roaring back, or it would be impossible to work with him. Impossible to act normal around him.

"Are you sure your mom won't mind us storing the auction items here?" Luke asked as he opened the back of her vehicle.

"There's less storage space at the church. The items will be safe here until we can set up right before the auction."

Darcy propped the front door of the house open and began to carry small items into the wood paneled study. The room still reminded her of her dad, though her mom had pretty much taken over his desk. His books still filled the shelves, and his framed photos remained on the desk.

"Is that you, Darcy?" Noreen called from the kitchen.

"Yes. We're going to unload the car."

"Dinner will be ready soon. Burt is already here."

Someone in her mom's life had put a bounce back in her step and a chronic smile on her face. Could that person actually be Burt?

As Darcy trudged back outside, Luke's cell phone rang.

He signaled for her to hold up. "Yes, I appreciate you calling me back."

He listened to the caller for another moment. "I see." Nodded. Frowned. "Yes, I understand. Please don't worry about it. We'll talk soon."

Rubbing his forehead as if trying to smooth away a headache, he tucked the phone in his pocket. "That was Mr. Haley. They aren't going to be able to donate the trip to their ski chalet after all."

“You mean they can’t pay the travel expenses?”

“I mean they can’t donate any of it—travel, use of the chalet or the lift tickets. We’ve lost the whole vacation package.”

He had to be kidding. She waited for him to break into laughter and say so, but his serious expression squashed her hope.

She groaned. “That skiing package was supposed to raise the majority of our money. We’ve been advertising it on the church website for weeks. What happened?”

“He said unexpected financial obligations. Looks like we’re going to have to knock on doors to come up with more donations, and hopefully a big one.”

Which would take more of Darcy’s nonexistent time. That, coupled with the strain from being around Luke, was simply too much. “I can’t do this,” she said under her breath as she lifted a large painting out of the car.

He grabbed hold of the frame. “I’ll get that. It’s too heavy.”

He didn’t get it. She couldn’t handle the fund-raiser commitment—or him. “If Chloe comes to dinner this evening, I’m going to ask her to help round up donations.”

“Sure, do what you need to do.” He didn’t look thrilled by the prospect as he picked up a framed mirror and headed inside.

Having another committee member still wouldn’t solve the problem of Darcy handling her feelings for Luke. She’d had enough disappointment where he was concerned. She didn’t need to bring more on herself.

After two more loads of items, they carried the carton holding the basketball hoop to the garage, then headed to the kitchen.

Steam rose from a boiling pot on the stove. A freshly baked pound cake sat on the granite countertop, the smell of vanilla and sweetness filling the air.

Was it Darcy’s imagination, or were Burt and her mom standing awfully close? Could he be the mystery man? They looked kind of cute together and acted comfortable around each other. How could that be a bad thing? After watching her mother suffer through a year of sadness and withdrawal, followed by another year of merely getting by, Darcy liked seeing her happy.

And the affection didn’t appear one-sided like Luke had suggested.

“Oh, hi, you two.” Noreen’s eyes were bright, her smile perky. “Now I can put the garlic bread under the broiler. It’ll be ready in two minutes.”

“Is Chloe coming for dinner?” Darcy asked.

Burt opened the drawer and pulled out a serving spoon. “She called to say she was running late. We’re to go ahead and eat.”

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