# HOUSEKEEPER UNDER THE MISTLETOE

Cara Colter

Cherish™

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# Housekeeper Under The Mistletoe

## Аннотация

Maid for the millionaire?Angelica Witherspoon is hopeful that a housekeeping job is the fresh start she's been looking for. Until she arrives at the remote lakeside mansion full of enthusiasm and has the door slammed in her face!Reclusive millionaire Jefferson Stone clearly stated chatterboxes need not apply, but Angelica is tenacious, and reluctantly he gives her a trial. Recently widowed, Jefferson has cut himself off from the world, but Angelica's warmth and stunning smile are tempting him to step out of the shadows and sweep her under the mistletoe!

# Содержание

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# Jefferson took a deep breath and looked into the pleading eyes of the woman who had landed, uninvited, on his doorstep.

Was this who he had become? So embittered by the death of his wife that he could turn a woman so obviously terrified away from his door?

"Geez …" Jefferson muttered under his breath. He was a man who made decisions every day. That was what he did for a living. His decisions often had millions of dollars riding on them, and the livelihoods of thousands of people.

And yet this decision, this split-second decision, about what kind of man he would be, felt bigger than all of those.

Jefferson Stone stepped back marginally from his door. It was all she needed. She catapulted over his threshold and into his house.

*Into his life,* he told himself grimly. "Thank you," she breathed.

"Nothing has been decided," he told her gruffly, though somehow he knew it had been.

And she knew it, too. She was beaming at him.

"It's not going to be a walk in the park," he told her. He

was already annoyed that his decision had been based on a moment of pure emotion, not rationale. He had to get things back on track and make sure she was aware this was a *professional* arrangement.

Housekeeper
Under the
Mistletoe
Cara Colter

www.millsandboon.co.uk

**CARA COLTER** shares her life in beautiful British Columbia, Canada, with her husband, nine horses and one small Pomeranian with a large attitude. She loves to hear from readers, and you can learn more about her and contact her through Facebook.

To all the people who share my love of the wild and untamed beauty of Kootenay Lake.

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## CHAPTER ONE

"UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES," Angelica Witherspoon muttered to herself, as she drove down a main street where the summer sun was filtered through a thick green canopy

of leaves, “this is the kind of place I would adore.”

The city of Nelson was nestled in the Selkirk mountain range of British Columbia. It was quaint and charming.

She angle parked her car and noted plenty of activity on the wide sidewalks in front of historical buildings. It made her feel safe enough to vacate her car and get out and stretch. Her muscles were cramped with tension. In the distance, she could catch glimpses of the sparkling waters of the west arm of Kootenay Lake.

Angie sighed with longing. “This is a place I would love to explore.” But she reminded herself, sternly, it was her *old* life that would have allowed her to explore the vibrant, artsy and scenic community.

In her *new* life she was extraordinarily tired and on edge. And it took money to explore. Angie had six dollars and twenty-two cents left to her name. She had allowed herself one cash machine withdrawal and was still in shock at how quickly two hundred dollars, the maximum she could take, had evaporated.

Under a colorful awning, just in front of where she had parked her car, there was an outdoor café. The savory smells of rich coffee and of spicy Indian food enveloped her. She felt a pang of hunger. It was the first time in a week on the run that her stomach had unknotted enough for her to feel hungry.

But, she told herself, if she bought a loaf of bread, and some sliced meat she could make her six dollars and change go a bit further than if she gave in to the temptation to sit down to a

restaurant meal. She looked around for a corner store.

Tires squealed off in the distance, a jarring sound, and Angelica felt her heart begin to hammer, and a fine bead of sweat broke out on her lip. She fought terror as she scanned the street, making sure she was not being watched.

Inwardly, she talked herself down from the ledge.

"Of course you are not being watched," she chided herself. "How could anyone have followed you when you were not sure yourself where you were going?"

But it was part of this surplus of caution that wouldn't allow her to use the bank machine again. Winston had shown remarkable creativity in invading her life. What if he could track her transactions? No, she would find a loaf of bread. Peanut butter might be a better choice than meat, because it would be easier to keep.

*And then what*? she asked herself. With her quickly dwindling resources, she was going to have to give this up and go home?

*Home.* A shudder ran up and down her spine.

He'd been in her home, she reminded herself. Winston had been in her home. In her bedroom. What had he touched?

"Ugh," she said as repulsion shuddered down her spine, making her uncertain that she was ever going home again. But, realistically, she had to be back at school in September—summer would not last forever. Surely this would be over by then? What if it wasn't?

She thought of faces of her students, the changes she saw in

those faces over one school year, the sense they gave her of being *needed*, and she nearly wept at the thought she might not be able to return to them and to the job she loved.

"Never mind that," she told herself firmly. That was all in the distant future. Right now there was a more urgent and immediate question. How was she going to get by for a few weeks until the police apprehended Winston?

"I just need a break," she whispered, heavenward. "One small break."

And that was when she noticed the community bulletin board. She was drawn to it as if it were a magnet and she a dropped pin. All else faded, and she saw only one posting.

In very masculine printing it read:

HOUSEKEEPER NEEDED IMMEDIATELY.

MATURE APPLICANTS ONLY.

EMPLOYER DESIRES QUIET AND PRIVACY.

CHATTERBOXES NEED NOT APPLY. APPLY IN PERSON AT THE STONE HOUSE, ANSLOW, BC.

Angelica snatched the scrap of paper down off the board like a starving pauper who had been tossed a crust. She glanced around surreptitiously, holding the paper close to her chest, as if others might be waiting to pounce on her and wrestle her to the ground for that job opportunity. It occurred to her she might be drawing attention to herself.

But Nelson seemed to be a place that embraced everything from the slightly eclectic to the downright weird, and no one was

paying the slightest attention to her. She forced herself to relax and read the notice again, more slowly.

The position was probably long gone. There was no date on it. The paper it was written on seemed frayed around the edges and slightly water damaged. On the other hand, it was downright unfriendly. Only someone desperate—that would be her—would be the slightest bit interested in such a posting.

She wasn't sure how "mature" would be defined, but considered herself a very mature twenty-five. She definitely was not a chatterbox, though she was outgoing and friendly, which was probably what had gotten her into trouble in the first place.

Angelica Witherspoon was being stalked.

*Stalked.* It was like something out of a movie. Three months ago, she had gone for one cup of coffee with someone she'd felt sorry for. Her life had been unraveling ever since.

Angelica forced herself to focus on the scrap of paper in her hand instead of revisiting what she could have done differently, where she went wrong.

She read it for the third time. In her mind, a picture formed of an elderly gentleman, sweetly crusty and curmudgeonly—maybe like the beautifully animated character in the movie *Up*—who found himself alone and needed some help around his house.

She had asked for one small break. And here it was. She had to grab it. Her resolve firmed within her. With her background in home economics, she was fully qualified for this job.

"Excuse me," she said. She was startled—and faintly ashamed

—by how timid she sounded. It seemed that a minor annoyance deepening into something more sinister had changed everything about her in a very short amount of time.

The man going by her had dreadlocks and a multicolored striped knit toque despite the mid-July heat. He also looked as if he was wearing a skirt instead of pants. But when he stopped and looked at her, she saw he had friendly eyes.

"Where is Anslow?"

"Take the highway that way, around the lake. It's only fifty-eight kilometers, but it will take you an hour. The road is windy."

"Is there any other kind of road in British Columbia?" she asked wearily.

"Ah, an Albertan."

Just like that, without intending to, Angie had revealed things about herself, which Canadian province she lived in. If somebody was following her and came asking... Rationally, she knew the chances of this very same man being stopped and asked about her were slim to none, but her life was not rational, not right now.

"Saskatchewan, actually," she lied. She was aware the lie filled her with an odd sense of guilt, which she shook off. "Have you ever heard of the Stone House in Anslow?"

"No, but I like the possibilities."

Given his very Bohemian appearance and the faint, acrid smell of smoke coming from him, Angelica got his meaning and actually smiled. It was the first time she had smiled since coming home a week ago to find the campaign to infiltrate her life had

escalated. The doors to her new apartment had still been locked, but a brand-new stuffed panda with a red bow around its neck had been residing jauntily against the pillows on her bed. She was sure her dresser drawers had been opened. This had been the final straw in a string of steadily escalating and upsetting incidents that had been going on for the three months since she had said an innocent yes to that cup of coffee.

The shock—finding the bear on her bed, the red ribbon looking horribly like a cut throat—had sent her pell-mell into flight mode. Still, after a week, it felt that no matter where she went, she wasn't far enough away yet.

Now, an hour and a half after leaving Nelson—she'd stopped to wolf down a peanut butter sandwich at a picnic area being enjoyed by several families—following instructions she had received in the town of Anslow, she pulled up to a formidable stone-pillared entrance that would not have looked out of place guarding the entrance to a haunted house. She hesitated but the wrought iron gate hung open, and really...? If she was looking for a place where it would be hard to find her, this was certainly it.

She could not see a house, just a long, deeply shaded drive that wound down to a sharp curve, where it disappeared.

She took the road slowly, around the curve, but still no house, just the drive, weaving its way through magnificent old-growth forest. Angelica opened her window, and birdsong and a wonderful smell, sun on fallen pine needles, wrapped around her.

She felt some of the edginess drain from her. It made the

feeling of exhaustion intensify.

The road dropped down and down, drawing ever closer to the water. It wove its lazy way through the forest and occasionally broke out into cleared grasslands that allowed her to see the full and enormous expanse of Kootenay Lake. And then she would be back in the deep, cool shadows of the forest, catching only glimpses of the glinting waters of the lake.

Finally, after a good fifteen minutes of driving, the house came into view.

The name had led her to expect she would see a stone house. Instead, Angie saw it was possible the house was named for its location, anchored as it was into a slab of natural gray stone forty or fifty feet above the placid waters of the lake.

The gate and the picture of the curmudgeonly little old man she had been working on had led her to expect a decrepit mansion.

Instead, the house before her was a masterpiece of modern architecture, blending with the elements around it. The house appeared to be constructed of 90 percent glass, the glass reflecting leaves and trees and sky at the same time as making the interior of the house and its contents seem as if it was an oasis that was magically suspended in the outdoors.

The huge expanse of windows made it possible to see right through the house, past a sectional white leather sofa and a stand-alone fireplace, to the deck on the other side of the dwelling. The deck, though huge, seemed to hold a single hammock, positioned

in a way that took best advantage of the breathtaking view of the lake.

The setting and the house were stunningly beautiful. Angie imagined if you were inside the house it would feel as if nothing separated you from the forest on one side and the lake on the other.

It was not, to be sure, the house she would have expected a curmudgeonly old man to live in!

She suddenly felt ridiculously vulnerable. She was out here in the middle of nowhere, alone. No one, except the person she had asked for instructions in Anslow, knew she was here.

What if she was jumping from the frying pan into the fire?

"What are the chances," she asked herself, "that you could meet another deranged man in such a short span of time? None!"

Realistically, her situation—peanut butter and loaf of bread in the backseat not withstanding—couldn't be more desperate. The past three months had made her steadily more cowardly, but she had to call on what little courage remained in order to do what needed to be done.

She twisted her rearview mirror over and ran a hand through her hair, tried to tidy her blouse and straighten the crumples out of her shorts, which suddenly seemed too short. Despite her efforts, she could not lose the faintly disheveled look of a week of living out of a suitcase.

Then, putting her anxiety about her appearance aside, Angie parked her car under a towering pine. She got out and marched

to the door of the house. Okay, she left the keys in the ignition and the door of her car open, just in case she had to make a quick getaway.

As she made the winding walk to the front door, she was aware again of a beautiful aroma, deep and woodsy, and a cacophony of birdsong.

It was a double-entry doorway and it was constructed of stainless steel, etched with a geometric pattern of interlocking squares. The leaves of the trees surrounding the house were casting dancing shadows on the surface. Despite the fact it needed a good scrubbing, it was more like a work of art than a door.

In the center was a ring of steel, and she grasped it firmly and rapped against the door. The sound was loud and pure, like a gong in a Buddhist temple, and it startled her. She was aware of the sound reverberating inside of her when the door swung inward soundlessly.

Angie was pretty sure her mouth had fallen before she snapped it shut.

The man who stood in front of her was about the furthest thing from a curmudgeon that she could imagine.

He was stunningly handsome.

He looked to be in his early thirties. Tall and powerfully built, he had brown hair, the exact color and sheen of a vat of melted dark chocolate. His hair was long enough to touch the collar of an untucked white denim shirt that needed pressing. His hair was

faintly mussed, as if he had been out in the wind.

To add to the pirate-straight-off-the-boat look of him, his cheekbones and chin were cast in the dark shadows of a day or two of whisker growth. His legs were long and set apart, braced, which showed the powerful cut of his thigh muscles underneath the faded denim of blue jeans. His feet were bare, which Angie was perturbed to note she found sexy. She hastily lifted her eyes from them to look him in the face.

His eyes were astonishing, the same restless gray blue of the waters of the lake she could see through wall-to-wall windows beyond him. But the water looked welcoming on this sweltering day, and nothing about his expression, and especially not his eyes, welcomed. And still, his eyes were every bit as sexy as his bare feet had been!

He regarded her with a furrowed brow for a moment, the line of his sensuous mouth pulled down in a surprised frown.

"Nope," he said. It was a single word. Despite the fact his voice was a rasp of pure unwelcome, there was something about it that made Angelica even more aware of what an almost criminally attractive man he was, blatantly sexy without even trying.

Apparently, the attraction was not shared. He shut the door. It clicked closed with metallic finality.

## CHAPTER TWO

"NOPE."

The gravelly rejection rang in Angie's ears for long moments after the door had clicked shut.

Oddly, her first reaction to the door being slammed in her face was relief. She reminded herself she no longer wanted men to find her attractive. It was dangerous. Plus, if he was deranged, he could have taken advantage of the isolation to pull her inside that house. Instead, he was dismissing her.

Though, looking into the strong cast of his face, the intelligence in his eyes, the confidence of his bearing, derangement did not seem like even a remote possibility.

She recognized her relief at the closing of the door, in part, not just because he was obviously not a pervert just waiting for a damsel in distress to land at his door, but because she had reacted to him in a very primal way, and she could not tolerate that in herself.

In the past year her fiancé, Harry, had abandoned her in favor of a beach in Thailand, and a more exciting companion, and now she was being stalked by a maniac. If anyone should be absolutely immune to the charms of the opposite sex, it was her! But apparently she wasn't. So, she should be glad of that door closed with such quiet finality.

But she wasn't. In fact, the relief that she was being dismissed was short-lived, indeed. It gave way to a stirring of indignation at his summary dismissal. And indignation felt so much better than the wound she had carried with her since Harry had shattered her dreams.

And it felt *way* better than the cowering scared-of-her-own-shadow fear she had been living with ever since Winston's

escalating invasion of her life.

Angie decided, right that second, that she was not going to be a victim anymore.

Besides, she *needed* this position as a housekeeper. It was an answer to that whispered prayer she had said at the bulletin board in Nelson just a few hours ago.

Angelica took a deep breath. She marshaled her courage. She set her chin and her shoulders. And then she lifted that ring of steel again and rapped it against his door with all the gumption she could muster.

"Damn him," she muttered, when it seemed the master of the Stone House intended to ignore her. She drew in a sharp breath, marshalled her threads of tattered courage, and then she grasped the ring again.

Her hand was clutching the door knocker with the fierce determination of a drowning person clutching a life ring when the door was yanked open.

The unexpected force pulled Angie over the threshold and into the cool, marbled foyer of his house. She stumbled, let go of the knocker—a full second too late—and put out her hands to stop her forward momentum.

Angie's hands ran straight into a solid wall...of man.

She stared at her hands on his chest. Through the fabric of his shirt she could feel the steady, slow beat of his heart and the shocking heat of his skin. She could feel the utter and steely power of him. His scent was masculine, absolutely tantalizing

and utterly spellbinding. He smelled of sunshine and lake water and pine trees. Angie dragged her gaze away from the wide expanse of manly and mesmerizing chest in front of her.

Those gorgeous stormy-water eyes were fastened, with some consternation, on the placement of her hands, which for some reason she had not yet removed from his person!

She gulped, came out of her trance, and snapped her hands off his chest and down to her sides. She took a giant step backward.

He raised his eyes from where her hands had been glued to him and tilted his head at her. "You're still here," he said.

His tone was laconic, but his eyes were narrowed with annoyance. There was a little muscle flicking in the uncompromising line of his unshaven jaw. It was fascinating.

"Um," she said intelligently.

"Yes?"

"I just needed to know."

"Know?"

"*Nope* to what?" Angie was trying very hard to regain her sense of equilibrium. She reminded herself to straighten her shoulders and lift her chin.

He seemed surprised that she would have the audacity to even question him. He regarded her piercingly.

"I mean, who answers their door like that? With a single word? Nope? When you don't even know why I'm here." Angie had to remind herself of her vow not to be a victim anymore. Still, she had to fight herself not to fidget, to hold her chin firmly in place

and her shoulders square. He regarded her silently, with lowered brows and narrowed eyes. She was certain that he intended to let her stew, to see if he could make her squirm. She held her ground.

Finally, he sighed. The sound was one of pure exasperation, and yet she felt certain his expelled breath had touched her cheek, like a kiss. It was everything she could do to keep her hands at her sides and not touch her cheek.

"Nope to whatever you're selling." His voice was stern and annoyed, not the voice of a man who could kiss cheeks with his very breath.

"But you don't even know what I'm selling!" she protested. Was that a quaver in her voice?

"Yes, I do." His voice was like gravel.

"You don't," she said stubbornly.

"I do."

*I do.* The words she had expected to be hearing from Harry. Even said out of context, they filled Angie with a longing that made her despise herself. How many kicks in the teeth did a gal have to endure before she got it? There was no knight in shining armor. There was no happily ever after. Those kind of illusions were what got people in trouble.

"Girl Guide cookies," he said, his voice hard, "or your version of enlightenment, or tickets to the high school play. And to all of those, an emphatic nope."

See? This man was the cynical type. He would never fall

victim to illusions of any kind.

"As a matter of fact," she said, stripping any trace of quaver—or illusions—from her voice, "you're wrong on all counts. I am not selling anything."

This man was not accustomed to being told he was wrong. She could see that instantly, when the dark slashes of his brows dropped dangerously.

Angie told herself she needed to be careful not to be off-putting. He was going to be her future boss, after all!

"I've come about your posting on the community board in Nelson," she told him.

The firm line of his lips deepened into a frown. That, coupled with his lowered brows, made it inarguable. Her future boss was scowling at her. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"I'm here about the position you advertised for a housekeeper."

His eyebrows shot up. His gaze swept her. "Oh," he said, "that."

"Yes, that."

He gave her another long look, apparently contemplating her suitability for the position. She tried for her most housekeeperly expression.

"Especially nope to that," he said.

When the door began to whisper shut, again, it was pure desperation that made Angie put one foot in to stop it.

The man—good God, was he Heathcliff from Wuthering

Heights—glanced down at her foot with astonished irritation. And then he gave her a look so icily reserved it should have made her withdraw her foot and touch her forelock immediately. But it did not. Angie held her ground.

The master of the mansion glared back down at her foot with deep annoyance, but she refused to retreat. She couldn't!

After a moment, he sighed again, and once more she felt the sensuous heat of his breath whisper across her cheek.

Then he opened the door wide and leaned the breadth of one of those amazing shoulders against the jamb, the seeming casualness of his stance not fooling her. Every fiber of his being was practically vibrating with displeasure. He folded his arms over the immenseness of his chest and tilted his head at her, waiting for an explanation for her audacity.

Really, all that icy remoteness should not have made him *more* attractive. But the impatient frown tugging at the edges of those too-stern lips made her think renegade thoughts of what was beyond the ice and what it would be like to know that.

These were crazy thoughts. This man was making her think crazy thoughts. She was a woman who had suffered so completely at the hands of love.

First, her Harry had decided all their dreams together were decidedly stodgy and had replaced her with insulting quickness with someone far more exotic and exciting.

And then, a coworker, Winston, had taken total advantage of her brokenhearted vulnerability. She had caved to his constant

requests. Angie had said yes instead of no to a single cup of coffee. He had used that yes to force his way into her life.

With that kind of track record, it made her thoroughly annoyed with herself for even noticing what the master of the Stone House looked like. And what his voice sounded like. And what he smelled like. And what his breath had felt like grazing the tenderness of her cheek.

If she had a choice, she would have cut and run. But she was desperate. She had absolutely no choice.

With her foot against the door he was too polite to slam, she said, determined, "I need this job."

He contemplated that, and her, in silence.

"Really," she clarified when it seemed as if he was not going to say anything at all.

"Well, you don't qualify." His determination seemed to match her own. Or exceed it.

"In what way?"

"You're obviously not mature."

"I guess that would depend how you defined mature," she said.

"Old."

"How old?" she pressed. "Fifty? Sixty? Seventy? Eighty?" She hoped she was pointing out how ridiculous he was being. *Old* was not necessarily a great qualification in a housekeeper.

For a moment he said nothing, and then one corner of that sinfully sexy mouth lifted, but not in a nice way. "Older than you."

“I’m sure the human rights commission would have quite a bit to say about not being considered for a job—for which I’m perfectly qualified—because of my age,” she said.

The smile deepened, tickling across his lips—cool, unfriendly, dangerous—and then he doused it and lowered the slash of his brows at her. “Are you threatening me?”

It occurred to her that annoying him would be the worst possible way to wiggle her way into this job position.

“No, not at all. I’m just suggesting that you might have attracted a better response to your posting for an available position if you had said you needed someone highly organized and hardworking and honest.”

“All of which I’m presuming you are?” he said drily.

She took it as very hopeful that he had not tried to physically shove her foot out the door and slam it on her.

Not that he looked like a man who ever had to get physical to get what he wanted. That look he was giving her was daunting. Anyone less desperate would have backed down long before now.

“I’m desperate.” There she had admitted it to him.

“Your desperation is not my con—”

“I’m willing to guess you haven’t had a single response to that ad,” she plowed on. “Who would answer an ad like that?”

“Apparently, you would.”

“I’m not *just* desperate.”

“How very nice for you,” he said, his tone so sardonic it had a knife’s edge to it.

“I’m also highly organized and hardworking and honest.”

“You’re too young.”

“Humph. I think youth could be a great advantage for this position.”

He didn’t answer, so she rushed on.

“I will be terrific at this job. You’ll love me.”

He looked insultingly dubious about that.

How could she have said that? That he would love her? You did not want to even think a word like that in front of a man like this—who could make you feel as if he had kissed you by simply sighing in your direction.

“I’ll work for free for one day. If you’re not impressed, you haven’t lost anything.”

He frowned at her. “Look, Miss—”

“Nelson,” she filled in, using the name of the town she had just come through. “Brook Nelson.” There. A new name. She had used part of the city of Cranbrook that she had passed through on this wild ride, and part of the town of Nelson.

She held her breath, knowing from the tension she felt while she waited that she *needed* the new existence her new name promised her.

## CHAPTER THREE

JEFFERSON STONE REGARDED his unwanted visitor. Something shivered along his spine when she said her name. He knew she was lying.

And she wasn’t very good at lying, either. In fact, she was

terrible at it.

He allowed himself to study her more closely. Brook Nelson—or whoever the hell she really was—was cute as a button. She was dressed in a brightly patterned summer blouse and white shorts. She was a little bit of a thing, slender and not very tall. It looked as if a good wind would pick her up and toss her.

*And yet when her hands had been pressed into his chest, he had been aware of something substantial about her.* That little bit of a thing had set off a tingle in him—an awareness—that had been as unwelcome as she was.

Hard not to be aware of her, when those shorts ended midthigh and showed off quite a bit of her legs.

Annoyed with himself, Jefferson shook off the thought and continued his study of his housekeeper candidate.

It just underscored what he already knew: she would not do.

She had light hair, a few shades darker than blond, but not brown. Golden, like sand he had seen on Kaiteriteri Beach in New Zealand. That hair was cut short, he suspected in a largely unsuccessful effort to make those plump curls behave themselves. They weren't. They were corkscrewing around her head in a most unruly manner.

Her eyes were hazel, leaning toward the gold side of that autumn-like combination of golds and greens and browns. She had delicate features and it was probably that scattering of freckles across her nose that made her seem so wholesome, even though she was lying about who she was.

There was something earnest about her. Despite her youth, and despite the shortness of those shorts, she seemed faintly prim, as if she would be easily shocked by bad words. Which, of course, was part of the reason she would be a very bad fit for him as a housekeeper.

Because of her size, Jefferson had assumed she was young. But on closer inspection, she looked as if she was in her midtwenties. Still, she was exactly the type you would expect to be peddling cookies for a good cause or wanting to change the world for the better or encouraging attendance at the annual Anslow high school performance of *Grease*, which would be dreadful.

*And he should know. Because a long time ago, in a different life, he had been cast as the renegade in that very high school play.*

Jefferson shook it off. He did not like reminders of his past life.

Besides, Brook wasn't anything like the ideal person he had in his head for this job, which was gray haired, motherly but not chatty, and someone willing to stay out of his way and keep schtum about his life.

Brook Nelson, in spite of the wholesome exterior and her claims of honesty, was lying about who she was. He needed her gone.

"Look, Miss, um, Nelson, I've gone through three housekeepers in three weeks—"

"Somebody answered *that* ad?" she asked disbelievingly.

"Not exactly," he had to admit. "*That* ad was a result of the other failures."

The failure was that he had mentioned to Maggie, at the Anslow Emporium, that he was going to need someone.

He hadn't anticipated that telling Maggie—whom he had known since he was six—that he needed some help at his house would be like creating a posting in a lonely hearts club rag.

"Tell me about my three predecessors."

He frowned at that. She was a cheeky little thing, wasn't she? What part of no could she not get? But, since she was immune to slamming doors, why not give her anecdotal evidence of her unsuitability for this position?

"Okay, the first one was *not* mature. Mandy, showed up in flip-flops, and had a most irritating way of popping her gum, except when she was texting on her cell phone, which seemed to require her jaw to stop moving. When she had been here approximately three hours, she knocked on my office door to complain that the internet signal was weak from the deck. And then she acted insulted when I suggested I didn't need her services any longer."

Jefferson did not mention that Mandy had told him that she was prepared to overlook the vast difference in their ages if he wanted to give it a try.

He had escorted her to the door with a sense of urgency almost unparalleled in his life—and before finding out exactly what "it" meant.

"The second one was also not *mature.* She had on too much mascara and her skirt was too short, and she seemed way too interested—"

He stopped.

"In you?" Brook asked quietly.

He didn't want to get into that. He was a small-town boy who had left here, made good of himself and then come home with a wife. He should have figured out, before he took his request to Maggie, that now that Hailey had been dead over three years, he would be perceived, by the good and simple people of his hometown, as a rather tragic figure. Which was nothing new. He'd come to live with his grandparents when he was six, after his parents had died. He sometimes wondered why he had come back here, to this place where he had been and always would be the little orphan.

And now a widower, seen by one and all as much more in need of a new wife than a housekeeper.

"You don't have to worry about that with me," Brook piped up. "I have no romantic inclinations at all. None."

Brook seemed too young to have developed a truly jaundiced attitude toward romance, and Jefferson remembered housekeeper number two's rather frightening avarice.

He focused on her work performance flaws instead of telling Brook the full truth. "She also said *youse* instead of you. *Do youse want the toilet seat left up or down?*"

"You don't have to worry about that with me, either," Brook

rushed to assure him. “There are few things I love as much as the English language and its correct usage.”

“Hmm. That is not adding up to housekeeper, really. A true housekeeper might have been more concerned about the toilet seat and its correct usage.”

A delicate blush crept up her cheeks.

“I’m a student,” she said, “desperate for a summer job.”

The desperate part was true enough, he could see that. But her eyes had done a slow slide to the right when she had said she was a student.

“My third housekeeper was Clementine.” Clementine had been sent after he’d gone back down to the Emporium and read Maggie the riot act.

“She was certainly more suitable in the mature department. She’d actually been a friend of my grandmother’s. But Clementine started talking the second she got in the door and did not stop, ever.”

Jefferson remembered how even the lock on his office had not stopped her. “She stood outside my office while mopping the floor and polishing the door handle, chattering about her Sam. Husband. Mickey and Dorian. Children. Sylvester and Tweety. Bird and cat.”

Suddenly it occurred to Jefferson, he *was* being the chatty one. This stranger standing at his door—whom he had absolutely no intention of hiring—certainly did not need all of this information.

Maybe it was a sign of too much time alone—three failed housekeepers not withstanding—that he just kept talking.

"I barricaded myself inside my office for three days, but Clem showed no sign of moving on to other parts of the house. To avoid discussion, I finally shot a generous check and a nice note about how I really didn't need her anymore under the door. It achieved exactly what I hoped—blessed silence."

He had managed to stop talking before he revealed Clementine's real fatal flaw. She had one divorced stepdaughter and three single nieces, all of whom she thought he should meet.

Brook's lips twitched. That hint of a smile deepened Jefferson's awareness of her as what he wanted least in his house: the distraction of an attractive woman. But that tentative smile also made him aware of the fine lines of tension in her—around her shoulders and neck, around her eyes, around her lips.

"It must have been hard to fire a friend of your grandmother's."

"You have no idea," he said.

But, looking at her, he had the uneasy feeling she *did* have an idea.

"Why the sudden search for a housekeeper? Are you replacing a housekeeper you were quite satisfied with?"

He scowled at her. Who was interviewing whom, here?

"No, I've never felt the need of one before."

"And now?"

He sighed. "In a moment of weakness, I agreed to allow an

architectural magazine to photograph the house."

She glanced past him. "A moment of weakness? The house is extraordinary. You must be very honored at their interest."

"I may have been when it was all just an idea. But as soon as a date was set, I realized the house would need attention, which, six weeks later, I am no closer to giving it."

"When is the photo session scheduled?"

"Two weeks." He was aware he was engaging with her, and it didn't seem to be bringing him any closer to getting rid of her.

"I can have your place completely ready for a photo shoot in two weeks. I promise."

Jefferson contemplated that. It was a weakness to contemplate it. But he did need someone to get the place ready, and the date of the photo shoot was creeping up far more rapidly than he could have believed. And he suspected, from the lack of applicants now, that word had spread far and wide through this tight-knit region of the Kootenays that he was impossible to work for.

So, the young woman in front of him could be considered a godsend, if one was inclined to think that way, which Jefferson Stone most definitely was not.

No, Nelson Brook, or Brook Nelson, or whatever her name was, just wasn't going to work out, despite the fact no one else had responded to his blunt posting that had laid out exactly what he needed. He would just have to postpone *Architecture Now* indefinitely. He was aware of feeling relieved at that possibility.

He reached for the door. He was going to gently shove on it

until she moved her foot.

But then a crow cawed loudly and raucously in the tree the prospective housekeeper had parked her car under. It dropped a pinecone out of its beak onto the roof of her car, and both sounds, the cawing and the sharp plunk of the cone on her car roof, were loud and unexpected in the drowsy quiet of the afternoon.

She gasped and jumped forward, and she smashed against him. For the second time, in the space of just a few minutes, she was touching him.

Only this time, it wasn't her hands splayed across his chest, which had been disconcerting enough. This time he could feel the press of the entire length of her body against his, and he was acutely aware of the sweet softness of her. He was acutely aware of hesitating a fraction of a second too long before putting her away from him.

"I'm so sorry," she stammered, but he caught the look on her face as she swiveled her head and glanced over her shoulder. It was the frantic look of a deer being startled by wolves. When she turned back to him, despite the fact she was trying hard to school her features, he could see the pulse pounding in the hollow of her throat.

Tension trembled in the air around her, and her muscles had gone taut. It made him notice there were shadows under her eyes and an edginess about her that was far from normal.

Her car door, he noticed, looking beyond her, was open, as if she had planned what to do if she needed to make a quick

getaway.

Brook Nelson, or whoever she was, was terrified of something.

What shocked Jefferson was how her fear pierced the armor around his heart. It was as if a little sliver of light found its way to a place that had been in total darkness.

Inside himself was some nearly forgotten sense of decency, some sense of being connected to a human family he'd managed to ignore for three whole years, much to the dismay of the people of Anslow.

Jefferson stood very still. For a moment, he thought of the grandparents who had raised him, in a house not far from here. They had been old-fashioned people, who were decent to the core and kind to a fault. They would have never turned someone in need from their door, and no one had benefited from their generosity of spirit more than him. He could almost imagine the look of disapproval on both their faces if he shut the door now.

Jefferson took a deep breath and looked into the pleading eyes of the woman who had landed, uninvited, on his doorstep.

Was this who he had become? So embittered by the death of his wife, Hailey, that he could turn a woman, so obviously terrified, away from his door?

"Jeez," Jefferson muttered under his breath. He was a man who made decisions every day. That was what he did for a living. The decisions he made altered the courses of entire cities, impacted huge companies and global corporations. His decisions

often had millions of dollars and the livelihoods of thousands of people riding on them.

And yet, this decision, this split-second decision, about what kind of man he would be, felt bigger than all of those.

Jefferson Stone stepped back marginally from his door.

It was all Brook Nelson needed. She catapulted over his threshold and into his house.

*Into his life,* he told himself grimly.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"Nothing has been decided," he told her gruffly, though somehow he knew it had been. And she knew it, too. She was beaming at him.

"It's not going to be a walk in the park," he said. He was already annoyed that his decision had been based on a moment of pure emotion, not rationale. He had to get things back on track and make sure she was aware this was a professional arrangement. "The finer aspects of housekeeping have been neglected for a long time."

He fully intended to tell her that if she didn't put them right he would not tolerate her presence any longer than he had her predecessors. But she spoke before he could get the grim warning out.

"I could tell that from this door that things have been slightly neglected," she said, tapping the front door. "It needs polishing. You probably use something special for it, do you?"

"I have no idea. That's your job, not mine." He was trying to

make up for his moment of weakness in letting her in, but she didn't seem to notice uninviting his tone.

"Do you have an internet connection here?"

"Not one that housekeeper number one, Mandy, approved of, but my career is dependent on being connected."

"I'll just look up online what to use on a door like that one. Is it stainless steel, like kitchen appliances?"

He considered her question. She was focusing on the job at hand and not asking any personal questions about his career. Hopefully, that indicated a lack of nosiness. Hopefully, that indicated his impulsive decision to let her in was not going to lead to complete disaster. "Yes."

"I know I just use a few drops of vegetable oil on mine. At home."

So, there was a home, somewhere, and presumably a fairly nice one if it had stainless steel appliances in it.

Despite his intention to keep everything professional, he smelled man problems in his new housekeeper's personal life. She had already claimed she had no romantic notions, which basically meant *burned by love.* It would be nothing but good for him if she was sour on the whole relationship thing. It could be almost as good protection as *mature* and *silent*. And, despite the fact he had his own history that had turned his heart to the same stone as his name, he sensed a need to keep up his defenses and to demonstrate the same lack of nosiness that she was showing!

Still, she wasn't just having man problems. She was terrified.

## CHAPTER FOUR

JEFFERSON CONTEMPLATED HOW Brook's obvious terror stirred an emotion in him that he did not feel ready to identify and, in fact, felt a need to distance himself from.

He'd been living—despite the efforts of the townspeople—without the complication of untidy emotions for some time.

He'd give this woman—Brook Nelson, or whoever she was—a break. That didn't mean he had to involve himself in her drama in any way. The house was ridiculously large. With the slightest effort, during the day he wouldn't even know she was here.

Though that might pose some challenges, because she was in his living room now, and despite the fact the windows let in all kinds of light, it was as if sunshine had poured into the room with her. She flounced into his living room, hands on her hips, eyes narrowed, lips pursed.

"Wow," she said.

He thought she was referring to the architecture, which generally inspired awe, but she turned disapproving eyes to him. "Good grief, I can see neither Mandy nor Clementine got to this room. You mustn't have allergies. How long since this has been dusted?"

"A while," he admitted, instead of *never*.

"And I take it, it would have gone a while longer if it weren't for the photo shoot?"

"That's correct."

"You are a true bachelor, aren't you? Why live in such a

beautiful house if you aren't going to take care of it?" she wailed with genuine frustration.

"I'm a widower," he said tersely.

He was not sure why he had imparted that little piece of information. He hoped it wasn't because he thought that would make her more sympathetic to his slovenliness than being a bachelor would.

But, as soon as he saw the sympathy blaze in her eyes, he realized he did not want her sympathy. Arriving in Anslow as an orphan, losing his wife, Jefferson Stone had experienced enough sympathy to last him a lifetime. He did not want any more challenges to his armor. He realized he needed to be much more vigilant in his separation of the professional and personal.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice a low whisper that could make a man long for a bit of softness in his life.

But he had had softness, Jefferson reminded himself, and had proved himself entirely unworthy of it.

He lifted a shoulder in defense against the sympathy that blazed in her eyes. "My wife was the architect who designed the house."

"Ah, that explains a lot."

He lifted an eyebrow at her.

"You don't really seem like the type of person who would be amenable to having your home photographed. You are honoring her. That's nice."

Jefferson really didn't want her to think he was nice, and he

squinted dangerously at her.

She got the message, because she moved over to an enlarged black-and-white photo on the wall.

"Who is this?"

*The people responsible for the fact you haven't been sent packing.* "It's me, with my grandparents, in front of the old house."

"It's a very powerful photograph."

That's what Hailey had said, too. She wasn't into hanging family portraits, but she had unearthed this photo and had it enlarged to four feet by six feet and transferred to canvas.

"How old are you in it?"

"Six."

She turned and looked at him. "How come you look so sad?" she asked.

He started. Hailey had never asked a single question about the photo. She had considered it an art piece. She had liked the composition, the logs of the old house, the dog on the porch, the hayfork leaning against the railing.

This woman was looking at him as if all his losses were being laid out before her, and he hated it.

"My parents had just died." He kept his tone crisp, not inviting any comment, but he saw the stricken look on her face before she turned away from him and ran her finger along the bottom of the frame.

She looked at her finger but didn't say anything. Her

expression said it all. She felt sorry for him. No, it was more than sorry. She was, he could tell, despite the lie about her name, the softhearted type. She didn't just feel sorry for him. Her heart was breaking for him. And he hated that.

"This is a temporary position," he said, his voice cold. "After the photo shoot, I'll return to companionship of my dust bunnies. Maybe you want to consider if two weeks employment is what you are really looking for."

It was a last-ditch effort to let her know this position probably was not going to work for her. Or him.

"Temporary works perfectly for me," she said, as if that made it cosmically ordained. "Two weeks. I have a lot to do."

She had been careful not to express sympathy, and yet Jefferson felt her *I have a lot to do* could somehow mean rescuing him. Just a second. Wasn't he rescuing her? And if she thought she was going to turn the tables on him, she was in for an ugly surprise.

"We haven't come to terms yet. What do you expect for remuneration?"

"I haven't passed the free-day test yet."

He looked at her face. The softness lingered, but he was willing to bet she was one of those overachiever types. He deduced if she set out to impress, he would be impressed.

"Let's assume," he said drily.

She named a figure that seemed criminally low. But then she added, "Plus room and board, of course."

Jefferson stared at her. Why was this coming as a surprise to him? Obviously, some fear had sent her down his driveway, and just as obviously she was not eager to go back to it.

"I'm in the middle of relocating," Brook said vaguely. Then, as if sensing how disconcerted he was, she added, "This looks like a huge place. There must be a spare bedroom? Or two? Or a dozen?"

"I'm not sure—"

"Besides, if I'm going to be a proper housekeeper, I should probably make you some meals. That would be easier to do in residence, don't you think?"

He saw it again. Behind her I'm-going-to-be-the-best-housekeeper-in-the-world bravado was terror.

She *wanted* to stay here.

Under his roof and his protection. He supposed if you were looking for a place to hide, the Stone House fit the bill quite nicely, as long as the things you were hiding from were outside of yourself.

Jefferson wondered if his new housekeeper would feel quite so eager to seek shelter here if she knew how colossally he had failed the one other woman, his wife, who had expected protection from him.

Meals. He hadn't really even considered a housekeeper providing meals. His search for a housekeeper had been motivated strictly by getting the house ready for the magazine photo shoot. He considered telling her meals would not be part

of their agreement but found himself oddly reluctant to do so. He had not had a home-cooked meal in longer than he could remember, and his mouth was watering. His weakness annoyed him.

"Look," he told Brook sternly. "Against my better judgment, I'm giving you a chance, but be warned, if you chatter, you're out of here."

She looked as if she might say something. But then she pursed her lips, brought her fingers up, locked and put the imaginary key in her pocket. But before he could even be properly relieved, she reached into that imaginary pocket, took out the key and unlocked her lips.

"Maybe just before we begin our vow of silence, I should get you to show me around and you can tell me what you'd like to see prioritized. I'll make a list of what each room needs."

It was a reasonable request, and he knew he could not really refuse it.

"Let's begin here," she coaxed, when he was silent.

"This room is the great room," he said. "I noticed the windows are rain spotted."

"The windows would be a priority," she agreed. "But I should probably leave them until right before the photo shoot so they just sparkle that day, right?"

"Right," he said, though of course he had not thought of that.

"Dusting." She looked up at the high vault of the ceiling. "You have a ladder somewhere? I see cobwebs up there."

He frowned up at where she was looking. He did not like spiders. Before he answered, she went and slapped the couch, and a cloud of dust flew up from it. “Vacuuming. If the weather stays nice, I might even put the furniture outside for a bit to air it out.”

He couldn’t really imagine she was going to get all that furniture outside by herself. The sectional was huge. And apparently she was going to need a ladder. Actually, he was not going to let her up on a ladder, so there was no point in finding one. He needed to make it clear he was not going to be roped into interaction with her. He was going to protest, but then she went on.

“It smells faintly stale in here. I think a good airing of the furniture will change that.”

It smelled stale in his house?

“For the photo shoot,” she said, a little pensively, “it might be nice to make it look lived in. You don’t use this room much, do you?”

“Not really.” She was proving to be uncomfortably astute.

“What would you think if we set it up a bit?”

*We?*

“We could just add a bit of color. Maybe a bright throw over the couch, a few glossy magazines on display, a vase of flowers.”

“Don’t you think the photographer will do that?”

“Well, if he doesn’t think to bring a vase of flowers with him, you’d be out of luck, since the nearest vase of fresh flowers would be quite a distance away. I could make the throw. I’ll snoop

around and see what you have."

He must have looked unconvinced because she rushed on, "You'd be surprised what you can make things out of. And I'm pretty handy with a needle and thread. I made this blouse."

That made him stare at the blouse for an uncomfortable second.

Thankfully, she had moved on. "It's just that this room—the house—is so beautiful, but it doesn't look very homey. It would make me happy to help it look its very best."

He stared at her. She already appeared much happier than she had when she first arrived, that little furrow of worry easing on her brow.

"I'll leave it up to you to spruce it up however you see fit. If you need to buy a few things, let me know," he said, and was annoyed that he felt he was giving in to her in some subtle but irreversible way. "Stay out of my office. And my bedroom."

The fact that he did not want her in his bedroom, that most intimate of spaces, alerted him to the fact she—this little mite of a woman in her homemade blouse with her wayward curls—was threatening him in some way that he had not allowed himself to be threatened in, in a very long time. If ever.

"But surely they'll want to photograph those rooms, too?"

"I'm quite capable of getting two rooms ready." His tone was curt and did not invite any more discussion, but he was aware that she had to bite her lip to keep herself from discussing it.

"I'll show you the kitchen," he said stiffly, leading her through

to that room.

"Whoa," she said, following him, "now *this* is a room you use."

She didn't say it as if it was a good thing.

He looked at the kitchen through her eyes. The sink was full of dishes. She didn't know yet, but so was the oven. His mail was sliding off the kitchen table, and there were several envelopes on the floor. The counter by the coffeemaker was littered with grounds and sticky spoons. He often tromped up from the beach, wet, across the deck and through the kitchen. His bare footprints were outlined against the dark hardwood of a floor he'd allowed to become distinctly grimy.

Instead of looking daunted by the mess, she gave him a smile. "You need me way more than you thought you did."

He looked at her. In this room, as in the living room, it felt as if her presence had made the light come on.

He had the terrible feeling that maybe he did need her more than he had thought he did. His life had become a gray wash of work and isolation.

*And damn it*, he told himself, *he liked it that way.* What he didn't like was that Brook had been in his domain for only a few minutes, and he already was seeing things about himself that he had managed to avoid for a long, long time.

"Look, I have work to do," he said. "I'm going to let you poke around the rest of the place by yourself. I'm sure it will become very quickly apparent to you what needs to be done."

He could have left then, but he watched as she wandered over

to where the mail had fallen on the floor.

"This one is marked Urgent," she said. She came across the distance that separated them and held out the envelope. He reached for it.

For just a moment, their hands brushed. Something tingled along his spine, an electrical awareness of her. She might have felt something, too, because she spun away from him and went to the kitchen counter. It had a long, sleek window that overlooked the lake. But she did not look out the window. She opened up a cupboard.

"Is this what you're eating?" she asked him, holding up a soup can, and then setting that down and holding up a stew can.

He folded his arms over his chest, uninviting.

She ignored that. "Canned food is very high in sodium," she told him. "At your age, you have to watch things like that."

"My age?" he sputtered.

And then she laughed. It was a tinkling sound, as refreshing as a brook finding its way over pebbles.

"Do you have any fresh food?"

"Not really. There might be a few things in the freezer."

"That's not fresh. What do you eat?"

He thought of the stacks of microwavable meals in the freezer. "Whatever I feel like," he said grouchily.

"Never mind, I'll make a grocery list. How do you get the perishables here? In this heat? I guess ice cream is out of the question."

“I take the boat and a cooler,” he said. “Anslow is quicker by water.”

“You take a boat for groceries?”

“In the summer, yes.”

“That’s very romantic.”

And then she blushed. And well she should. You did not discuss romance with your employer!

“If you make a list, I’ll do a run tomorrow.” That hardly sounded like a reprimand for discussing romance with him! It sounded like a concession to her feminine presence in his house!

“Oh, good,” she said. “I’ll be happy to prepare some meals if I have the right ingredients.”

There was that whole meal thing again. A strong man would have just said no, that it was not part of her job, and that he was more than capable of looking after himself. But Jefferson had that typical man’s weakness for food.

“What kind of meals?” he heard himself ask. He tried to think of the last time he’d had a truly decent meal. It was definitely when he’d been away on business, a great restaurant in Portland, if he recalled.

*Home cooked* had not been part of his vocabulary for over a decade, not since his grandmother had died. How she had loved to cook, old-fashioned meals of turkey or roast beef, mashed potatoes and rich gravy. The meal was always followed with in-season fruit pie—rhubarb, apple, cherry. When he had first moved in with his grandparents, his grandma had still made her

own ice cream.

Hailey had been as busy with her career as he himself was. She liked what she called "nouveau cuisine," which she did not cook herself. She had made horrified faces at the feasts he fondly remembered his grandmother providing.

"It is not healthy to eat like that," she had told him.

And yet he could never remember feeling healthier than when his stomach was full of his grandmother's good food.

Jefferson remembered, suddenly and sharply, he and Hailey arguing about this very kitchen.

*"Double ovens?"* he'd said, when they met the kitchen designer. *"We'll never use those."*

*"The caterers will appreciate it when we entertain."*

Why had he argued with her about it? Why had he argued with her about anything? As they had built the house, it had seemed as if the arguments had become unending.

If a man only knew how short time could be, and how unexpectedly everything could change... Jefferson felt the sharpness of regret nip at his heels. Somehow, it felt as if Brook, nosing through his fridge, was the reason for this regret. He usually was able to bury himself in work. It prevented being bothered by pesky emotions and, worse, by guilt.

Brook closed the fridge door and opened the freezer side of the huge French-door-styled appliance. She stood with her hands on her hips for a moment, staring at the neatly stacked boxes of single-serving freezer foods.

“I’ll make that list,” she said, obviously dismissing everything in the freezer as inedible.

“You do that,” he said.

Apparently, she meant to make a list right now, while the lack was fresh in her mind. She found a piece of paper on the counter, and a pen. Her brow furrowed with concentration, and as she wrote, she muttered out loud.

“Chicken. Chocolate chips. Flour. Sugar...”

Chocolate chips. And flour. And sugar. Was she going to make cookies? Jefferson felt some despicable weakness inside himself at the very thought of a homemade cookie.

She had obviously been distracted from her request to see the house. “I’m expecting a call in a few minutes, so if you’ll excuse me,” he said.

Jefferson eased himself out of the room. His mouth had begun watering at the mention of chicken. Again, his thoughts went to his grandmother and platters of golden fried chicken in the middle of the old plank table.

It was a weakness, but he had no power to fight it. Besides, so what? She was signing on as his housekeeper, if she wanted to cook a few things, why shouldn’t he be the beneficiary? He’d be signing the paychecks, after all. There were no worries that she would be as good a cook as his grandmother had been. No one was that good a cook.

## CHAPTER FIVE

AS SHE WATCHED him go, Angie realized that, in her

eagerness not to annoy her new employer with anything that could even remotely be construed as chattiness, she had not asked him his name. Now he was in full retreat and she didn't know where his cleaning supplies were kept or where he would like her to stay.

Instead, she watched mutely as he stalked away, down a wide hallway, turned and disappeared from view. A moment later she had heard the slamming of a door.

Considering how unfriendly he was, Angie contemplated what she was feeling. She felt as if she understood his unfriendliness. Her new employer was a man who had lost everything.

For the first time in a long time—far too long, in fact—Angie was aware that it was not all about her. She had seen in his face that he would not brook any sympathy from her, and though her first impulse had been to offer some, she had listened to her instincts. There were other ways to let him know she had heard him and seen him. There were other ways to offer comfort. After the public humiliation of her broken engagement, she personally knew how hollow words could feel.

Her boss had become an orphan when he was six, and now he was a widower. She remembered the shattered-glass look in his eyes when he had revealed that about himself, and his quick rejection of what he had perceived as sympathy even though she had not said a word.

He didn't want sympathy, and she did not blame him. He wanted to be left alone, and she did not blame him for that, either.

But he had let her into his house, and that was a gift to her. She would give him a gift, too. She vowed she would be the best housekeeper the world had ever seen. She vowed for the next two weeks, she would make her employer's life a little bit easier in any way that she could.

Angie contemplated the feeling in her. It was nice that it was not terror. What was it?

She felt *safe.*

Maybe his unfriendliness even made her feel safer. Look where seemingly friendly male interest had landed her last time, after all!

But no matter the reasons, for the first time since she had bolted after finding that stuffed panda on her bed, she felt something in her relax. Really, the tension had been increasing for months, as it became more and more apparent Winston's interest in her was not healthy.

Now, it was as if she had exhaled, after a long, long period of holding her breath. Looking around the neglected house, it felt extraordinary to have a purpose beyond her own survival.

With that exhale came a sensation of pure exhaustion, and she let her eyes wander longingly to the hammock that she could see through the kitchen window. But falling asleep would be no way to make a good first impression or forward her goal of making her boss's life a little better!

She made herself focus on the task at hand. From the stack of leaning mail that had taken over the beautiful harvest-style

kitchen table, she presumed his name was Jefferson Stone and that he was a business consultant who owned a company called Stone Systems Analysis. She made a mental note to sort the mail for him. Some was obviously junk, but some of those envelopes just as obviously contained checks and business correspondence.

The kitchen cabinets revealed a rather impoverished selection of food. As she went through the cupboards, her grocery list was becoming quite extensive, especially since the thought of cooking for him now was imbued with her sense of altruism.

After she had finished in the kitchen, she went exploring. Off the kitchen was a laundry room. When she opened the washing machine it had wet clothes in it that had been sitting so long they smelled dank. She found the soap and restarted the cycle. The soap was in a cabinet sadly lacking in the cleaning supplies necessary to keep a house. She retrieved her list and added a few more items.

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