



TO CATCH A CAMDEN

Victoria Pade

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HIS SINGLE DAYS ARE NUMBERED...Look up unlucky in love in the dictionary and you'll see Gia Grant's picture. Still, she takes inspiration from her elderly neighbours and will do anything to stop foreclosure on their home. Businessman Derek Camden claims he's here to help, but can't be trusted. So why is it every time she turns around she wants to kiss this lovable lout?Derek has a knack for falling for the wrong women. Or so he likes to tell himself – because the beautiful botanist is growing on him! This could definitely be the bachelor's last stand.

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“You were on my mind a lot this last week.”

Derek’s mouth eased into a small, thoughtful smile as his gaze lifted somewhat, and he added, “Must be the hair.” His blue eyes returned to hers.

Gia suddenly couldn’t think straight enough to say anything. She was just too overwhelmed with the idea of him kissing her. Something that certainly had no place here and now, at work, in her office, with her dressed for much worse than casual Friday, and him being who he was ...

And yet he was looking at her as if he might be thinking about it, too.

That couldn’t be ...

But he wasn’t making small talk anymore. He was standing there—dashing handsome in a suit that probably cost as much as her car—just looking into her eyes.

Then down at her mouth ...

Her chin went up a fraction of an inch as she looked into those astonishingly blue eyes of his, and she was ready.

* * *

The Camdens of Colorado:

They’ve made a fortune in business.

Can they make it in the game of love?

To Catch a Camden

Victoria Pade



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VICTORIA PADE is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author of numerous romance novels. She has two beautiful and talented daughters—Cori and Erin—and is a native of Colorado, where she lives and writes. A devoted chocolate lover, she’s in search of the perfect chocolate-chip-cookie recipe.

For information about her latest and upcoming releases, visit Victoria Pade on Facebook—she would love to hear from you.

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Chapter One

“This is a wonderful thing you’re doing, Gia.”

Gia Grant laughed uncomfortably at the compliment from the church pastor. “The Bronsons are wonderful people,” she demurred. “I didn’t know how tough it could get for the elderly until seeing the way things are for Larry and Marion. And thanks again for letting us use the church basement tonight to organize everything so we can get started.”

“Of course. The Bronsons have been church members since my father was pastor here. We want to do all we can.”

“That reminds me—thank your mom, too, for the cookies and the brownies and the cupcakes. I was surprised when the Bronsons wanted to come tonight—they just don’t go out much—but it’s turned into a rare social event for them. Complete with goodies,” she added with a nod toward the opposite end of the big room, where the elderly couple who were her next-door neighbors were chatting with other members of the church.

Gia had launched a grassroots effort to help the Bronsons. They were on the verge of losing their house because their fixed income wasn’t meeting the cost of living expense increases and the additional medical expenses mounting with their age.

After making several calls and searching the internet for help for them, she’d discovered there weren’t a lot of options available to older people in their predicament.

But she couldn’t just sit back and watch what was happening to them without doing something. So she’d spread the word in their surrounding neighborhood that help was needed.

Small business owners who knew the Bronsons had put out donation jars at their checkouts. The church had sounded the alarm in their newsletter, and Gia had persuaded a local news station to do a human-interest piece on them. It mentioned both the donation fund Gia had started for them and the need for manpower to do repairs and maintenance on their house.

Gia’s highest hope was that she could raise enough money to keep the Bronsons out of foreclosure. If she couldn’t do that, then she at least wanted to get the place in order so that it could be sold before that happened.

Tonight, neighbors, friends and church members had gathered to form a plan of action to spruce the place up, and now that the meeting was finished it had become a social hour. Gia was happy to see the eighty-nine-year-old Larry and his eighty-seven-year-old wife, Marion, enjoying themselves.

“I was also wondering if you might have dinner with me some night...” Pastor Brian said, interrupting her thoughts.

Gia had wondered if that was coming. Although she didn’t belong to the Bronsons’ church, the minister had asked to be part of her efforts to help the older couple, and that had meant seeing him here and there. He’d become more and more friendly over the past few weeks.

At first Gia had thought he was merely trying to entice another sheep into his flock. But then a personal undertone had developed when he talked to her and she’d begun to wonder if he was interested in her.

Thinking that he probably wasn’t, she’d still considered what she might do if he asked her out.

At thirty-four, Pastor Brian was only three years older than she was. He was nice looking, with golden-blond hair and hazel eyes. And he certainly came equipped with the attributes she was determined to look for in a man from here on out—he was upstanding and honest. There wasn’t so much as a hint of wrongdoing in any aspect of him—he was a minister, for crying out loud.

But the fact that he was the head of his church put a crimp in things. Not only wasn’t Gia a member of his religion, his job brought with it obligations and duties that were an uncomfortable reminder of the family ties that had bound her ex-husband and caused her to take a backseat in his life.

Plus, even though it had been nearly a year since her divorce was final, she felt as if she was just beginning to catch her breath, and she wasn’t ready to get into the whole dating thing again yet. With anyone.

And then there was the fact that she was divorced.

“Thanks for asking, Brian, but no,” she answered. “I like you, I do. But right now just the thought of dating gives me the willies. And even if it didn’t, I’m divorced. And your congregation is old-fashioned. I’ve overheard Marion’s church-lady friends talking about finding you a wife—”

“I’m surprised they haven’t formed a committee. By now I think I’ve been introduced to every young single female they’re even remotely related to.”

“You haven’t been introduced to the ones who are single through divorce, I can promise you that,” Gia said. “Because believe me, when it comes to who they want to see you with, it isn’t anyone with that in her background. In their eyes, that’s damaged goods and definitely not a prospect for their Pastor Brian.”

The minister smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, I told my folks I was going to ask you to dinner and they said the same thing,” he admitted. “But it would only be dinner and I thought I might risk a little scandal....”

Oh, good, I could go from being a shut-out in-law to a church scandal, Gia thought.

“But I’m really not ready,” she repeated honestly. “I’m just barely getting my being-single-again sea legs.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. I just thought I’d ask—no harm, no foul. I’m still with you a hundred percent on this project to help Larry and Marion.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Gia pointed at the restroom sign. “I’m headed to wash my hands—I got into something sticky.” And had just avoided getting into something even stickier....

“Yeah, I think I’m ready for another cup of coffee myself,” he said, leaving Gia free to go into the bathroom.

Safely behind a closed door, she went straight to the row of three sinks, breathing a sigh of relief now that that was over.

It hadn’t been too awkward, she decided.

The minister had taken her rejection in stride, so she thought it would all be okay. She hoped it would all be okay. And at least she knew now that she hadn’t been imagining things—because even as she’d thought he might be showing her undue interest, she’d also wondered if she was flattering herself.

She washed her hands and took stock of her reflection in the mirror above the sinks. Dark eyes. Decent skin. An okay nose—not too prominent, not misshapen. A mouth she was afraid might be too wide, especially when she smiled. And dark, curly, curly—really curly—hair that she had to keep six inches below her shoulders so the weight of it would keep it from bushing out like a fright wig.

A neglectful husband—whose eye had begun to wander at the end of their marriage—and then a divorce had her making more assessments of her looks than she had since she was a teenager. And finding flaws. So even as she’d thought the pastor might have been showing her undue interest, she’d also been skeptical of the possibility that she could attract a man’s attention.

Of course, there was also the fact that she was only five feet three inches tall—that made her one of the few people the five feet five inch minister was taller than....

That was probably the real reason, she thought suddenly, doubting herself all over again.

Gia’s second sigh was a bit demoralized.

Oh, well. At least she could say she’d been asked.

She finished washing her hands and after drying them with a paper towel, she used the towel to brush wrinkles from the black slacks she’d worn to work today with her plain white blouse. Then she tossed the used paper towel in the trash and left the restroom.

Which was when she noticed someone new coming down the steps into the church basement.

A latecomer, was her initial thought.

Before she took a second look and recognized the man.

Unless she was mistaken, that was Derek Camden.

She'd never met him. But not only had the Bronsons' dislike and resentment of the Camdens brought the well-known family to her attention whenever they were in the news or in magazine or newspaper articles, she also had some small knowledge of this specific Camden. He'd been involved for a brief time with her best friend Tyson's cousin—a woman Tyson referred to as the family nutcase—and Gia had seen a snapshot of the two together.

Being reasonably sure that was who he was, she moved to intercept him before he got out of the stairwell and could be seen by anyone else.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a hurry, hoping not to draw the attention of the Bronsons.

"Umm...I don't know. I heard through the grapevine that tonight was the night people were getting together to talk about helping Larry and Marion Bronson—that's the group I'm looking for...."

"But you're Derek Camden, aren't you?" Gia said.

"I am. And you are...?"

"Not going to let you in here."

His face erupted into a grin.

The face that she'd already noted was even more striking in person than it had been in the photograph. And he'd looked incredibly good in the photograph.

His hair was an even darker brown than hers was—verging on black—with just a touch of wave to the top that he left slightly longer than the short sides. His nose was the perfect length and shape—thin and straight. His mouth was just lush enough. He had the sexiest hint of a cleft in his chiseled chin. And nothing she'd heard about the Camden blue eyes had done his justice, because they were the vibrant blue of the delphiniums she loved to look out at through her kitchen window every morning.

And it all went with six foot two inches of muscular masculinity not at all hidden behind the tan slacks and cream-colored shirt he was wearing with his brown tie loosened at the open collar, and the suit coat he had hooked by a thumb over one impressively broad shoulder.

"You're not going to let me in here?" he repeated, as if her thinking she could stop him amused him no end.

"No, I'm not," Gia asserted. "It would ruin the Bronsons' night."

It only occurred to her as she said it that this man appeared to be about her own age and maybe didn't know what had been done by his family generations before. That maybe he was there purely in response to word getting out, and had genuinely just come to help. Without knowing that his family was at the heart of the Bronsons' hardship.

"I'm sorry, did you know that there's bad blood between the Bronsons and your family?" she asked.

The alarm in her tone only made him laugh. "A lot of people don't like the Camdens," was all he admitted to.

"This is more than just—" she wasn't sure how to put it so she repeated his words "—a lot of people not liking the Camdens on some sort of principal—"

"It's okay. I came to help anyway," he assured as if he didn't view an aversion to his family as an obstacle.

"Yeah...well...it wouldn't be okay with Larry and Marion, and I'm reasonably sure they wouldn't take help from any Camden," Gia said more bluntly because she was concerned that he wasn't getting the picture. "And this may not look like it, but it's a night out for them, they're having a good time talking to people they haven't seen in a while and I don't want it wrecked for them...." She had no doubt the presence of a Camden would do just that.

"But I do want to help them," Derek Camden said.

He was kind of stubborn. Great looking and amiable and certainly nothing more than tickled by her blockade, but difficult to persuade.

“They lost their hotel years ago to H. J. Camden. So maybe if you give them the Camden store that was built where their hotel was...” Gia suggested to get her point across. And to test his response and possibly learn whether or not he knew the history.

It worked, because he flinched charmingly and Gia had the impression that he knew exactly what she was talking about. “I don’t think I can do that. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want to do something. And by the way, who are you?” he asked without any rancor.

“Gia Grant. I live next door to the Bronsons.”

“And you’ve taken them under your wing,” he guessed. “The guy who cuts my hair down on University had a donation jar. He said there was some little lady behind this. Is this whole thing your doing, Gia Grant?”

“We’re friends and neighbors. The Bronsons are good, good people and I can’t sit by and just watch what’s happening to them—”

“Which is what, exactly?”

Gia glanced over her shoulder at the long lunch table where the group that was left was talking. They hadn’t yet noticed that she wasn’t back from the restroom, but that wasn’t going to last forever.

“The longer I stand here, the more likely it is that someone is going to see you and, honestly, I won’t let you put a damper on Larry and Marion’s night.”

“But I do want to help,” he insisted.

“Donate, then.”

He nodded that oh-so-handsome head sagely. “We’re interested in more than just stuffing some cash in a donation jar. My grandmother isn’t too much younger than the Bronsons, and let’s say they’ve struck a chord with her. She sent me to represent the family and make sure whatever needs the Bronsons have are met.”

“Then donate a lot of money. Anonymously, or they won’t take it.”

He inclined his head as if that might be a good solution but he just couldn’t accept it. “We don’t want to just throw some money at the problem. We want to find out what all of the problems are and lend a hand getting them addressed in the best way possible so these people can finish out their lives comfortably, safely and securely.”

“You’re admitting that what your family did way back when caused the problems, and now you have a responsibility to make things right,” Gia surmised.

“We just want to help,” he said, firmly holding that line and acknowledging nothing else.

Gia shook her head. “The Bronsons are in trouble. But they’re proud people. I’ve convinced them to accept help from their friends and neighbors, their church, by assuring them that the help is coming from people they’ve given business to for decades, from the same people they’ve helped in the past or would help if the need arose even now and they could. I’ve promised them that it isn’t charity, it’s people who know and care about them just wanting to do something for them. But they hate you—I’m sorry to be so direct, but that’s just a fact. I know them—they’ll think that anything you do will have an ulterior motive. If they know you’re behind a dime, they won’t take it.”

“Maybe you can persuade them to,” he proposed.

“I don’t know how I’d do that.”

“I’ll bet you can think of a way...” he said pointedly.

“You do owe them,” Gia said matter-of-factly because it was true. And even though she knew how the Bronsons would feel about accepting anything from the Camdens, she also knew that they were in need of more help than what her efforts were producing. The Camdens’ assistance could go much further in solving the elderly couple’s problems.

“Maybe you could introduce me as a friend of yours and leave out the part about me being a Camden.”

“They’d recognize you. They might not know exactly which Camden you are, but they follow your family like fans follow celebrities, begrudging you every step of the way. And they might be

old, but mentally, they're both sharp as tacks. Nothing gets by them, and you wouldn't, either." With another glance over her shoulder to make sure no one was looking in this direction, Gia added, "And really, I want you to leave before they spot you."

"I'm not giving up," he said then, but he did step one step higher, which made him tower above Gia even more. "So how about I leave it to you to convince them to accept my help?"

He reached into his shirt pocket with his free hand and pulled out a business card. "All my numbers are on that."

Gia accepted the card.

"If I don't hear from you, you'll have me knocking on your door—don't forget you already told me that you live next to the Bronsons."

"I can't make any promises," Gia said, knowing full well that she had to do what she could to convince Larry and Marion, because the Camdens—no matter how despicable—still had the kind of resources the Bronsons needed.

"I'm relying on you anyway," he said, investing her with the responsibility despite her hedging.

"I'll do what I can if you just go!"

He grinned again and took another step up. "I'll tell you one thing," he said as he did, "you're the prettiest bouncer I've ever been ousted by."

"As if a Camden has ever been kicked out of anyplace," Gia countered.

"You might be surprised."

"Just go!" she said, trying not to think that he was lingering in order to stare at her—which was how it appeared, because his beautiful blue eyes seemed to be taking in every inch of her and his expression said he was enjoying the view.

"Get back to me soon or I'll come for you..." he threatened in a way that didn't sound as if they were still talking about helping the Bronsons.

"No promises," Gia repeated firmly to let him know he wasn't wearing her down.

But he was. Just a tiny bit.

Enough so that, as she turned from the sight of him backing up the rest of the steps so he could go on studying her, she felt a smile come to the corners of her mouth.

Because although she had no idea why, just the way Derek Camden looked at her made her feel better about herself than the dinner invitation from the minister had.

Chapter Two

"Georgie! You feisty little beanbag, where are you?" Derek called when he went into his grandmother's house midmorning on Tuesday.

"She's in the greenhouse."

"Oh, hey, Jonah. Hey, Louie. I didn't see you guys up there."

Jonah Morrison—Derek's grandmother's old high school sweetheart and new husband since their wedding in June—seemed to be working on something on the stairs. Louie Haliburton—the male half of the married couple who had worked for the family as live-in staff for decades—was helping him.

"What's going on?" Derek asked the two older men.

"Fixing the banister," Louie answered.

"Or trying to," Jonah added.

"Need help?" Derek offered, even though he was in the midst of his workday and had only stopped by on his way back from a meeting with Camden Incorporated's bankers in his capacity as chief financial officer.

"Nah, we can handle it," Louie assured.

"I'll head for the greenhouse, then. Holler if you change your minds."

Derek went across the wide entryway, down the hallway that led straight to the kitchen. There he found Louie's wife, Margaret.

“Hey, Maggie-May,” he greeted the stocky woman, who was old enough for retirement but was still on her hands and knees cleaning one of the ovens.

“Derek! Did we expect you today?”

He leaned over and kissed her rosy cheek. “Nope. Just stopped by to talk to Georgie.”

“She’s in the greenhouse.”

“So I heard. That’s where I’m headed.”

“Staying for lunch?”

“Can’t. Have to get back to the office. I only have a few minutes.” He went through the kitchen to the greenhouse, where his grandmother was watering her prize orchids.

“Georgie...don’t let me scare you...” he said in a mellow tone once he got there, because his grandmother’s back was to him and he didn’t want to startle the seventy-five-year-old.

Georgianna Camden was the matriarch of the Camden family, the woman who had raised all ten of her grandchildren after the plane crash that killed their parents and her husband. The rest of the family called her GiGi. Derek had always affectionately called her Georgie.

“As if I didn’t hear you shouting from the doorway,” his grandmother said, turning off the water.

He crossed the greenhouse to kiss her cheek, too, putting an arm around the shoulders that—like the rest of her—felt as cushy as a beanbag chair.

He gave her a little squeeze before letting her go. “I’m on my way back to the office, but I thought I’d stop for a few minutes to tell you that I went to that church your friend belongs to last night—”

“Jean didn’t see you. I talked to her this morning.”

“Checking up on me?” he asked with a laugh. “I went but I didn’t get in. Some hot little number named Gia Grant caught me at the foot of the steps to the basement and wouldn’t let me go any farther.”

“I know that name—Jean can’t say enough good things about her. She doesn’t belong to their church, she’s the Bronsons’ neighbor and—”

“She’s the one behind this deal to help the Bronsons—I know, the guy who cuts my hair told me. But last night she was also the guardian of the gate. Your friend Jean was right about the meeting to organize the work for the Bronsons, but what she didn’t say was that the Bronsons themselves would be at the church. Gia Grant spotted me coming, recognized me somehow and wouldn’t let me out of the stairwell. She said a Camden would ruin the Bronsons’ night.”

“Oh, dear...”

“Yeah. We might not have known about what went on between H.J. and those people until you read about it in the journals, but it isn’t something they’ve forgotten.”

The man who had started the Camden empire—Derek’s great-grandfather H. J. Camden—had kept a journal while he was alive. Only recently rediscovered, it confirmed what H.J., his son, Hank, and his grandsons, Mitchum and Howard, had long been accused of—ruthless, unscrupulous business practices that trampled people and other businesses.

After reading the journals, Georgianna Camden and her grandchildren were determined to make amends for some of the worst of the wrongs done. Including what had been done to the Bronsons.

“Gia Grant says that no matter how much trouble the Bronsons are in,” Derek informed his grandmother, “they have too much pride to take anything from us. Her recommendation was that we just donate money anonymously.... And the anonymity wouldn’t be so bad for us, because then we’d be avoiding any admission of guilt....”

GiGi shook her head at that suggestion. “I know we need to keep from making any kind of open, public acknowledgment of wrongdoing so we don’t have people coming out of the woodwork to sue us for things the Camdens didn’t do—”

“Big corporations and money make for easy targets,” Derek confirmed. “And you know there are stories out there accusing us of stuff that didn’t happen—so, yeah, if we say some of the accusations are well founded, there’ll be an avalanche of see-I-told-you-so lawsuits for unfounded complaints that will tie us up in court until hell freezes over.”

“We also don’t want to come out and say that H.J. and your grandfather, father and uncle really were involved in underhanded business practices—there’s family loyalty at stake here, too,” GiGi said under her breath, because this was something that she didn’t discuss if Jonah, Margaret or Louie were around.

“So a payout would be a whole lot easier, but it wouldn’t protect us,” Derek acknowledged.

“And we wouldn’t necessarily achieve our goal of making amends with a simple payout,” GiGi added. “In this case in particular, just donating some money might not be the best answer for the Bronsons. Jean says they have no family. No one beyond that Gia girl—and she’s only a neighbor—to look after them or help them. They’re in their eighties, so there are some health problems, and Jean isn’t sure they should be living on their own anymore. And what if one of them dies and the other is left all alone—?”

“You want to just move them in here?” Derek joked.

“You know how I feel about this one, Derek. It’s going to need some involvement on our part for what remains of the Bronsons’ lives,” GiGi insisted. “And you know that just donating money doesn’t guarantee that the money will get into the right hands or get used in the ways it should be used, especially down the road. We have to know that these people have whatever they need to finish out their lives—financially and otherwise. And their needs can change depending on how their health or situation changes. We have to have some kind of presence in their lives. So you have to make nice with them. Win them over and establish a relationship with them so we can help later on, too, if need be. For their sake.”

“I touched on some of that with Gia. But I still couldn’t even get in the door....”

“Well, you’re going to have to do whatever it takes to accomplish that, honey. Maybe first you’ll have to win over the guard at the gate....”

That brought a vivid image of Gia Grant to mind—something that had been happening at the drop of a hat since he’d met her last night.

Maybe because of that hair, he thought.

That hair was just great!

Every time the memory of it popped into his head it made him smile.

Full and thick and shiny and wildly curly...

That was probably why it appealed to him. He liked things that were a little on the wild side.

And he’d loved that hair....

Plus, she had big, beautiful brown eyes the color of espresso sprinkled with gold dust.

And peaches-and-cream skin that didn’t show a single flaw.

And a straight nose that turned up almost imperceptibly and just a little impudently at the end.

And a picture-perfect mouth that was exactly the kind he liked to kiss because her lips were slightly full and sumptuous-looking....

All on top of a body that was tight but still soft and curvaceous even if she wasn’t particularly tall....

Oh, yeah, he’d done a lot of thinking about Gia Grant since last night....

For no reason he could put his finger on.

“I did ask her to intervene on my behalf, but she wasn’t too optimistic that she could convince the Bronsons to accept anything from us,” he told his grandmother when he’d pulled himself out of his thoughts of Gia.

“Like I said, win her over first, then,” GiGi advised. “The better she likes you, the more apt she is to sell you to the Bronsons. And from what I understand from Jean, that shouldn’t be too painful

for you—Jean says she’s never met a nicer, friendlier, more helpful person, and that she’s beautiful to boot and doesn’t even seem to know it. So she’s humble, too. I know Jean has her eye on her for Lucas once his divorce is final, and she and the other ladies in her church committees are all worried that their pastor is very taken with this Gia Grant—”

“So wouldn’t that make her perfect for their pastor—a paragon of virtue like that?”

“Shame on you for saying that like it’s a bad thing! That’s what gets you into trouble.”

No truer words were ever spoken, so Derek couldn’t deny it. Besides, he didn’t dare. Not after his most recent blunder, the one that had really caused him to cross the line.

The one he wanted to kick himself over.

The one that had cost him a bundle and most of his dignity....

“If she’s all that your friend says she is, why wouldn’t the church ladies want her for their pastor?” he asked more respectfully.

“She’s divorced.”

“And that’s an issue?”

“It’s only an issue when it comes to their minister—they want someone purer for him, I guess. Plus, like I said, Jean wants Gia for Lucas—”

“Lucas Paulie is a weasel,” Derek said, not understanding why it rubbed him wrong to think of the woman he’d spent all of about five minutes with either the church pastor he didn’t know or the guy he did know.

“I didn’t realize you disliked Lucas Paulie so much,” GiGi said.

“I just wouldn’t wish him on some poor unsuspecting do-gooder.”

“There it is again, Derek James Camden! Do-gooder—that is not a bad thing. A nice girl is what you need. You’d better start looking for one and stay away from what you’ve been bringing around here since you were a teenager. Haven’t you learned your lesson yet?”

“I have, Georgie,” he said on a sigh. “I just can’t help it if the...tame ones don’t do it for me. I like a little spice.”

“What you’ve brought around here is not a little spice. And this last one—”

“I know. You don’t have to tell me—again—how damn stupid that was.”

“And yet here you are, barely out from under the mess you were in, looking down your nose at someone doing some good.”

“I’m not looking down my nose at Gia Grant.”

He was doing anything but that, if the truth be known. He sure as hell hadn’t been thinking bad things about her since last night.

It just didn’t matter. He knew the way things went for him—regardless of how beautiful the woman, regardless of how much he might respect and admire her or what she was doing, in no time the good girls just couldn’t keep his interest. In no time they started to seem ordinary. They started to get predictable. They started to bore him to tears.

But he wasn’t a kid anymore. And he had no business letting himself be sucked into situations with the bad girls anymore.

It had been bad enough when he was a kid, but now it was inexcusable. Especially when it embarrassed the whole family right along with himself. Like this last time.

Which was why he was lying low. Why he was doing some self-imposed penance by staying away from all women for a while. Why he was putting his energies into work and the Camden Foundation and trying to make things up to the Bronsons the way his grandmother had asked him to. Even if he was reasonably sure that his grandmother’s intent was to keep him well-occupied so he wouldn’t have time to get involved with anyone else for a while.

Not that he could blame her....

“I gave Gia Grant my card and told her if I didn’t hear from her I’d track her down,” Derek said then, ignoring how much he was looking forward to seeing her again. “She apparently lives next

door to the Bronsons, so even if I have to knock on the wrong door before I get the right one, I'll find her. Then maybe I can try to go through her to get to the Bronsons. I think she may have seen the benefit of our help over her donation jars and church volunteers, but whether or not she can convince the Bronsons—"

"You'll find a way in," Georgianna said.

"I really will, Georgie. I'm not going to let you—or any of the rest of the family—down again."

"I hope not," GiGi said. "Maybe you should try to let this Grant girl be a good influence on you for a change...."

"You never know," he said, rather than defend himself the way he might have done before the latest fiasco. "But for now I'd better get back to the office."

GiGi nodded. As she reached to turn the water on again, she said, "You're a good boy, Derek. I don't know why you have such a soft spot for bad girls. Maybe you can turn over a new leaf."

"Tryin', Georgie, I'm tryin'."

But even as Gia Grant's oh-so-lovely face came to mind again, he wondered if he could.

* * *

"A chicken and steaks and a roast, Gia? You could freeze these, you know," Marion lectured.

"I already froze a bunch. It's cheaper to buy at the bulk warehouse, but I end up with more than I can use. You're helping me out by taking some of it." It was the same thing Gia said every time she brought Larry and Marion groceries. Their budget was so strapped that meat had become a luxury item. But pride wouldn't allow them to let Gia provide that for them unless she made it sound as if they were doing her a favor. So that was the slant she put on it.

"Well, thank you. You're too good to us," Marion said as she put away the groceries that included some other things Gia knew they liked but couldn't afford for themselves.

"Let's open one of those beers right now," Larry suggested.

Marion obliged her husband and opened the cupboard to get glasses. "Will you have some of this, Gia?"

"No, you guys go ahead," she said. She declined their offers every time, too.

"I know you didn't buy this for yourself," Marion said as she poured the beer into two glasses.

Gia laughed. "And I know how much you and Larry like your little swig of beer before dinner," she said, using the term they used.

They were in the Bronsons' kitchen late Tuesday afternoon. Gia had left work at three o'clock, done some shopping and was now delivering groceries as a pretext for what she really came to talk to the Bronsons about.

The couple had been in such good spirits when they'd left the church the night before that Gia hadn't wanted to dampen them by bringing up Derek Camden. But he'd somehow gotten her cell phone number and left a message this afternoon about the status of persuading Larry and Marion to let him help them.

Gia hadn't returned his call yet, but his invitation to meet her for coffee at seven to talk had inspired this visit.

And given the boring evening she was facing a whole new spin....

Not that she was eager to see Derek Camden again, she told herself. Even if he had shadowed her thoughts since she'd first set eyes on him last night. It was just that she didn't have anything else to do tonight and hopefully the evening would end up benefitting Larry and Marion.

When they were all seated around the Bronsons' aged, scarred kitchen table, Gia said, "There's something I want to talk to you guys about. You didn't know it last night, but a Camden showed up at the church—Derek Camden...."

Marion looked alarmed. Larry was instantly angry.

"What're they doing, coming for the money you've raised to help us?" Larry said.

“Didn’t they get enough when they took everything from us? Are those richy-riches even after our pennies now?” Marion said, her tone harsh.

This was the reason Gia hadn’t wanted Derek Camden to crash last night’s get-together.

“There’s no way they could get hold of what’s been donated—that’s in a secure account at the bank under your names and mine,” Gia assured them. Then she added cautiously, “Derek Camden said he came to help... I’m not sure how—”

“Some way that’ll put more in his pocket!” Larry again.

“They’re probably looking to take our house now!” Marion said, sounding genuinely afraid. “Like with the hotel—right when we were struggling to keep it, they swooped in and made it so we couldn’t. Now when the bank wants the house, they’re coming for that, too!”

“No, no, no,” Gia said quickly, trying to calm the elderly woman’s fears. “I’m sure they don’t want your house—”

“They probably want the whole block. The whole area for another one of their damn stores!” Larry said, getting more and more worked up. “You’d better watch out, Gia, they could be coming for your place, too!”

“They already have two stores nearby—the one that was built where your hotel was, and the one on Colorado Boulevard. And we’re zoned residential—”

“They pay off people to change zoning—don’t be fooled by that,” Larry contended.

Gia had known this was not going to be easy. “Okay, I know how you both feel about the Camdens—and with good reason—”

“You bet we have reason—they robbed us,” Larry ranted.

“I know—”

“Dirty crooks!” This from Marion.

“But what was done to you two was a long time ago, by H. J. Camden. And I’m not defending what he did—” Gia said quickly, because she could see that more comments were coming from the elderly couple “—but H. J. Camden is long gone and maybe—just maybe—the Camdens in charge now want to make up for what H. J. Camden did....”

“Did they say that? Did they admit what he did? Because we couldn’t prove anything, but if they confessed, maybe we can sue their pants off now!” Larry sounded excited by the prospect.

“He didn’t admit anything,” Gia said. “Derek Camden only claimed that he wanted to help.”

“How could we ever sue them even if they confessed?” Marion reasoned with her husband. “We’d still be going up against a million of their lawyers. And with what? Where would we even find a lawyer to take them on? Or hire one with no money? They’d crush us like bugs—again!”

“But the three of us know that they still owe you,” Gia said, hoping to ride the wave of Marion’s logic. “Derek Camden said they want to help financially, but that they also want to make sure you guys are taken care of all the way around. And we could use help like that....”

“Not from Camdens we couldn’t!” Larry proclaimed.

“We could, though,” Gia said gently. “We’ve raised a few thousand dollars and we have people coming over to help clean up the yard and paint the house, but a few thousand dollars isn’t going to keep the bank from foreclosing for long—the best it will do is pay some of the back payments and stall so we can sell the house after it’s been fixed up.”

Gia hated—hated—when she had to remind them of the cold, hard facts, because it just deflated them both and made them look as old as they were. Both were white haired—Larry only had a wreath of hair around a mostly bald head, and Marion wore hers in a short style she cut herself. There wasn’t an ounce of fat or much muscle left on Larry’s five-foot-eight frame, and Marion could easily qualify as frail—she was barely five feet tall and didn’t weigh a hundred pounds. They both had blue eyes that still showed a zest for life, and ordinarily they both stood straight and moved fairly spryly. But whenever they discussed their current predicament, it just sucked the life out of them right before Gia’s eyes.

“You know I’m with you if that’s the best we can do,” she added to reassure them. “My basement apartment is yours and I’d love to have you with me. But I know that neither one of you wants to do that. You want to stay in this house. And with the kind of money the Camdens have...” She shrugged. “Not that Derek Camden made any promises, but if there’s any chance left of coming up with enough to maybe keep you here...”

“I still think they have something up their sleeve,” Larry grumbled.

“You can’t trust them,” Marion concurred.

And they both sounded so beaten that it broke Gia’s heart.

But as much as she wanted to side with them and tell them she would throw whatever Derek Camden offered back in his face on their behalf, she had to look out for what was best for them. And if the Camdens followed through on their promise, it could mean better than what she’d been able to accomplish.

“I’ll do anything you want. This is completely up to you,” she told them, in hopes of making them feel as if they had some control, some power, some choice in the matter. “But if you’ll accept help from the Camdens, I’ll make sure there are no strings attached to anything they give. That there’s nothing up their sleeve. That nothing about this can hurt you—”

“Or you,” Marion contributed.

“Or me—in any way. And if you never want to set eyes on Derek Camden or any other Camden —”

“Get him over here to pull weeds and let me turn the hose on him,” Larry muttered.

“You can’t turn the hose on someone like that,” Marion chastised. “He’d probably sue us!”

“I can turn my hose on anybody I want to turn my hose on,” Larry contended cantankerously.

“We could bring him lemonade while he works and lace it with laxative—then he’d never know what hit him!” Marion suggested, making Gia laugh.

“So you want me to get him over here to help work so you can have a little payback?” Gia asked, reasonably sure that they wouldn’t actually do either of the things they were threatening.

“A Camden working for us...” Marion mused.

“That’d serve them right,” Larry added.

Gia could tell that they were both finding some fuel in their retribution plots, and she was glad to see them rally.

“So you’ll let me talk to Derek Camden about what they’re offering? And you aren’t opposed to having him come over here and do some of the work?” she said, since she thought she should strike while the iron was hot.

“We don’t want anything to do with them,” Larry reiterated.

“No, we don’t,” Marion confirmed. “But you can take whatever they’re offering, Gia,” she said, as if anything coming from the Camdens through her made it more palatable. “As long as you watch them like a hawk—because they do owe us, and whatever helps you help us we’ll take.”

“But don’t say anything that lets them off the hook for anything, those lousy shysters!” Larry added.

Gia marveled at a phenomenon she’d witnessed before—sometimes it was as if they’d communicated with each other and come to a decision without ever having talked about it. Apparently seventy years of marriage put them on the same wavelength somehow. Or maybe they’d always been on the same wavelength and that was why they’d been able to stay married for so long.

But regardless of how they’d come to this particular conclusion, Gia was just glad they had.

“Then I’ll tell Derek Camden that we’ll take his help.”

The scowl on Larry’s face and the dour, forlorn creases on Marion’s brow told her how unwillingly the offer was being accepted. But Gia thought it was better to get out before they changed their minds. Besides, it would give the Bronsons some time alone to rant and rail about it to their hearts’ content while she went off to deal with Derek Camden.

And why she felt as excited as a teenager who had just finagled permission from her parents to see someone forbidden—who she really, really wanted to see again—Gia didn't quite understand.

She was a long way from being a teenager.

Larry and Marion weren't her parents.

And Derek Camden was forbidden because Gia was forbidding herself from him.

Because even if she was ready to date, she wouldn't date a man like Derek Camden. She might not have a grudge against the Camdens the way Larry and Marion did, but her own past experience taught her to avoid men like Derek.

Her ex-husband was also a man with deep-rooted loyalties to a big, corrupt, ruthless, unprincipled clan-like family, and that was a hot-button issue for her.

So Derek Camden was not someone she would even consider getting involved with.

Personally anyway.

For Larry and Marion's sake, she would have contact with him—and she would watch him like a hawk, as Marion had ordered—but that was the beginning and end of it.

So any sort of excitement at the thought of seeing him again was something to squash hard and fast.

Which she did as she said goodbye to the Bronsons and left them sitting at the table.

And yet on her way home, a tiny blip of excitement still registered when she started to consider what she was going to wear to see him tonight....

* * *

When Gia returned Derek Camden's call, he asked if they could meet at a Cherry Creek bakery rather than the coffee shop he'd suggested in his message.

It didn't matter to Gia where they met, so she agreed. Then she fixed herself a sandwich for dinner and decided she couldn't wear anything different for this meeting than what she had on.

Not that she didn't want to change out of the brown slacks and tan pin-tucked blouse she'd worn to work. She just couldn't let herself. This wasn't a date and she needed not to forget that.

But she told herself that it was purely for her own comfort that she unleashed her hair from the ponytail it had been in all day, brushed it out and let it fall loose and full into its naturally curly mass.

And when it came to refreshing her blush and adding a neutral eye shadow, some eyeliner and more mascara, it was merely to look at the top of her game in order to warn him that he'd better not try to put one over on her.

Arriving at the bakery five minutes early, she spotted Derek Camden through the storefront windows as she pulled her sedan into a parking spot.

He was also still in work clothes, although he'd taken off his tie and suit jacket. He was wearing gray-blue suit pants and a pale blue dress shirt, and Gia's first thought was that no one should look that good after a full day.

But there was just the hint of scruff to his sculpted jawline, and his dark hair was the ideal amount of disheveled; combined with the perfectly tailored shirt and pants, it formed a very sexy contrast.

A split second after the thought occurred to Gia, she reprimanded herself for it.

Handsome and sexy did not make the man. Handsome and sexy could, however, provide camouflage for something very ugly under the surface or behind the scenes.

It was a fact of life that she'd learned well and wouldn't let herself forget.

It would have been easy to, though, because when she went into the bakery and Derek noticed her, he smiled a smile that said he liked what he saw. And it made her heart beat a little faster.

"Hi, thanks for coming," he greeted her.

"Hi," Gia responded simply.

"Excuse me just a minute."

For a moment his attention turned back to the woman behind the counter. “So I can pick up the cake tomorrow at one—that’s great, just what I need.” Then, with a nod toward Gia, he said, “Let me add what we have now to the tab and I’ll settle up with you later?”

When the woman agreed, he said to Gia, “I don’t know if you’ve been here before, but you can’t go wrong with anything—”

“Lava cake, Bea,” Gia said to the woman, who was already taking one from the case and putting it on a plate.

“Heated with an extra dollop of hot fudge on top,” the woman recited her order from memory.

Derek laughed. “Ah, I see I’m not introducing you to anything new.”

“She’s our favorite chocoholic,” the owner of the bakery informed him.

He ordered lemon-meringue pie, and they both asked for iced tea. Then, while the shop owner got everything ready, Derek led Gia to one of the small café tables.

“We order all of our office celebration cakes here,” he explained. “Tomorrow I’m surprising my assistant with a little engagement party.”

A head-honcho Camden was ordering the cake himself? Her ex-husband and the rest of his family would never have bothered.

“How about you? How do you know this place?” he asked.

“I work around the corner and come at least once a day.”

Derek Camden’s well-shaped eyebrows rose. “Every day?” he said, taking a quick glance at her body as if wondering where the calories went.

“Sometimes it’s the only thing I eat all day,” she confessed.

“Chocolate every time?”

Her shrug confirmed it.

He laughed. “You are a chocoholic.”

Gia didn’t deny it.

“What do you do around the corner?”

“I’m a botanist. I work for a company that makes herbal supplements and medicines.”

The eyebrows went up again. “Really?”

“My ex said I’m just a glorified gardener.”

“Well, I’m just an accountant, so it sounds more impressive than that.”

He was being humble. Gia knew he was the chief financial officer of Camden Incorporated. But she preferred humility to arrogance. Elliot had been all arrogance.

Not that she preferred Derek Camden, she amended in her thoughts. The only way she wanted to compare him with her ex was in terms of their similarities—like the fact that they both came from big, powerful, rich families willing to do dishonest, shifty, devious and deceitful things.

“How did you get my cell phone number?” she asked then, continuing the vein of small talk while they waited for their desserts.

“My grandmother is friends with Jean Paulie—I believe she was one of the church members at your meeting last night—”

“She was.”

“Jean is one of the people who brought the Bronsons to our attention—her and the guy who cuts my hair because he had a donation jar in his shop. Anyway, I asked my grandmother if Jean had your number and she did.”

Gia nodded.

“My turn—how did you know who I was last night?” he asked.

“My best friend is Tyson Biggs. You dated his cousin and I saw a picture of you with her.” Gia didn’t add that the image had stuck with her because he was so terrific looking. Or that now that she’d seen him in person she couldn’t shake his image from her mind at all....

He grinned. “Sharon. Dragon nails, always in stilettos, carried a purse that was also a fish tank—complete with her goldfish in it—claimed to be psychic...”

“That would be Sharon,” Gia confirmed.

He smiled conspiratorially, in a way that was much too engaging. “Did she ever get a reading for you right?”

“I’ve never had her do one of her actual readings. She’s offered, but on the two times I’ve met her she told me out of the blue—”

“To prove her powers—she likes to do that,” he said as if it amused him.

“Well, the first time she told me I was pregnant and I wasn’t. The second time she said to watch out because I was going to lose my job. Luckily, that didn’t happen, either.”

“Yeah, she’s never gotten anything right that I know of. She isn’t even good at guessing,” he concluded with a laugh that wasn’t at all disparaging or unkind. “I haven’t seen Sharon in...I’m not even sure how long.”

“So long that you’ve had time to get married and settle down?” she asked because she was curious. She’d heard about Sharon and about her friends that he’d dated later—also all wackjobs, according to Tyson. But Gia didn’t know anything about Derek Camden beyond that, and she reasoned that if he’d married and settled down he might be more trustworthy in the Bronsons’ eyes.

But the question that shouldn’t have been difficult to answer instead seemed to puzzle him.

“Huh...” he said, rubbing the back of his neck and suddenly making a face that conveyed discomfort and confusion. “I was going to jump in and say no, never married. But then I remembered that that isn’t exactly true anymore. Is annulled a marital status?”

“Annulled... I don’t know, I’ve never met anyone who was annulled.”

“Yeah, me, neither...” he said with a frown.

Their desserts arrived and when the shop owner left them to eat he didn’t explain further, leaving Gia curious but not feeling free to ask more than she already had.

Then he changed the subject and she really couldn’t indulge her curiosity.

“So did you talk to the Bronsons about accepting some help from us?”

“I did.”

He smiled at her tone. “It didn’t go well?”

“It went the way I thought it would. But they did come around. They said they would let you help me help them.”

He nodded slowly as he ate a bite of his pie. “Okay. A little convoluted but still something. And I’ll take what I can get at this point. So what do you have planned?”

Gia had taken a bite of her own dessert as he said that. And when it came to chocolate, there was no rushing her. So she held up a finger in front of her mouth to signify a pause as she savored the warm, rich, dark chocolate of her lava cake.

He smiled. “No hurry, enjoy yourself.”

“The lemon pie is good, but next time try one of these,” she advised when her mouth wasn’t full. “It’s just the right blend of chocolates and just melty enough and just...amazing.”

His smile stretched into a grin. “Not a big chocolate guy so I’ll take your word for it.”

If anything could turn her off, it should be that!

But somehow it didn’t make him look any less appealing to her, so she just filed the information away and answered his inquiry into what she had planned to help the Bronsons.

“There’s a day of yard work and a day of home repairs to get their place in better shape,” she said. “And I’m cleaning out their stuff and collecting things to sell at a yard sale that I’m hoping will also raise some money—if you want to bring anything for that, do it. This coming Saturday is the yard work, the Saturday after that will be the home repair day and the Saturday after that is the yard sale.”

“So yard work and home repairs—they haven’t been able to keep their place up,” he deduced.

“They haven’t had the money, and they’re just getting too old to do most things—”

“Should they be moved into a retirement home or assisted living?”

It was a perfectly reasonable suggestion, one she and Tyson had swatted back and forth, one she’d thrown out to the Bronsons.

And yet hearing it from Derek Camden made her recall Larry and Marion’s concern that the Camdens were after their house.

Which still didn’t seem at all likely to Gia.

But even though there wasn’t anything intimidating about Derek Camden—in fact, he seemed down-to-earth, open and friendly—she’d also heard so much from the Bronsons about the evil Camdens that she felt some concern herself.

“Retirement homes and assisted living are expensive, too, and the Bronsons are really against going somewhere with old people—”

He laughed again. “They’re how old themselves?”

“Eighty-nine and eighty-seven,” Gia said with a hint of humor at the irony of that. “But staying together in their house is a big deal to them.”

“Okay. So beyond their home needing some work inside and out, what else is going on with them?”

He’d said the night before that he wanted to get the full picture, not to merely give money but to make sure the Bronsons had what they needed all the way around. So logically, what he was asking was just a way to get that full picture.

But still, Gia was a little uncomfortable giving this man too many details that would let him know exactly how vulnerable the couple was.

“A lot of things are going on with them,” she said ambiguously, opting only to give him an overview. “They live on a very limited budget. Costs for everything are always rising. They aren’t in bad health for their ages but there are some issues—they both have high blood pressure and some heart things, some arthritis, Marion has osteoporosis. And every time they go to a doctor there’s another medication added—”

“Not your herbal supplements and medicines?”

“I can’t really recommend any of those because they take so many prescription meds I’m afraid of interfering with something or giving them a supplement that reacts badly with a prescription drug—so no. But I help them pay their bills and balance their checkbook—because they both have trouble holding a pen and seeing small print—and there are months when I can’t believe the cost of their prescriptions.”

“Do they need better insurance? A cheaper place to get their prescriptions filled?”

“I’ve looked into both of those things and done the best I can for them, but the bottom line is that some things fall outside of their coverage and there’s nothing that can be done about it.”

“Except to get them more money to pay the expenses they have.”

Gia conceded with a shrug and hoped she hadn’t said too much.

“So where do I start to help you help them?” he asked as he finished his pie.

Gia couldn’t risk telling him too much about the Bronsons’ predicament until she was sure his motives really were pure. But the only way she could think to get a better feel for him was to get to know him a little and see if he seemed trustworthy. And she didn’t know how else to do that except to enlist him in the manual-labor portions of what was going on and spend some time with him. Talking to him. Watching him.

Even if it meant tempting Larry to turn the hose on him or Marion to lace lemonade with laxatives....

So, in response to his query about where he should start to help, she said, “Like I said, Saturday we’re starting with the yard and we can always use two more hands....”

“Okay,” he said without skipping a beat. “Are the Bronsons going to throw rocks at me if I show up on their doorstep, though?”

Maybe he was psychic....

"I hope not," was the best Gia could promise. "Their bark tends to be worse than their bite—"

"At eighty-seven and eighty-nine their teeth probably aren't their own."

"Every one of Marion's is and she's very proud of them," Gia corrected his joke. "But I'll run with the you-helping-me-to-help-them angle and I think you'll be safe." She didn't add that the Bronsons liked the idea of a Camden working for them, so they were apt to gloat about it—whether to his face or not she couldn't be sure.

"Then just tell me when and where to show up and I'll be there," he said.

Gia gave him the details and finished her lava cake. There didn't seem to be any more to discuss at this juncture, so she offered to pay for her own dessert as a signal that the meeting had come to a conclusion.

"It's going on the tab," he reminded her, refusing to even allow her to leave a tip.

He stood up when she did, and Gia tried not to be bowled over by the pure magnitude of the man as she slipped the strap of her purse over her shoulder, thinking that talking to him so far had not been a hardship, and watching him work on Saturday likely wouldn't be, either....

"Thank you for playing go-between," he said then.

"I'm just looking out for Larry and Marion," she countered.

"They're lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one—I don't have any family and they've become that for me."

He nodded as if he understood something about that, although she had no idea what and he didn't offer an explanation.

Instead he said, "I guess I'll see you Saturday, then."

"I'll supply the gloves," she added as they said goodbye and she left him to deal with the bill for their desserts and his office cake.

Then she returned to her car, studying him through the plate-glass windows again as she did and counting how many days would have to pass before Saturday came.

So many...

Oh, no—I don't have any reason to think that! she silently shouted at herself when she realized that was what had actually gone through her mind.

And to punish herself, she spent the short drive home recalling what it had been like to be married to a man who could well be Derek Camden's counterpart.

Chapter Three

"So you don't think there's any way he's going to show up," Gia said to Tyson Biggs on Saturday morning as they had a cup of coffee before going next door to begin the yard work on the Bronsons' property.

Gia's tall, lanky blond friend repeated his prediction, a frown on his hawkish face. "Derek Camden? No way."

Gia and Tyson had been best friends since childhood. His family had lived in the house directly behind her grandparents' house, where she'd grown up.

Gia had received the two-story house where she now lived in the divorce settlement—it was formerly one of her ex-husband's rental properties. Gia lived on the ground floor, but the second floor had been turned into an apartment, where Tyson was living while his own house was being built, and the basement apartment was vacant, so she could potentially use it for Larry and Marion.

"You don't really think Derek Camden is coming here to do yard work, do you?" Tyson asked.

The answer to that was yes, she had thought that. Until now. In fact, Derek Camden was pretty much all she'd thought about since Tuesday night, with the prospect of him coming today the light at the end of the tunnel.

Not that she'd wanted to admit that. But denying it didn't keep Tyson's skepticism from knocking the wind out of her sails just the same.

“What was it your ex liked to say? He could say anything, that didn’t mean he had to do it,” Tyson reminded her.

Gia nodded. “He did like to say that. With that smug smile he had when he felt like he was outsmarting someone by telling them what they wanted to hear when he didn’t have any intention of making good on it. But Derek Camden claims he really wants to help.”

“People like the Camdens pay people to do their yard work, G, they don’t turn around and do other people’s yard work themselves.”

That did make sense.

“You met him, right?” she asked then, wondering if she had been completely mistaken in believing that he truly was determined to help the Bronsons. After all, she’d been totally misled by her ex-husband, so her track record was hardly reliable.

“I only met him that once when he was dating Sharon. But it was in a loud, crowded club—I just ran into them, had one drink and left.”

“But you said he was nice to you and you didn’t know what a guy like him was doing with Sharon.”

“Right, I remember. And it’s true—he wasn’t her usual type. He seemed normal. But he was with her—so how normal could he be? Plus, Elliot was always nice, too—I’m not sure that means much with these guys. I think they just learn good social graces early to help cover up their darker side. Or maybe as a distraction so you don’t see the knife in the back coming.”

That had been true of Elliot.

“Well, if Derek Camden only gives a check, that’ll still be something,” Gia said. “The work is getting done with or without him.”

“But why do you sound disappointed—were you really counting on him for some reason today?”

“Me? No! I have you and people from work and a couple of friends from the Botanical Gardens and some neighbors and the pastor and a whole group from the Bronsons’ church coming. We’ll be able to get it all done.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that a Camden used to living in the lap of luxury would be much help anyway.” But then Tyson narrowed his hazel eyes at her. “You don’t like this guy, do you?”

“I haven’t found anything to dislike,” Gia said with a negligent shrug. “At least not about him personally, if you take away what his family did to Larry and Marion. But no, I don’t like him, either. I don’t even know him.”

She really only knew the way he looked. Her ex-husband had been good-looking, too—not as good-looking as Derek Camden, but still, no slouch. As time had gone on and she’d looked deeper, though, she’d begun to think “handsome is as handsome does,” and those good looks had meant less and less to her.

“But it’s enough to know what Derek Camden comes from,” Tyson said, as if he needed to open her eyes. “The Camdens could buy and sell the Grants a thousand times over, and their reputation is even worse—sneakier, but worse. Getting involved with a Camden after just getting away from the Grants would be like going from the frying pan into the fire.”

“Oh, I know,” Gia agreed wholeheartedly. “Even the hint of shadiness means I don’t want anything to do with them.”

“Plus, what Sharon didn’t like about him was the whole family connection. There’s a ton of them and they’re all joined at the hip—they work together, they hang out together, there’s a family dinner at the grandmother’s house every Sunday that none of them ever miss—”

“And believe me, no one knows better than I do that in a family that tight there’s no real room for other people. Even spouses are always outsiders.” Gia knew that from her own experience; it was something she and Tyson had talked about numerous times before.

“But none of this matters,” she said to her friend when she realized they were just rehashing. “I’m not ready to even date right now—I told you I just turned down dinner with the church pastor,

and who's more upstanding than him? And even if I was back on the market, people like the Camdens are everything I spent three years fighting tooth and nail to get away from—I would never get into anything like that again.”

“And let's also not forget that Derek Camden dated my crazy cousin Sharon,” Tyson added in support of Gia. “Plus, she must be the type he goes for because he dated two of her whacko friends after the breakup. I doubt that you're off-the-wall enough for that guy—unless you want to cut your hair into a spiky Mohawk and dye it blue....”

“This hair in a Mohawk?” Gia said with a laugh, pulling a springy curl from her ponytail.

“And I'm good, but I don't think I could face another divorce from one of those people,” Tyson added as if to seal the anti-Derek Camden deal.

Tyson was rated one of Denver's top-five divorce attorneys and had represented Gia when she'd divorced Elliot Grant. But the Grants' dirty fighting and false accusations against Tyson himself had prompted an inquiry from the Bar Association. It had all taken its toll on him and his practice, and wasn't something Gia wanted to put him through again.

“Don't worry, never again, Ty,” Gia assured him. “When I'm ready to get back out there, it will only be with nice, average guys from nice, average families.”

Gia poured what remained of her coffee down the sink and rinsed her cup, then took Tyson's to do the same so they could get next door to work.

Where Derek Camden probably would not show up because Tyson was right.

And where she would throw herself into the job and try not to feel as if she'd wasted almost an entire week fantasizing about Derek Camden flexing muscles to hoist fertilizer bags and paving stones....

* * *

Tyson was wrong.

Derek Camden arrived at the Bronsons' small redbrick two-bedroom house along with everyone else enlisted to work on Saturday. He wasn't even a minute late.

His outfit for the occasion—tennis shoes, old jeans and a plain green crewneck T-shirt—let Gia know she hadn't imagined the muscles behind those dress shirts the two times she'd seen him before. The well-worn, unflashy clothes also caused him to fit in seamlessly with the other volunteers.

And when she introduced him to the group, he cut her off before she said his last name and was simply Derek to everyone except her and Tyson.

Derek mentioned how he and Tyson had met the one time, even remembering that Tyson was an attorney and a diehard Miami Hurricanes football fan. He also asked about Tyson's cousin Sharon, wishing her well without any sign of bitterness in regards to their relationship that hadn't panned out.

Then he pitched in. Not only did he have a can-do attitude, he had a surprising amount of knowledge and experience to back it up, especially when he offered to mow the lawn and actually repaired the lawnmower to do it.

But Gia's conversation with Tyson before leaving home served as a warning to her not to be too impressed.

Sure, Derek Camden could fix a lawnmower and mow the lawn.

Sure, he could hoist fertilizer bags and paving stones with the best of them—flexing muscles that made Gia's mouth water in a way that didn't happen at the sight of anyone else's flexing muscles.

Sure, he couldn't have been more pleasant or agreeable or uncomplaining.

Sure, he made friends with everyone there and she even watched Tyson accept more and more of his overtures as the day went on.

But she continued to remind herself that appearances could be deceiving, and that she would not—could not—let herself be deceived by them.

Which wasn't always easy to remember as the day went on and she got an eyeful of broad shoulders, thick thighs and a tight, perfectly shaped derriere she knew she had no business looking at.

And yet somehow couldn't help stealing a glimpse of over and over again....

* * *

By six o'clock the Bronsons' front and back yards were in better shape than they'd been in since Gia had known the elderly couple. Weeds were gone, bushes and trees were trimmed and the lawn was a well-manicured green carpet.

The volunteers had added a sandstone path from the front to the back and a second path from the back patio out to the toolshed. Landscapers had built a multitiered rock garden with room for flowers to be planted in the spring, and two of the horticulturists had planted shrubbery to line the fence in back. Gia and another botanist had formed a perennial garden just below the front porch on each side of the steps leading to the house.

The final effect was a vast improvement and upgrade that would require only minimal, easy maintenance either for Gia or for any new owner should the house have to be sold.

Throughout the day Larry had been in the center of things, unable to work but chatting with the people who were, while Marion went in and out of the house with beverages and cookies.

Gia had kept an eye on them both and had seen no indication that they were going to turn the hose on Derek or secretly dose him with laxatives, and she was glad that really had only been a joke.

But after both Larry and Marion had had Gia confirm on the sly that Derek was who they thought he was, neither of the Bronsons ventured too near to him, either. Or made any effort to talk to him the way they did everyone else.

For Derek's part, he gave them the space they so obviously wanted, and the one time there was unavoidable contact he was polite and respectfully pleasant without pushing anything or going overboard trying to win their favor.

It was the best way he could have handled it, but still Gia wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen when the work was finished and everyone—including Tyson—left, and only Derek and Gia remained to roll up hoses and put away tools.

As the elderly couple took a stroll around their newly enhanced yard to see the end results, it was impossible for them not to acknowledge Derek.

Gia was relieved when they spoke to him with guarded courtesy. But it was noticeable how all of their gratitude and praise went to her alone.

Even then, Derek handled the situation with aplomb. He agreed with them that Gia had done a remarkable job and didn't seem in the least offended by their lack of gratitude for the backbreaking work he'd done all day.

When the older couple went inside, Gia said, "Thanks for everything you did today."

"You're welcome." He grinned as if her gratitude was payment enough.

"I'm surprised that you knew your way around this stuff."

"My grandmother raised my brothers, sisters, cousins and me—there are ten of us—and she was originally a farm girl, so she believed in chores for everybody. As a kid, I did yard work—among other things. All the boys in the family did—sexist, I know, but the girls had to do more dusting so I guess it evened out."

"The Bronsons told me that H. J. Camden's son, grandsons and granddaughters-in-law were killed in a plane crash—you were one of the ten great-grandchildren left...."

"I was. Left to GiGi—that's what we call our grandmother—and H.J. and Margaret and Louie Haliburton, who work for GiGi but who are really more like family than anything."

It wasn't how Gia—or the Bronsons—had pictured things. They had imagined the Camdens as growing up like royalty, not as having to do their chores like any other family.

"But even with ten kids around, the Camdens didn't have a troop of gardeners?" she asked.

He laughed. "Sure. A troop of seven able-bodied grandsons. We still trade off going over to help with the yard work even now—you're just lucky that this wasn't my week or I'd have been late getting here this morning."

“Well, I’m glad you weren’t since no one else knew how to fix the lawnmower.”

“That church minister was making the attempt, though,” he reminded her. Then, after a pause, he said, “He wanted to take you to dinner tonight....”

The pastor had given it a second try.

“I didn’t know anyone had overheard that,” Gia said.

“Is he trying to convert you, or is he interested in more than that?” Derek asked with a hint of teasing to his tone.

Gia laughed. “I’ve wondered the same thing. I’m not exactly sure either way. But since he knows his congregation doesn’t approve of him being with someone who’s been divorced, it could be conversion.”

“So you said no.”

“Because I’m not interested in dating anyone for any reason.”

Derek Camden nodded. “Then what would you say to going our separate ways to clean up then meeting for a nondate bite to eat—just because you and I seem to be the only two without plans tonight?” He leaned in so he could add confidentially, “You can tell me how you think I did with the Bronsons today and maybe give me some tips for improvement.”

No.

It was a simple answer and the only one she knew she should give him.

But the wheels of Gia’s mind instantly began to spin.

It was Saturday night.

She’d put in a long day.

Everyone else had gone off on dates like Tyson had, or dinners out with spouses.

Larry and Marion were inside fixing their own dinner, after which they would cozy up on their sofa with popcorn to watch an old movie—their Saturday-night-at-the-movies tradition upheld even though they could no longer afford to go to a theater.

And she was slated for a shower and sitting alone in front of the television, eating whatever leftovers were in her fridge.

Or she could shower and meet Derek Camden for a bite to eat. A nondate. Unlike what the minister had invited her to.

She hadn’t been at all tempted to accept the minister’s offer.

But Derek Camden’s?

She just couldn’t seem to bring herself to say no....

“Not a date,” she clarified firmly, knowing even as she did that she was walking a fine line but really hating the thought of those leftovers in front of the TV....

“Not a date,” he confirmed. “We can both wear whatever—shorts, T-shirts, anything comfortable. I won’t pick you up. I won’t open your car door. We’ll just meet at the restaurant. I’ll buy you dinner in exchange for tips on how better to win over these guys so they let me really help them,” he said with a nod at the Bronsons’ house. “And then we’ll go our separate ways afterward.”

She did want to encourage a truce between the Bronsons and this man in order to get the Bronsons as much aid from the Camdens as she could.

That was what put it over the top for her. She was doing this for the Bronsons....

“Okay,” she agreed.

“What do you feel like eating—Italian, Mediterranean, Moroccan, Mexican, Chinese, sushi...?”

She closed her eyes to think about it and when she opened them he was grinning at her.

“Did that help you decide?” he asked with a laugh.

“I was just giving my stomach the chance to tell me what it wanted,” she said as if it should have been obvious.

“And what did it tell you?” Another question within another laugh.

“Lemon chicken at the Red Lantern on Broadway.”

“Your stomach is very specific,” he teased. “No dessert?”

“Always dessert—that was actually the deciding vote. The Red Lantern has this really, really dark chocolate pudding—the lemon chicken is just what I have to eat to get to that.”

He laughed again but there was something about it—appreciation or delight or something—that didn’t make her feel as if he was making fun of her at all. “Of course—really, really dark chocolate pudding. Can you be there in an hour?”

“An hour,” she confirmed, knowing that didn’t leave her a lot of time.

But that lack of time ensured that she couldn’t make this a bigger deal than it needed to be, so that was all she gave herself.

* * *

Gia didn’t wear shorts—she wore khaki capris. But she did put on a simple red square-neck T-shirt with a red-and-white-striped tank top peeking from underneath it. Without much time to get ready, she’d washed her hair in a hurry, scrunched it and left it loose in order to spend some of that time applying blush, mascara, eyeliner and a glossy lipstick.

When she got to the Red Lantern she noted that Derek—who was waiting for her by leaning against his black sports car in the parking lot—had also not opted for shorts. Instead he was wearing jeans that were much better than what he’d worn to work in earlier today. But he, too, had gone with a T-shirt—a white V-neck with long sleeves that he’d pushed to his elbows.

He was freshly shaven, his hair was clean and casually perfect, and it didn’t matter whether or not he’d put much thought into his attire; he still looked great.

She warned herself not to pay too much attention to that as she parked.

Having spotted her when she’d turned in from the street, he pushed off of his car and followed her all the way back to the only open space at the far end of the lot. As promised, he didn’t open her car door for her, but he was waiting right there when she got out of her small hybrid sedan.

She caught him giving her the once-over, which prompted a small smile, as if he liked what he saw. But all he said was that he’d already gone in and put their names on the waiting list, so they should have a table shortly.

Gia wondered if he’d tipped the hostess in advance, because the place was crowded but all it took was him stepping up to the hostess station and giving his name for them to be led right to a table.

They ordered soon after sitting down, and once they’d been served their iced teas, he said, “So, how do you think I did today?”

“You were a lot of help,” she assured him.

He laughed. “I don’t mean how did I do with the work. I meant how did I do with the Bronsons.”

“Oh. Well, no rocks were thrown and the hose wasn’t turned on you, so I think that counts as a success at this point.”

“You say that as if you half expected it to happen,” he said with a laugh.

Gia shrugged. “You were the one who thought rocks might be thrown, so I didn’t think that would happen. But the hose part was mentioned....”

His laugh had just a touch of alarm to it. “They talked about turning the hose on me?”

Gia shrugged again. “You know, what your family did to the Bronsons was pretty bad.... Awful, in fact....”

He sobered somewhat and admitted, “Actually, I might not know exactly what went on. It was 1968—my father and my uncle were only teenagers then, so it was my great-grandfather and my grandfather at the helm. But even when my father and my uncle grew up and were on board they all kept things completely separate—business was business, home was home. They never brought business home with them—”

“But still the Camdens have a reputation....”

“I know. Over the years we’ve heard the bad stuff that’s been said about us. But H.J. always said it was nothing, not to take it seriously, that he’d never done anything wrong. And to us—” Derek

took a turn at shrugging “—H.J. was our great-grandfather. He took care of us. He doted on us. That was all we knew from him. When anyone brought up something that was being said, he’d say that in business, in politics, in sports and in life there were wins and there were losses. And that whoever lost was never happy about it—that that was where the bad-mouthing came from and not to pay any attention to it.”

“So you didn’t,” Gia said as their meal arrived and they began to eat.

“Not really. GiGi’s take on it was that success came with a cost, and she guessed that having some negative things—she actually called them lies—said about us was that cost.”

“But they aren’t lies. I mean, I don’t know about anything else, but they aren’t lies when it comes to Larry and Marion.”

“With the Bronsons, I don’t know all the details, to be perfectly honest. I know that they owned a hotel—”

“The Larkspur,” Gia supplied.

“It was built in the late 1800s.”

“By Larry’s great-great-grandfather,” she filled in as they ate.

“And it was in the very heart of downtown Denver on a prime piece of real estate.”

Again Gia offered information. “A prime piece of real estate that H. J. Camden wanted to build a store on.”

“Right,” Derek concurred. “But while the real-estate was prime, what was on it had gone downhill....” he said diplomatically.

“The Larkspur needed work,” Gia conceded. “Larry and Marion admit that they hadn’t had the time or money it needed because of Roddy—”

“Roddy? Who’s Roddy?”

“Their son. You didn’t know they had a son?”

“I didn’t,” Derek said.

“So you don’t know everything,” Gia muttered more to herself than to him.

“I don’t,” he answered. “In fact, I think it’s probably safe to say that what I do know is only the tip of the iceberg, and even that I haven’t known for long.”

Gia wasn’t quite sure what that meant but she didn’t see a point in trying to figure it out.

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