

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

*Love Inspired*

# Made to Order Family

Ruth Logan Herne



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### **Аннотация**

Single mom Rita Slocum wants to get her life back on track. Taking things one day at a time seems doable—especially with Brooks Harriman at her side. Brooks has been there for her through good times and bad. But she's always been leery of getting too close to the broad-shouldered woodworker who keeps his past locked away. Now that Rita's opening her own bakery, she needs him more than ever. If only Brooks would open up his life—and his heart—to Rita.

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## **“What’s wrong?” Skeeter asked her mother, uncertain.**

Rita swiped a tissue over her eyes, reached out and hugged her daughter. “I’m crying because I’m happy.”

“But you’re okay?” Skeeter pressed, confused.

Rita hugged her again and gave a brisk nod. “I’m more than okay. I’m wonderful. I’m going to open my own bakery.”

Rita flashed Brooks a smile that thanked him for his caring, his friendship, his support and maybe more.

“This makes our celebration tonight doubly sweet.”

“It does.”

Rita sailed into his arms and hugged him, holding tight, feeling more right and natural than he had hoped and dreamed for years.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

Her smile said more than words ever could. “Everything.”

His heart burst wide open, embracing her, her family. Holding her, cherishing her—this was the future he’d wanted and needed without knowing it.

# **RUTH LOGAN HERNE**

Born into poverty, Ruth puts great stock in one of her favorite Ben Franklinisms: “Having been poor is no shame. Being ashamed of it is.” With God-given appreciation for the amazing opportunities abounding in our land, Ruth finds simple gifts in the everyday blessings of smudge-faced small children, bright flowers, fresh baked goods, good friends, family, puppies and higher education. She believes a good woman should never fear dirt, snakes or spiders, all of which like to infest her aged farmhouse, necessitating a good pair of tongs for extracting the snakes, a flat-bottomed shoe for the spiders, and the dirt....

Simply put, she’s learned that some things aren’t worth fretting about! If you laugh in the face of dust and love to talk about God, men, romance, great shoes and wonderful food, feel free to contact Ruth through her Web site at [www.ruthloganherne.com](http://www.ruthloganherne.com).

# Made to Order Family

## Ruth Logan Herne



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

—Ephesians 5:18

This book is dedicated to my beautiful girls, Sarah, Mandy, Beth, Lacey and Karen. I hope my love inspires your continued strength and faith as motherhood offers interesting challenges and grace.

Just remember that Cousin Ann in Understood Betsy is a GREAT role model.

Seriously.

# Acknowledgments

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# Chapter One

Rita Slocum worked to envision every possible reason why she shouldn't quit her job right now, pack it in and call it a day.

Three good reasons came to mind. Liv, Brett and Skeeter, her beautiful children, three amazing gifts from God that had already suffered from their parents' host of bad choices.

Never again would she compromise their happiness.

Crossing the grocery-store parking lot, she inhaled a breath of brisk, clean, North Country spring air, gave herself a quick kick in the behind and brought to mind all she should be grateful for. Her kids. Her faith. Her home. Her sobriety.

She fingered the bronze one-year chip she kept tucked in a pants pocket, a valid reminder of three hundred and sixty-five days of good choices, of strengthening values, each day chasing the pervasive shadows of drunkenness further into oblivion.

Stronger now, she refused to be fooled. Once sober, she'd studied her problem and couldn't excuse her share of the blame. It would be easy to slough things off on circumstance and depression, justify that first drink. Then the next and the next and so on.

But Rita recognized her primary responsibility in the whole mess. Sure, her life had tanked emotionally, morally and financially with her late husband's crimes and suicide, but she'd had other choices.

She'd made the wrong ones then. She'd make the right ones now.

Despite the soap opera prevailing in her current job, her kids came first. Their strength. Their faith. Their well-being. No more messing them up.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

Wonderful words, sweet and succinct. Perfect for an alcoholic's soul.

And even though today was bad, a definitive two on a scale of one to ten, most days weren't too awful, and she'd learned a great deal by working in a commercial bakery that supplied fresh bread, cakes, desserts and rolls to grocery-store shoppers.

It wasn't her dream job. No, that option lay dust-riddled alongside her computer, fact sheets for a bakery of her own, a sweetshop that called to passersby from a delectable window showcasing mouthwatering treats.

Someday.

Rita refused to be cowed by the unlikelihood of that development. For the moment she was working a no-glory job, following orders, obeying company policy on weight, ratio, freshness and back stock of quick-selling items.

It paid the bills and that was reason enough to stay—creditors were ever-present baggage from her former life. Still, her business degree from SUNY Albany prompted her to do

more than follow someone else's orders, a quality she should have clung to during her marriage to Tom Slocum. Oops.

Settling behind the wheel, she pondered her angst. Not bad enough to grab Kim, her AA sponsor, but she wanted to talk with someone who'd listen and not condemn, commiserate but not feed into her funk. Recovering alcoholics couldn't afford to bask in self-pity, ever.

Brooks.

The tall, broad-chested, sandy-haired woodcrafter with deep gray eyes would listen. He always did. And then he'd set her straight, a trait she could do without some days. The reality of that inspired a smile. Brooks' honesty matched his integrity. Great qualities in a man.

Unless she was the target of said honesty, in which case he could take his calm, confident perceptions and bury them in his ever-present sawdust bucket.

Checking her watch, she steered the car toward Grasse Bend. Plenty of time to stop in before Skeeter's bus dropped her off at home in Potsdam, and she had to drive through Grasse Bend anyway. Kind of.

She fought the invading flush, turned the air-conditioning to high despite the cool day and let the chilled air bathe her skin, her face. Brooks was a friend, a know-it-all one at that, a guy whose very being screamed "loner," and that's where they'd leave things. No risk, no worry. Perfect.

"I want to quit. To walk away without a second glance and

never look back. Your mission, Brooks Harriman, should you choose to accept it, is to talk me out of it.”

Rita’s announcement lifted Brooks’ head. He glanced from the tiny, green-tipped paintbrush to the etched scroll accenting the antiqued credenza holding center stage in his “clean” room, the area designated for finishing applications, then back to her, appraising. “Hold that thought.”

A smile tempted her mouth. She walked forward, more confident than she’d been last summer. Angled light bounced off ash-blond hair. Her cross necklace danced brightly in the slanted spring beam. He sensed her approval of his painstaking work before she walked toward the back of the room to greet his apprentice as he applied tung oil to a deacon’s bench. “Hey, Mick.”

“Rita.” Mick’s low voice greeted her while his broad hands worked oil into the receptive oak, the grain leaping to life with his attentions. “How’re you doing?”

Filling the etch with forest green, Brooks imagined her grimace. “Frustrated, peeved, disgruntled. Take your pick.”

Brooks couldn’t resist. “Whiny. Complaining. Petulant.”

“I don’t recall listing those.”

He smiled. “Nevertheless.”

“None of the above,” she retorted. “And since you’re working on something requiring a level of care, I suggest you pay mind to it.”

“Ouch.” His smile turned into a grin. “There’s coffee in the

pot.”

Rita Slocum only drank tea. He knew it, but offered coffee anyway. It was an old game from her early days in AA, when he'd squire her for old-fashioned one-on-one. Bad enough to be a single mother with a drinking problem, but a single mother with a drinking problem in the North Country, well...

That was tough. There were no secrets in the small towns littering Route 11. But she'd made it so far and today's crisis wasn't serious or she'd have called Kim to talk it out, fight the temptation, view her choices and choose.

Her presence pushed Brooks to hurry. He dismissed the urge. Fluid green followed his strokes, filling the angles and curves. Short minutes later, he sat back, satisfied. “Done.”

“I love it.”

He'd sensed her approach, the scent of baked apples and cinnamon teasing his nose, tweaking awareness. He looked up. “How's your tea?” His eyes swept the foam cup, the telltale tag hanging outside.

“Wonderful. Soothing. Sweet.”

He'd stocked up on various brands for when she required a sounding board. Her hair swung forward as she examined the piece, the fruity scent light and flirtatious, a delightful combination. Her sky-blue eyes twinkled. “I'm not even going to ask what something like that goes for,” she quipped, admiring.

Brooks nodded. The German-style dresser was dear. “This wouldn't blend with your things anyway, would it?”

“At some point in time, when the term ‘discretionary funds’ reenters my vocabulary, my things will change,” she promised. She pressed her lips thin, musing. “For the moment, I’m content with the scuffed-up remnants of raising three kids.”

Brooks envisioned Brett’s soccer ball thumping against the finished sideboard. Drawers stuffed with disjointed game pieces. Skeeter using it as a support for her gymnastic maneuvers. Olivia...

At fifteen, Liv was probably the only one besides Rita who would treat the stylish cabinet with any level of respect. He bit back a sigh inspired by his thoughts and his early morning wake-up call. “In your particular case, I think refurbishing should stay on the back burner for a decade. Maybe two.”

“For years those kids weren’t allowed to live in their own house. Be creative,” she told him. “Tom wasn’t comfortable with disorder.”

Brooks stiffened at the mention of Rita’s late husband, a man who’d engineered a well-disguised Ponzi scheme that bilked money from innocent investors, then killed himself rather than face charges, leaving Rita more baggage than anyone should have to handle. Ever.

Rita didn’t notice his reaction. As her finger traced the sweep of the beautiful sideboard, she lifted her shoulders. “With Brett and Liv both teenagers, they’ll be gone before you know it. Plenty of time for change coming.”

Brooks wiped his hands on a tack rag, stood and moved to the



sink to wash up, weighing her words. Rita had learned to embrace change out of necessity, a brave move for a woman alone, a single mother to boot.

Whereas he'd run fast and hard, disappearing into oblivion when the going got tough. Polar opposites to the max.

He stretched his shoulders, rolling the joints to ease the stiffening that accompanied detail work. "So. What are we quitting?"

"Mindless work a trained monkey could do," Rita grouched.

"Trained monkeys are scarce hereabouts." He poured coffee, eyed the density, scowled and added cream. "We could import some."

"There's little imagination or thought that goes into industrial baking," Rita expounded, leaning against a sturdy, unfinished logged bedstead. Her blue jeans, thin and baggy, were standard wear in the bakery. "Every cake is like every other, don't even think you can special order a combination that isn't in the book because you can't, and the custard filling tastes like chemical waste."

"It sells."

"Because there are no alternatives," she spouted, eyes flashing. "If the cheesecake cracks, they dummy it with extra topping and sell it anyway, at full price." Her voice rose. "And the crème horns? The filling comes in a box. You measure out x, add y and z and voilà! White crème filling."

"There's another way?" She ignored the humor in his tone.

Didn't note the lift to his brow, the hint of a smile.

"The right way. The way it should be done, would be done if I were running the place." Arching a dark brow that contrasted with her light hair and eyes, she played her trump card. "To top it all off? Add insult to injury?"

He fought a grin and nodded, the gesture inviting her to continue.

"The cannoli filling comes from a can."

"No."

"Yes!"

The earnestness of her expression made him lose constraint. He grinned. "Who'd have thought?"

Uh-oh. The grin made her huffy. She set her tea on his workbench with an uncharacteristic thump. "Never mind, Brooks. I shouldn't have come."

"Why did you?"

"I..." His question caught her off guard. She fingered the collar of her knit shirt, nonplussed, her gaze searching his.

Mick hid a chuckle beneath a cough.

Brooks met her look, unflinching, rock solid. "Reet?"

The telltale blush traveled her throat, her cheeks. She turned toward the door. He stilled her with a gentle hand on her arm. "Open your own place. You've talked of it often enough."

"I can't."

"You don't know that."

"I do," she corrected him. "I've done my homework on

this. I've scoped out costs versus income, possible locations, equipment requirements, licenses, refurbishing. The start-up costs are prohibitive and no lending institution worth its salt is going to front a loan to a drunk with a pile of bills, three kids and no money."

"What have you got to lose by filling out the applications, trying every angle?"

"Besides my self-respect and my sobriety?" She stared beyond his shoulder, gnawed her lip and drew her gaze back to his. "Rejection scares me. A lot."

Her admission didn't surprise Brooks. Rita's lack of self-esteem was a big part of what had pushed her into the alcoholic abyss that almost tore apart her family. Thankfully her sister-in-law Sarah had stepped in to take charge of the kids before Rita sought recovery the previous spring. Otherwise they'd have been wrenched apart and put in foster homes, another family gone bad.

But that hadn't happened. Instead the kids had spent the summer working on Sarah's sheep farm while Rita faced her demons and won.

God's hand at work. Brooks might never step foot into a church, but he recognized God's might and power in this particular situation. And despite his nonattendance, Brooks knew his beliefs to be as strong and ardent as most churchgoers, probably more than some. He served one God, one Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. He just handled it a bit differently from everyone else on the planet.

Singular. Unfettered. Independent.

He prayed one-on-one, lived alone and ran his own business with no one to answer to.

Ordered. Structured. Organized to the max.

The loner profile worked for him, offering a shield of protection that he'd erected nearly a dozen years back. So far, so good. But not so easy when Rita came around. Something about her heightened his senses, awakening possibilities he'd buried long ago.

But he hadn't served as a Delta commander in the army for nothing. Brooks was adept at identifying and administrating, the sorting techniques intrinsic to success in battle. How weird was it that he needed those skills around Rita?

He dipped his chin and gave her arm an encouraging squeeze. "Things are different now. You're stronger. You've had over a year without a lapse of sobriety, you've taken a job that's helped strengthen your résumé when you do apply for bakery funding and I expect you've learned a thing or two about commercial baking in the process."

"A lot, actually."

"Then put that knowledge to good use. Draw up a prospectus."

"I already did," she admitted.

Brooks grinned. "Good girl. Now fill out some applications. Give it a shot. You've got a lot of people behind you, believing in you. You can do this."

Could she, Rita wondered? At that moment her answer was

yes, Brooks' words bolstering her confidence.

Brooks Harriman didn't blow sunshine carelessly. Not now, not ever. He shot straight from the hip, his analysis unjaded and unbiased. That honesty won him respect in their tight-knit community, a precious commodity in the North County. In an area that courted winter seven months of the year, stoicism was held in high regard.

But tiny spring leaves dappled the afternoon sun with dancing shadow, their Kelly-green newness refreshing. Rita clutched her tea with one hand while the other fingered the one-year chip in her pocket. "You really think I can do this?"

His expression defined confidence. "I know you can do this. And I'll be glad to help with any and all refurbishing when you get approval and pick a site."

"There's a really sweet store available in Canton," Rita told him. The admission brought heat to her cheeks, as if she'd done something wrong in checking things out, having the audacity to believe in herself.

She gave herself an inward shake, burying the insecurities that challenged her faith in God and herself.

Change the things you can....

The words buoyed her in their simplicity. Maybe she could do this.

Brooks leaned in, the scent of wood shavings and oil-based paint tickling her nose, playing havoc with her thoughts. "Coffee tonight, after Brett's game?"

Brett's travel team had a game in Canton tonight, and while Brooks wasn't a big fan of Skeeter's gymnastics performances and the accompanying histrionics, he enjoyed watching Brett's soccer matches.

"No."

"Tea, then?"

His teasing tone inspired a smile and a softer response. "I can't. I've got to get Brett and Skeeter home. Spring games on school nights are always a killer."

"Oh. Of course." Brooks replied as if he understood the time frame, but he didn't. Not really. Kid bedtimes were something he'd never had to deal with, thanks to his brother.

She walked to the door, sure-footed, more poised and confident than she'd been last summer. Back then a confrontation like this would have sent her into duck-and-cover mode. Not anymore.

She was doing well. She had her first-year chip, the bronze medallion inscribed with the sacred words of sobriety, The Serenity Prayer.

Brooks lived by that prayer, a solid credo. Over a decade ago he'd recognized what he couldn't change, so he grasped the courage to change what he could, his location. He'd come north to start anew, and he had.

Thoughts of Baltimore invaded the peaceful afternoon. His parents. His brother. Amy and her deception.

Brooks shoved them aside. He'd left the Inner Harbor because

he had no choice, not after what they'd done. His faith, his focus and his freedom had been at stake, three concepts he held dear.

Family?

Um...not so much. Not since he realized that his fiancée was pregnant with his brother's child. While Brooks had been commanding men in the desert sands of Iraq, Amy and Paul had trysted in Maryland. Instead of being the model American family Brooks held in his heart, the Harrimans had been reduced to a Jerry Springer episode.

When Rita was around, a whisper of the man he'd been flickered to life. Captain Brooks Harriman, a soldier, a fighter, a special operative trained to make the most of a given situation.

His skills failed him in Baltimore. He'd been unable to separate the physical from the emotional, and had let the combination tumble him into the dark pit of alcoholism, until Sgt. Greg Callahan of the Baltimore Police Department dragged him up and out of the gutter, then became his AA sponsor.

Callahan's example as a sponsor and a man inspired Brooks. And he'd been dry for nearly a dozen years. At forty-two, he'd been spinning his wheels for a long time.

Too long, Brooks decided, watching Rita climb into her car, her hair bright with afternoon sun. Christ had promised life to the full, his words giving hope to gathered throngs.

When Rita was around, the sweet scent of cinnamon-soaked apples teasing his senses, that fullness seemed possible. Plausible. Add three kids to the mix...

Brooks passed a hand along the nape of his neck as Rita's car curved north. Her kids couldn't afford any more mistakes. Neither could she. But life without chances wasn't really life, and right now Brooks was ready to reach for the gold ring he'd missed twelve years before. Now if he could just convince Rita...

A slight smile tugged his lips. He'd managed to oversee covert operations, lead men into battle and engineer the behind-the-scenes cyber breakdown of Iraqi military software, disabling their computerized navigation systems. One sweet, thirty-eight year old single mother shouldn't be all that hard. Right?



## Chapter Two

"I hate those shoes." Skeeter's tone sounded like Rita's had earlier. Rita grimaced, recognizing the parallel. "They're ugly."

"Then wear your sneakers," Rita counseled. "The ones with Strawberry Shortcake are cute."

"For babies." Skeeter stuck out her lower lip, then tossed her head, pigtails bouncing. "I'm not going."

Rita cut her off. She squatted and locked gazes. "You have five minutes to get ready for Brett's game. If you don't, you'll lose TV privileges for the rest of the week. That's five long days, Skeets." Rising, she eyed the girl. "It's up to you."

In the old days she'd have wheedled the girl's cooperation, trying to assuage the guilt of Tom's crimes. She'd worked double time to make it up to them, be the nicest mom she could be, bending backward until she'd collapsed in an alcoholic heap. Big mistake.

Unraveling two years of insanity wasn't easy, but doable now that she was sober. She stirred boiling water into an insulated jug containing hot chocolate mix. Sweet cocoa essence rose, rich and full, delighting her senses. If only she'd turned to chocolate instead of whiskey....

Her computer light blinked green from the quaint kitchen alcove, a reminder of Brooks' words. How could she find time to write up a professional prospectus with long hours of work and

the intricacies of raising three children on her own, one of whom presented a constant challenge?

The phone rang. Rita grimaced, knowing her time frame was short. Her mother's phone number appeared in the display. Swallowing a sigh, Rita answered, one eye on the clock. "You're home."

No exchange of pleasantries. No socially acceptable intro. Yup. That was Mom lately. "Hey, Mom, yes. I'm here. But Skeeter and I are on our way to Brett's soccer game."

"You've had supper already?" Critical doubt shaded her mother's words. Intentional? Maybe yes, maybe no. In either case Rita had a game to get to as long as Skeeter cooperated.

Please, Lord, let Skeeter cooperate tonight.

"Sandwiches later," Rita explained. Skeeter reappeared wearing the Strawberry Shortcake sneakers and an aggrieved expression. Rita nodded approval at one and ignored the other. Some things weren't worth the battle.

"How do kids get homework done when their schedules run them ragged day after day?" Judith Barnes' voice pitched higher. "Nothing should outrank homework. School performance. You above all people should know that, Rita. Your grades were excellent when you applied yourself."

In Mom-speak, that meant, "You didn't apply yourself often enough."

The ten seconds Skeeter had been kept waiting pushed her patience beyond endurance. She parked one hand on her hip and

tapped a toe, the hint of bored insolence well practiced. At seven years old, it shouldn't be a consideration. With Skeeter it had become almost ingrained, not a good thing. "Um, hello? I thought we were going? Isn't that why I had to put these stupid shoes on?"

"I'm coming, Skeets." Rita added a silent frown, indicating displeasure at Skeeter's voice and tone. Skeeter rolled her eyes, her mouth curved down in a characteristic pout. Great.

"Mom, I've got to go. Brett's game is going to start soon."

"Rita, you know I don't like to interfere—"

Rita knew nothing of the sort.

"And I generally mind my own business—"

Meaning I'm about to mind yours, so watch out....

"And I'm a firm believer in parents raising their own children —"

Translation: I could do better, hands down, no questions asked.

"But why do you let her talk to you that way? So bratty? Liv wasn't like that. Neither was Brett. But with Aleta you let her get away with all kinds of things you'd have never let slide before."

Before what? Tom's crimes? His suicide? Her alcoholism?

Her mother drew a breath, her voice a mix of concern, criticism and consternation, a gruesome threesome. "When she gets like that, she sounds just like her father. Proud and pretentious."

"Mom, I can't do this now. I have to go. Skeeter's waiting. So is Brett. I'll be glad to discuss my chronic failings at a later date, okay?"

“You don’t have failings, Rita. You’ve made mistakes. Nothing the rest of us haven’t done, myself included. I just don’t want this to go too far, too long. It’s hard to backtrack with kids.”

Since Rita was fairly sure she’d let Skeeter’s sour attitude grow out of control already, she couldn’t say much in response. “I know, Mom. Gotta go. Talk to you later.”

“All right.”

Rita disconnected, checked her cell-phone charge because Liv would be calling later for a ride home, and nodded toward Skeeter’s clothes and shoes as she twisted the top of the thermos.

“You look great.” She raised the bright raspberry-toned bottle. “Hot chocolate for later.”

Skeeter’s eyes widened in appreciation.

“You might want to bring a book or stuff to color,” Rita added. “If it gets really cold, you can sit in the car.”

Rita moved aside to allow Skeets past. Stepping down, Skeeter caught her toe on a chipped porch tile. She crashed to her knees. Hysterical tears ensued, ruining the momentary peace. Rita leaned down, inspected both knees, grabbed the still-secure bottle and shrugged. “Not fatal. Let’s go.” Skeeter glared.

Rita did a slow count to ten. She was segueing from eight to nine, weighing choices, when Skeeter stood, a martyred expression in place. Moaning, she limped to the door.

Obviously five days of no television loomed long and lonely. Rita took the positive-reinforcement route. “It’ll make Brett happy to know we’re at his game.”

No answer. Ah, well. The sacrificial-lamb act would fade if ignored. After the day she'd had, Rita had no difficulty doing just that.

"Come on, Brett, that's it!" Rita fist-pumped as her son feinted right, dodged left, then sent the ball on a diagonal across the net where a teammate finished the play by tapping it in. Rita clapped and cheered with the rest of the Charger parents. The score was two—one with less than ten minutes to play. She turned as the teams regrouped and glanced at the parked car. The cold night made the backseat a welcome reprieve for Skeeter. Once they'd gotten to the field, she'd forgotten her snit and played with other sideline siblings until the damp air chilled them. Most of them had retreated to their respective cars as the temperatures dropped.

"Step by step," Rita reassured herself. It had taken time to plunge her family into the pits of despair, until a social services intervention spurred events that resulted in her sober state. Resuming an even keel wouldn't happen overnight.

"How's the game?" Brooks' voice startled her out of her reverie.

Rita's heart lurched. She frowned and turned, mad at her reaction, pretty sure half the single women in AA had a crush on Brooks at one time or another. His warm strength radiated solidity. She willed her pulse to calm and kept her voice even with effort. "We're winning. Brett just had an assist. That means he sent the ball to the player who kicked it in."

Brooks rocked back on his heels, one hand thrust into his pocket. His eyes crinkled. "I may not be a big fan but I comprehend the concept."

Embarrassed, she started to turn. He paused her action with a hand to her arm. "I brought you something."

He handed her a twenty-ounce convenience store cup. She eyed it, then him.

"Chai. The spiced variety. I thought you might appreciate a little warming."

She brought the cup to her nose and sniffed. Ah. Cinnamon. Vanilla. The undertone of mild tea. Rich cream. He watched her, head angled. "Since you wouldn't go out for tea, I thought the tea should come to you."

Warmth flooded Rita, and she hadn't even tried the tea.

"Dank night. You warm enough?"

And then some. Rita nodded, pulling her attention back to the game, not an easy task at the moment. "Fine, thank you. You're not at St. Luke's for the open meeting tonight?" Like several other venues, the quaint stone church on Windsor Street offered meeting space to AA members twice a week. "Not tonight."

Rita refused to ponder the reasons that brought him here instead of there. Brooks had been in AA a long time. His years of sobriety and successful business acumen made him a standout example to others. If he could conquer the dragon of alcoholism, anyone could. He cocked his head and studied the growing fervor of the soccer contest, assessing. "Dangerous strategy. Gives the

enemy too much time and latitude to perform.”

“Enemy?” Rita’s hiked brow questioned his word choice.

“I meant opponent,” Brooks answered, not acknowledging the expression.

“But you said...”

He stopped her with a quieting look, classic Brooks. “The other team is about to score.”

And they did.

A collective groan sounded. With scant minutes left, there wasn’t much chance of winning. Still, Brett’s team had played a good game.

Rita drew a breath of clean, cold air, smiled and raised her cup. “Thank you, Brooks.” She put the lid to her lips and sipped lightly, testing for temperature, then sighed her appreciation. “It’s wonderful.”

“Good.” He watched as the teams offered the obligatory handshake before adding, “I got another compliment on your window today.”

“Did you?”

“Yup. Customers from Vermont. They loved it. I was thinking you and Liv might be interested in doing a spring-summer version.”

“Might be? We loved doing it. And I know Liv’s got some ideas, she was just too shy to ask.”

“Why?”

Rita shrugged. “She felt awkward, like she was pushing herself

on you.”

“She’s got talent. An eye for color and balance that’s inherent, not learned. Solid qualities.”

“Thank you.” Rita smiled up at him, his compliments sweet music to her ears. Liv had suffered from her parents’ rough choices. As a result, she’d taken part in some escapades that had people wagging their tongues. But she’d turned a corner when Rita did. The thought of what her alcoholism had cost three wonderful kids gripped Rita internally.

That happened fairly often as memories stirred, but at least now she wasn’t nearly as tempted to reach for a drink, a glass, a bottle. When she was, she handled those moments with help from Kim, Brooks and good old-fashioned faith. How she wished she’d turned to that first, but God had seemed pretty far removed after Tom’s death.

“Earth to Rita?”

Rita flushed, caught in her thoughts. “Sorry. Thinking.”

Brooks’ look offered appraisal. “Remembering.”

“Yes. How’d you know?”

“It shows all over your face.”

“Great.”

“Maybe just for me?” he suggested, an eyebrow up, his gaze steady and warm.

“That would be better than being an open book to the world at large. Half the county knows who I am and what I’ve done.”

“Negative talk.”



“Where I’d say realistic.”

He weighed that. “County population was just over 100K in the last census.”

She turned, exasperated. “You watch Jeopardy, don’t you? I don’t know another soul on the planet with such a head for random facts and figures.”

“I’m a businessman,” he corrected her, his voice matter-of-fact. “It’s my job to know these things, to understand the shift in demographics and then adjust my sales strategies to fit.”

“Enemies. Strategies.” Rita took a step back, eyeing him, doing her own quick assessment. “You were a military man.”

A flash of shadow darkened his features before he nodded. “For quite a while. Nice evaluation.”

“Well, it’s not like I haven’t wondered,” she confessed. Taking another sip of chai, she let the soothing mix warm her, the tea a great gift on a cold, clammy night. Her toes were chilled and she couldn’t feel two fingers on her left hand, a leftover condition from childhood frostbite. But the warmth curled inside, way more satisfying than whiskey ever thought of being. And not nearly as scandalous. “You’re a private person, Brooks. Everyone wonders.”

“But no one asks.”

“Reverting to my former statement: you’re private. You like it that way. But you go out of your way to help others so they offer you respect in return.”

“Ah.” He rocked back on his heels, nodding. “In any case, I

don't think fifty thousand people have a clue who you are or what you've done."

"I'll guarantee you one hundred percent know what Tom did."

"True enough," Brooks acknowledged, considering. Tom's crimes had affected scores of local people. Despite its widespread geography, St. Lawrence County's population zones were centered in the towns and cities dotting Route 11, and big news like Tom Slocum's embezzlements made a notable splash in the headlines. With those numbers, everyone either knew or was related to someone affected by Tom's avarice.

The lack of insurance and the heavily mortgaged house had kept Rita right there in the midst of it all, her options limited by lack of finance and a downturn in the housing market, two tough smackdowns on top of the humiliation and grief. Her three kids lost their father, had to deal with the aftermath of his crimes and then watched their mother pitch downhill in the throes of alcoholism.

More than once he wished he could get his hands on Tom Slocum, give him the thrashing he so deeply deserved. What kind of man disregards his wife, his kids, to service his own greedy need? "Hey."

Brooks shifted his jaw and his gaze. "Hmm?"

"I lost you."

"Must be contagious."

"I guess. Anyway, about the window? When should we do it?"

"Mondays are best. Weekends are too crazy to be pulling

things out, playing with positioning and all that. This Monday maybe?”

“I’d have to bring Skeets,” she warned.

“I’ll alert the authorities. The police chief’s right across the way and our three meager jail cells get precious little use. We’ll be fine.”

“Brooks.”

He grinned.

“She’s not that bad.”

She was, and then some, but Brooks was a smart man. He had no intention of getting into the discussion now. He nodded toward Brett as he trotted off the field. “Fine game.”

Brett shrugged, miffed by the loss. “Should have won it. We overkilled at the end and left them open.”

“Recognizing that, you won’t let it happen again.”

“Exactly.” Brett smiled his appreciation of Brooks’ confidence.

“And you’ve developed a great left feint,” Brooks went on. “The feint, followed by the fast feet, then dodge right... Well practiced. Great move.”

Brett’s smile deepened to a grin. “You played?”

Brooks shook his head. “I’m a baseball man. Not too many played soccer back in my day, but it wouldn’t have mattered. I was born with a bat and ball in hand, according to my mother.”

Brett’s expression changed. “Were you named for Brooks Robinson?”

“Good connection,” Brooks observed.

Rita noted his expression, a mix of surprise and chagrin.

“Not too many know that around here, but yes. My dad was an Orioles fan.”

“Was? Oh. Sorry you lost him.” Brett’s look smacked of apology for bringing up a sore subject.

Brooks clapped a hand to the back of his head, bemused. Rita studied him, his reactions, his look. He drew a deep breath, exhaled and directed his answer to Brett. “He’s not dead. I should have said is a big O’s fan. We went to every Orioles game we could when I was a kid.”

Another little tidbit of a past Brooks never talked about. Interesting, thought Rita.

“Mom!” Skeeter’s pugnacious demand put a quick stop to her mental wanderings. The seven-year-old stomped their way, rude and discourteous. “I’ve been waiting forever and I’m cold and hungry and my brown crayon broke and I can’t color a stupid tree without a brown crayon. What’s taking so long? Stop talking and take me home. I hate it when you take so long!”

“Skeeter—”

Skeeter stomped her foot again, her normally cute features twisted.

Brooks took no pains to hide his assessment. He nodded Rita’s way, ignored Skeeter, and said, “I’ll see you soon, Reet. Brett, good game.”

“Thanks, Mr. Harriman.”

Rita started to stumble through a goodbye. Another foot stomp dragged her attention back to Skeeter as Brooks walked toward his truck.

Before her stood one very good reason why she couldn't entertain thoughts of a relationship. Not now. Probably not ever, at least not while she had to deal with Hurricane Skeeter on a daily basis.

Brett and Liv were old enough to appreciate the relative peace of Rita's sobriety and their current existence. Oh, she was still paying the price for stupidity, but things were better between them. But Skeeter...

Not so much.

Frustrated, Rita headed toward the car at a quick clip, Skeeter following, her feet clomping in the cold, wet grass.

Which meant her shoes would still be wet for school tomorrow.

Another day, another confrontation.

Great.

## Chapter Three

Rita sank into the comfy recliner, put her feet up and leaned her head back, relieved to call it a day. Had she really crawled out of bed eighteen hours ago, her 5:00 a.m. bakery start a distant memory now?

Liv poked her head around the corner. "Sitting down again?" Rita laughed.

Liv took a seat across from her, her glance taking in the time. "Long day."

"For you, too."

Liv shrugged. "I got to spend my evening watching two cute kids, neither of whom yelled or screamed or stomped their feet." She jerked her head toward the upstairs, where Skeeter lay sleeping. "Got my homework done, studied for a chem test and watched cable, all while getting paid."

"Nice gig."

"It was." Liv stood and stretched, the day catching up with her. "But as much fun as it is watching the Bauers' kids from time to time, I want to get a real job."

Rita raised a brow. "What about sports? Running? After-school activities?"

"Lots of people juggle both," Liv answered. She rubbed her eyes, stretched once more and shrugged. "Something to think about. I hate making you chauffeur me around more than you

already do, though. I know that's tough."

"It's no biggie, Liv. I'm your mom. That's what I do."

"But with our schedules all so different, it's not easy," Liv argued. "I just don't want to make things tougher."

Rita hesitated. Was Liv weighing this choice so heavily because she was afraid Rita would cave under pressure? She stood and hugged Liv's shoulder. "If you're ready for that step of independence, take it, kiddo. Seriously. You'll be sixteen in less than a year and then you can drive yourself places, at least some of the time. And you can become my part-time cabbie, tote your brother and sister all over for me."

Liv mock-scowled. "Great."

Rita grinned. "This could be a total win-win. I'm one hundred percent okay with that."

Liv's sigh of relief told Rita she'd nudged open a door for her daughter, curtailing her concerns.

Rita knew there were times when Brett and Liv held back, fear dogging their choices. Neither one wanted to be a catalyst in pushing her over an unseen edge, resulting in a fall off the wagon. With her one-year medallion safely tucked in her pocket, she wasn't quite as concerned as she used to be.

One day at a time. Sound advice.

"I'm heading to bed, Mom. You're off tomorrow?"

"Yes. Since it's my Saturday to work, I've got tomorrow to kick up my heels. Shop. Visit the spa. Do lunch."

Liv laughed. They both knew that Rita's scheduled day off

meant playing catch-up on all the stuff back-burnered during the other six days of the week. Cleaning, laundry, shopping, errands, banking. The short hours between Skeeter's morning bus and afternoon bus were crammed full of tasks and chores needed to maintain some small vestige of normalcy.

And she just might outline her prospectus, push things forward. If she could hurdle this cycle of fear, of rejection, she could possibly plant herself into the dream job she'd hoped and planned for.

An image of the storefront in Canton filled her brain, her creative side painting, trimming and polishing the scarred space into something warm, cozy and inviting, a respite from the long days of winter and the heat of the summer. A place to buy amazing pastries, cakes and cookies.

Did she dare put her mind to the test tomorrow? Give it a shot?

She yawned and realized she was too tired to make that decision now, but tomorrow...

Liv interrupted her musings. "Be sure to treat yourself to a nice massage once your nails are done."

Rita almost sighed. The very idea of a relaxing massage sounded absolutely wonderful and totally impossible. "I've decided pampering is overrated."

"And probably detrimental to womankind as a whole," Liv agreed. She hugged Rita one more time, understanding. "Night, Mom."

"Good night, honey."



Rita turned out the lights as Liv's footsteps faded, the deepening shadows peaceful and quiet, a perfect contemplative time for prayerful thought and consideration.

Skeeter had settled down once they got home, probably too tired to battle it out. Rita hoped she'd wake in the morning in good humor, find something in her drawers that tickled her fancy, choose to wear the dry shoes they'd left at home tonight, have breakfast and get on the bus all smiles, like most seven-year-olds.

Then return home tomorrow afternoon the same way.

Her gaze strayed to the kitchen where her computer lay dormant, its silence commanding attention.

Change the things you can...

Once Skeets was on the bus, Rita was tossing in the first load of laundry, starting the dishwasher and writing a prospectus. Once done, she'd have Brooks read it over, see if she'd covered all the bases. And then, applications.

Yeah, she could get knocked around emotionally, always a dicey thing for a recovering alcoholic. The chances of procuring the loan were slim.

But the chances went from slim to none if she did nothing, and that wasn't acceptable. Not anymore. She'd gotten braver and bolder in the past year. High time she took a chance. With her strengthening faith and the support of AA, she could take this step forward.

Fingering the bronze chip in her pocket, she nodded as she

climbed the stairs. One day at a time.

## Chapter Four

The metallic crash yanked Brooks from his bed later that night. Battle ready, one hand grabbed a weapon resembling a worn kitchen broom while the other sought the corner of the closed Venetian blind, his gaze searching the night.

A flash of red-gold skirted the pavement, enough to tell Brooks he'd been undermined by a four-footed varmint with a penchant for homemade mac and cheese.

Again.

He barreled toward the door wishing he'd remembered to turn the heat on after Brett's soccer game.

No.

Huffing against the cold, he grabbed the first thing his fingers hit, an old Baltimore Oriole's afghan. He yanked it around his shoulders and headed out the door, to no avail. Like previous times, the minute the door handle clicked left, the dog disappeared, obviously faster and smarter than Brooks.

Which didn't take much at 3:00 a.m.

Strewed garbage lay ankle deep across his small yard.

He bit back useless words, shook a fist, then danced sideways on the cold step, the chill of his feet knife-blading up, his outside thermometer reading twenty-nine degrees.

Brr...

And since his apartment wasn't much better, his living room

offered little reprieve. Disgruntled, Brooks finagled a light, cranked the thermostat right, tugged on sweats and tried not to be upset that some scruffy dog had once again bested a decorated war veteran.

The drawer full of military medals offered small comfort as Brooks cleaned a frosted yard littered with disgusting debris. Why him? Why now? What was it about this garbage that drew the mutt repeatedly?

Probably your ineptitude to catch him, tweaked an inner voice.

Brooks couldn't disagree. Like it or not, the dog had bested him multiple times.

Resigned, Brooks did what he should have done days ago. He hauled the garbage tote into the garage and closed the door, then stared into the darkened night, his backyard melding into state forest land, the dog gone from sight but not from mind. "Next time, pal."

The promise of payback sounded thin. The dog was obviously smarter, quicker and sneakier.

And needed less sleep.

Brooks yawned, scowled, then headed inside. In one night he'd been bested by a cantankerous seven-year-old and a tenacious dog, both of which could use a lesson in manners. He eyed the clock, decided six hours was plenty of sleep, made coffee and headed to the wood shop, wondering why kids and dogs couldn't just behave themselves.

"Toots, did Hy Everts drop off those frames I ordered?"

Brooks asked later that morning.

Tootsie Lawrence nodded as she hooked her deep green fleece in the workroom. "Late yesterday, actually. Do you have the picture Cade left? I'll frame it for you."

"Right here." Brooks handed an envelope to his longtime sales clerk. "The one with the blue matte is for Cade." The town's police chief had dropped off a family picture the week before.

"Beautiful." Tootsie withdrew the frame with care. Hy's work had become renowned, his wood carvings a natural expression of North Country life. The thick picture frames, a new venture for him, were engraved with north-woods symbols along the perimeter. Trees, bears, cabins, moose, wolves. The effect of the lighter wood recessed against the deeper stain held the pictures in relief. "Oh, Boss, look."

Brooks peered over her shoulder as Tootsie withdrew Cade's family picture, her expression beatific. "Isn't this just lovely?"

"You're crying."

"I'm not," Tootsie protested. She sniffled.

"You are," Brooks exclaimed, horrified. "Stop that. Now."

"I can't." Tootsie trailed a finger along the frame, her gaze trained on the sweet family before them. "And how cute is that baby, Boss?"

"Cute enough."

She swung around and offered him a stern expression. "He's absolutely, positively beautiful. Couldn't you just eat him up?"

Brooks couldn't, actually, but he knew better than to argue.

Cade called just then, saving Brooks from himself. “Hey, Chief.”

“Brooks, did my frame arrive yet?”

“We’ve got it. Tootsie’s actually framing the picture as we speak.”

“Sweet. Annie asked me about it and I promised I’d check. How does it look?”

Brooks eyed the framed print. Cade’s young family laughed back at him. He swallowed a sigh, worked his jaw and nodded. “Very nice, which is a good thing since these frames don’t come cheap.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Cade told him. “As long as it’s right, the cost is insignificant.”

His words touched Brooks’ heart.

Brooks was frugal. His lifestyle reflected that. He was constantly amazed at how quickly Rita went through money, week after week. Shoes here, doctors there, school supplies, car repairs, food, clothes. Her expenses boggled the mind.

Picturing Cade’s family, Brooks realized he was the anomaly, not them. His singular status and prudence labeled him different.

Usually that didn’t bother him.

Today it did.

A movement outside caught his attention, a flash of red-gold skirting the parking lot. “Cade, have you noticed this stray dog that’s been hanging around?”

“No. How long’s he been around?”

“Off and on for the last week or more,” Brooks told him. He

taped the edges and slid the frame into one of his distinctive cord-handled bags. "A retriever."

"Haven't seen him."

"I just caught a glimpse of him alongside the parking lot. He's been getting into my garbage at night, making quite a mess."

"Tags?"

"Haven't gotten close enough to see. He's furtive."

"Or smart."

"Either way, it's a pain to have to chase him off."

"I'll keep an eye out and let Bill Pickering know." Bill was the animal-control officer for St. Lawrence County.

The idea of the dog being caged niggled, but the thought of not having to wrestle garbage constantly won out. "Thanks." Brooks hesitated, then asked, "They won't put him down, will they?"

"That depends on a lot of factors," Cade explained. "If he's got an owner, tags, if he's healthy, adoptable. A lot of strays get put down. There are no guarantees."

"But he's not that bad," protested Brooks.

Cade went silent for a moment. When he spoke his voice held more than a hint of question and a good dose of amusement. "You either want him caught or you don't. Which is it?"

Brooks ran a frustrated hand through his hair and frowned. "I'm not sure, myself."

"Well, when you figure it out, call me back. I'm just across the road, so I'm fairly accessible."

"Thanks, Chief."

He wouldn't call, Brooks decided. The thought of the dog locked up in a pound bothered him. Not as much as the dog rummaging his garbage, but still...

Nothing to be euthanized for, right? A few scraps of paper, some old mac and cheese and one worn shoe that Brooks really should have tossed months ago.

Definitely not worth a death sentence, but Brooks couldn't deny he'd like to get a full night's sleep on a more regular basis, and hoped the locked-up garbage bin would ensure that.



## Chapter Five

Rita took a deep breath, breathed a prayer for strength and dialed her brother-in-law Ed's home. "Heather, it's Rita. Is Ed available?"

Her former sister-in-law's voice faltered. "I'm not sure, Rita."

Rita sent her gaze upward, compressed her lips and bit back what she wanted to say. "I only need a minute."

"Who is it?" Ed's churlish voice came through gnarled, as if Heather tried to block the sensitive microphone a little too late.

"Rita."

"What does she want?" His emphasis on the pronoun smacked of disregard. Obviously Ed felt she had nothing to say that he wanted to hear. But if she was going to garner enough courage to run her own business and her own life, Rita needed to lasso some guts, take charge and do what was needed on a daily basis. A good businesswoman didn't put things off for her convenience or to shore up a sagging self-esteem.

"Tell him I need to talk to him, Heather. It's either talk to me now or I'll come right over."

"She says she's coming over if you don't talk to her."

Ed muttered words unsuitable for decent company and Rita hoped his kids were somewhere else. Anywhere else. But Ed's kids had been raised around his late-day vulgarity, the ever-present twelve-pack of beer an after-hours habit.

“What do you want?”

Rita heard his words and figured he was about six cans into the night and it was only five o'clock.

“Ed, you're aware the judge could make his decision any day regarding the pension fund, right?”

“I know you're trying to finagle your way into messing up my retirement fund, yes. And that any decent judge will see right through your little scheme and tell you to get your drunken butt out of bed and get a better job. Take care of my brother's kids.”

His words hit their mark, but Rita choked back a retort. “Ed, if you split the fund now, I'll drop the case. I'm starting a bakery of my own and those funds would go a long way to helping me get on my feet.”

“I'll tell you what,” Ed expounded. “I know you're a worthless excuse for a wife and mother, that if Tommy hadn't been working night and day to keep you in fancy clothes and cars, he wouldn't have done what he did. You drove him to it, and we all know it.”

“Ed, if you wait for the judge to rule, you could be liable for legal fees and court costs. Those add up.”

“That judge ain't gonna give you a dime,” Ed shot back. “You get your share when I get mine, at age sixty-five. That's how Tommy and I set it up, and that's how it is. Now leave me alone.”  
Click.

Rita stared at the phone, thinking of all the things she wished she could say, then sighed. Not one of them would change the outcome, change Ed's outlook or make a difference in the long

run, so why say them?

Complete satisfaction?

Sure, yanking Ed's chain with a long-winded spiel might offer some sense of momentary comfort, but it was better she leave things be. She'd called, she'd tried, made an honest attempt. Now she'd go to the banks knowing she'd given it her best shot with Ed. Yeah, she'd come up short, but she hadn't chickened out or gone off on him. Two good things.

Having bank officers see her financial state of affairs unnerved her. Life hadn't been easy since Tom died and her drinking had messed the whole family up, but since she'd gone into recovery a year before, everything had been paid on time. That should count for something, right?

Maybe.

She pulled in another deep breath, turned her back on the phone and called Skeeter's name as she headed for the car.

"Liv? Skeets? You guys ready? We have to get to the wood shop."

"We're ready." Liv's light footsteps pattered down the stairs. Skeeter's followed at a more measured pace, but she wasn't testy, and Rita chalked that up as a quiet victory. "Do you need me to put anything in the car?"

"Nope. I did it while you were finishing your homework. Skeets, did you make progress on your room?"

Skeeter's expression said she hadn't.

Rita thrust up a brow. "This will come back to haunt you,

kid. At some point you're going to ask to do something and I'll say, 'Is your room clean?'" Rita slanted her best mother-knows-everything look down to her youngest daughter. "And then you're going to be really mad at me and yourself for not getting it done like I've asked."

Choosing to let Skeeter stew on that, Rita climbed into the driver's seat, popped in a Taylor Swift CD, started the engine and headed toward North Country Woodcrafter, ready to immerse herself in creative expression. Sure, it was just painting whimsical wooden flowers to fit Liv's perceived motif for the spring-summer window, but she'd been looking forward to this all day.

Because you love seeing Brooks. You love it when he asks your opinion on fabrics, colors and stain tones or washes. He includes you and that makes you feel good.

It did, she realized. He sought her opinions, her ideas, as if her thoughts mattered.

Of course, he was like that with everyone, she assured herself, shutting down that twinge of inner knowledge. Brooks liked to help people in his quiet way, and he'd been a good friend and a patient listener since meeting her in AA. That was all she wanted or needed. A friend, a confidant. There was absolutely no way she was interested in anything more than that, not now, not ever, despite how his gray eyes crinkled in amusement when she was around.

Rita hadn't been accused of being amusing since about age

eleven, and even then it was most likely accidental.

But Brooks laughed with her and at her, nudging her forward, fine-tuning her sense of humor. He wasn't afraid to spar with her, go toe-to-toe.

She wondered to herself why on earth that felt so marvelously good.

Once parked, Rita tugged the big plastic tub from the trunk of her car, balancing it on the trunk's lip as she juggled for a decent hand grip.

Strong arms descended around her, the scent of fresh-sawn wood and sweet oils tickling her nose.

Brooks. Smelling far too wonderful to ensure her peace of mind. A part of her longed to lean into the scent, the press of soft cotton knit comforting against her face.

He hoisted the tub from her hands, stepped back and surveyed it, then her. "You could ask for help, you know. It's not exactly a foreign concept."

"Why ask when I can do it myself?"

His frank expression offered more than his words. "Because I'm here? And available?"

Whoa. An opening too good to resist. Rita grinned. "I'll spread the word. Half the local singles will be dropping by with cookies and cakes, showing off their talents."

"I'll let that pass," Brooks told her. He grinned at Liv as she came around the side of the car, Skeeter's hand clutched in hers. "Ladies' night, hmm?"

Liv smiled up at him. “Yup. And Tootsie’s hanging out with us. Skeeter’s our gopher. What we need, she gets.”

To Rita’s relief, Skeeter smiled. She saw Brooks note that, and was pretty sure the big guy breathed a sigh of relief. She knew she did. “Liv, if you and Skeeter can get the door, I’ve got the grass mat to get.”

“Grass mat?” Brooks rearranged the tub to a more comfortable position and hiked a brow. “For?”

“You’ll see,” Rita promised. She hauled the folded mat from the backseat and headed inside. “We’re about to welcome spring full force at North Country Woodcrafter.”

“I see.”

She ignored the twinge of concern in his tone. Brooks didn’t hand over the reins often or well. Better he should go to a meeting or work in the wood shop or in the clean room or anyplace other than the showroom while they broke down the winter display and replaced it with Liv’s creativity. Having him on hand would make her the tiniest bit crazy. Just before they got to the door, Rita did an about-face. “Head in with that, Brooks. I forgot something.”

She hurried back to the car, swung open the front passenger-side door, reached down and grabbed the folder she’d brought for his approval.

Her prospectus, the layout of her bakery. Clutched in her right hand lay the career dreams and aspirations she’d kept on hold for years.

Would he laugh at it? Criticize? Advise?

She wasn't sure. It had been a lot of years since her business classes at SUNY Albany, but Rita understood the basic concepts as well as anyone. Exercise minimal risk to the maximum financial advantage. Guard the pennies, the dollars will come. Sage advice.

Brooks met her as she pushed through the entrance door. He took the mat from her hands, frowned as if thinking too hard, then shrugged. "I'm getting pizza later for everyone. Seven-thirty good?"

Rita surveyed the window, measuring time and space. "That gives us two hours. We should be fine. If not, we'll finish before the meeting at St. Luke's tomorrow."

Brooks shook his head. "I can't ask you to give up two nights in a row. I know how crazy your schedule is, Reet."

She waved a hand, already unpacking the tub, setting things out, giving Liv an overall view of what they had to work with. "You didn't ask, I offered. Whole different thing. And Liv and I don't do half-baked, Brooks. Really, you should know that by now."

"And here's more stuff," offered Tootsie as she entered from the wood-shop area, her arms full. "These are things we've used in the past."

"I'm totally loving the wooden flowers," exclaimed Liv. She stepped back, hair swinging, head tilted in a manner much like Rita's despite their dissimilar coloring, and nodded. "Skeets, can you help Tootsie carry the stuff that was in the window to the

back room please?”

“Sure.”

Brooks almost choked. He stared at the little girl, wondering who had taken over her body in the past thirty-six hours, then realized the truth with a full-fledged thunk. Skeeter Slocum had been taken over by a pod person.

All Brooks really knew was that the sweet, smiling kid in front of him offered a welcome respite from her usual prickly nature.

“Brooks, you need to leave,” Rita instructed.

A part of Brooks loved seeing her take charge, get a little bit bossy. Another part fought for total control. He subdued that with effort. “Where would you suggest I go?”

Rita laughed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that we want to surprise you and if you’re here, I’m going to second-guess myself, which will just annoy Liv. So we’re better off if you work out back. That way if we have questions, you’re available—”

“But not in the way.”

“Exactly.” She beamed up at him, tiny laugh lines crinkling the corners of her pretty blue eyes. A wisp of hair fell across her face as she turned, a tiny strand, just big enough to make him want to reach out, smooth it back.

So he did.

The warm expression his touch inspired threw him off guard. Eyes wide, her look swept up, met his, a flash of awareness ping-ponging between them until he broke the connection by dropping his hand. Stepping back.



She breathed deep, in relief or consternation, maybe a combination of the two, then thrust something into his hand. "If you have time, will you read this over? See if it makes sense from a business standpoint and has all the information a loan officer would need?"

Brooks recognized what he held. He smiled in approval, nodded and tried to pretend the whole sparks thing was a glitch. "You did it."

"I did," she admitted. She dropped her gaze to the folder, then brought it back to him. "I think it's good."

"Then I'm sure it is, but I'd be glad to go over it, offer advice if needed."

"Thank you, Brooks."

Her grateful smile melted another chink in his self-imposed armor. He hesitated, wanting to say more, then noticed Liv, Tootsie and Skeeter were all staring at them.

Time to go.

He held the prospectus up, nodded and headed out back. "I'll be back here until the pizza comes."

"Pizza?" Tootsie turned toward Rita and Liv as Brooks disappeared into the workrooms.

"Brooks is ordering some for later. Around seven-thirty. And we should be almost done by then."

Tootsie paled. Her throat convulsed.

Rita angled her head, concerned. "You okay, Toots? You're not still sick, are you?"

“I’m fine.”

Her words were less than convincing, but Rita understood the need for privacy. She nodded. “Okay, Liv, take it away. What’s first?”

“I need Skeeter to line up all the flowers and wooden animals we have so I can get an idea of height and balance,” Liv instructed.

Rita smiled inside. Liv was a born creator, and this task would keep Skeeter busy for a while and feel as if she was contributing. Great combination.

“And, Mom, I’m going to reverse-paint window images so that they appear to be moving forward from the outside vantage point. That’s going to take me a while, so if you and Tootsie could paint those flowers there, using bright summer tones, by the time they’re dry I should be able to lay the grass mat behind the painted grass stems.”

“Got it.” Rita handed Tootsie a brush. “If we do this in the clean room, we’re out of the way and have more space to work.”

“Perfect,” Toots agreed.

“You girls are okay out here?” Rita hiked a brow to Liv.

“A-okay.” Liv sent Skeeter a reassuring grin. “With Skeets’ help I can get this done fairly quickly. Right, Skeets?”

“Right.”

Rita blessed whatever combination had resulted in a noncombative evening, but was wise enough to keep her comments to herself. “We’ll be right back here if you need us.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Rita grinned at Skeeter, her earnest expression warm and sincere. This was the kid she'd like to see on a more regular basis. Maybe her strategies were working at long last, but Rita had been Skeeter's mother for a long time. She wouldn't be banking on it. Not yet, anyway.

## Chapter Six

“This is wonderful, Rita.”

Brooks’ voice jerked Rita out of her work zone. Her brush slipped and scarlet paint daubed his benchtop, the bright tone a stand-out against the clear, sealed wood. “Oops.”

His easy grin reassured her. “That’s why everything here is washable. Total necessity.”

His gaze canvassed the painted flowers, perky in their newly enameled finish. “Great effect already.”

Tootsie nodded. “Isn’t it, Boss? Talk about eye-catching.”

“As if you needed to catch any more business.” Rita made the observation as she used a fine-tipped brush to accentuate stem and leaf definition. “This place is hopping on a regular basis.”

“More business is never a bad thing.” Brooks held up her prospectus. “As you pointed out here. This is excellent, Reet.”

“Really?” Warmth spread through her, inspired by that heart-stopping smile.

But Rita had already made ginormous mistakes in the happily-ever-after department, and even though Brooks was a wonderful guy who would be Mr. Right for someone, he held himself just a little apart.

So had Tom.

Brooks liked his solitude.

So had Tom.

Rita had let herself be fooled by Tom's charm, his brains, his charisma. She'd taken second place to his work, his fun and games, and then his embezzlement schemes.

Nope, she wasn't looking for romance, not now. Her current efforts were best concentrated on raising her kids, keeping a semblance of order at home and striving to start a new business. That alone made her way too busy to contemplate silly things like fairy-tale endings with a guy who refused to darken the door of a church. While privacy wasn't a bad thing, Brooks' need for solitude sent warning signs flashing Do Not Enter!

"There are a couple of points I'd elaborate on a little more."

"Such as?"

Brooks angled his chin toward their current project. "Let's not discuss it now. Tomorrow night maybe? After the meeting? You've got Wednesday off, right?"

She did, but was surprised he remembered since her schedule changed weekly. Surprised and more than a little pleased. "Yes."

"Then let's talk about it after fellowship," he suggested, his gray eyes thoughtful. "Have you considered where to apply?"

"I have. I'll bring the list with me and we can go over it together."

"Good." He hesitated, his look saying he'd like to linger, his body language saying something else, although with a reluctance Rita didn't often see. "I'll head back to the workroom."

Ah. He wanted to stay, be part of the action. Or maybe direct the action...

No, Rita decided, he just wanted to join in. Work with them. “Bunnies are next on our agenda. You ever painted a bunny, Brooks?”

Did he pale under that weathered skin?

“You’re kidding, right? Rabbits in my window? With the flowers?”

Rita shared a grin with Tootsie. “And birds,” Tootsie quipped. “You’ve read Bambi, Boss, right? All the little forest creatures hopping about, twitterpated.”

“Twitter-what? Never mind.” Brooks ran a big blunt hand through his hair and finished the action by rubbing the back of his neck, his face bemused. “You know where I am if you need me.”

Rita slanted a grin up to him.

The action stopped him. He contemplated her, his gaze a mix of rough and tender, sweet and strong, his eyes warming at her smile before he pulled himself away. He turned back at the door linking the clean room to the workroom. “Pepperoni and sausage?”

“Yum.”

Tootsie nodded, kind of, but Brooks didn’t catch her hesitation.

Rita did.

When Brooks had disappeared into his work area, Rita laid a hand along Tootsie’s arm. “What’s going on, Toots?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“Are you still feeling sick?”

“I’m fine.”

Her ducked chin told Rita otherwise. “You’re not. Have you seen a doctor? Seriously, honey, this has been going on too long. You’ve been sick off and on for the better part of a month.”

Tootsie swallowed hard, eyes down, then sighed. She averted her gaze, staring at nothing, then dragged her gaze back and met Rita’s eyes. “I saw Dr. Renson last week.”

One of the area’s busiest and most sought-after obstetricians.

Rita drew a breath, worked her jaw and reached out to clasp Tootsie’s hands. “When is the baby due?”

“December.”

“A Christmas baby.” Rita beamed, trying to lighten the moment, soften the situation. “The time for miracles, Toots.”

A tiny smile softened Tootsie’s worried features, but just for a moment. Worry redescended, pushing Rita to grab her in a hug. “It’ll be fine, honey. I promise. Does Matt know?”

Matt was Tootsie’s soldier fiancé, currently deployed to Iraq.

“No.”

“You haven’t told him?”

Tootsie paled. “No.”

“But why?” Rita wondered out loud, confused. “Toots, you’re engaged, it’s not the end of the world. Why haven’t you told him?”

Tootsie drew in a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “Because Matt hasn’t been home since last Thanksgiving.”

It didn't take a rocket scientist to do the math. Rita sank back in her chair. "Oh, no."

"Exactly." Tears pooled in Tootsie's bright brown eyes, their cinnamon tone matching hair of similar color, such a pretty combination. "I don't know how to tell him what I've done. I'm so ashamed."

"Does Brooks know?"

Tootsie shook her head. "Absolutely not. Brooks is a good guy and a stellar boss, but he's a staunch conservative and big on faith and following the rules. He'd never understand how I could do such a thing."

Rita shifted forward, concerned. "Tootsie, nothing is unforgivable. Do you remember the gospel story about the adulteress? How the Pharisees sentenced her to be stoned?"

Tootsie drew back, remorse twisting her features.

Rita gripped her hands and leaned forward. "Jesus told the crowd that those without sin should cast the first stone. And slowly, one by one, they dropped their stones and walked away because we're all sinners, honey. Each and every one of us. And God forgives those sins. All we have to do is ask." She gave Tootsie's hands an encouraging squeeze, hoping her empathy rang true. "Things happen, Toots. God knows that. And you've got friends nearby, people who will stand by you. Help you."

"No family."

"We'll be your family," Rita insisted. Tootsie had been raised by a live-off-the-land aunt in a smaller-than-small town near



Malone, but her aunt had moved to Arizona several years ago, leaving Tootsie dating Matt and working for Brooks. This new turn of events would most likely sever Tootsie's ties to Matt's family, leaving her abandoned. "You've got us, kiddo. I promise."

Tootsie's jaw quivered. She firmed it, straightened and set her shoulders back, determined. "It'll be fine, I know. Eventually. I just dread telling Matt. And Brooks."

"If you need me around when you do it, I'll be glad to ride shotgun."

"Planning a bank heist?" Liv crossed the room smiling, one brow hiked as she surveyed the bright promise of their painting efforts. A glimpse of Tootsie's tear-streaked face blotted out her smile. "Toots, what's up?"

Tootsie waved her away. "It's nothing, I'm fine."

Liv rolled her eyes. "Yeah and Gretzky's just another hockey player."

"Your mom can tell you later. Right now—" Tootsie repositioned herself, chin down, eyes on the first bunny "—I need to work."

"All right." Liv stepped back, worry shading her brow. A tiny head shake from Rita erased the frown. "These are perfect," she exclaimed, eyeing the finished flowers. "Skeeter is helping me lay the matting. The glass images are done and drying. We actually might be able to get this done tonight."

"Bunnies won't be dry," Rita warned her.

"That's no big deal." Liv shrugged. "Toots can put them

in place tomorrow. The flowers and the window art were the biggies. I've just got to have Brooks approve what's done so far."

"Approval granted."

Brooks' deep voice drew their attention to the door. He nodded to Liv, pleased. "It looks wonderful, Liv."

She colored at the praise. "Really? You like it?"

His expression underscored his words. "I love it. You're one talented young lady. And working in reverse like that? That's a rare ability few artists possess."

Her blush deepened. "Thanks, Mr. Harriman."

"Brooks," he corrected her. "If you ever want a job, kid, come see me first."

Liv raised her chin, surprise and pleasure vying for her features. "Seriously?"

"Honey, my offers are never less than serious."

"That's for sure," quipped Rita. She watched the exchange between Brooks and Liv, her heart tripping just a little bit faster.

Liv respected Brooks. It was obvious in her manner, her attentiveness, her awareness of detail in his presence. Something about him inspired others to reach a little higher, go a little faster, try a little harder, that indiscriminate quality that screamed leadership in calm undertones.

Brooks slid his gaze to Rita's, offered her a half smile that made her heart pump faster than normal, then returned his attention to Liv. "You say the word, kid. You're hired."

"Mom?"

Liv turned toward Rita.

Rita sat back on her stool, worked her jaw, then eyed them both. "She's been wanting to get a job," she explained to Brooks, her gaze shifting from him to Liv and back. "And I can't think of any place I'd rather have you work than here." Brooks smiled.

Liv whooped. "Really, Mom? You don't mind?"

Brooks raised a hand of caution. "You still need to help your mother with Skeeter."

"And keep your grades up." Not that grades were a problem with Liv, not since Rita had reinstated herself as the mother, relieving Liv of responsibility. Liv had endured a couple of tough years, but she seemed determined to move on with her life, taking charge of her dreams. At fifteen, her attitude was pretty remarkable after what she'd gone through.

"Can we work around that?"

"Absolutely." Brooks arched a brow and indicated the showroom with a slight jerk of his head. "If I have you here to help Tootsie and Ava on the sales floor while learning cool things about fine carpentry on the side, I think we've got a deal, kid."

"And Ava will love not being dragged in for extra shifts," Toots noted. "She loves being here but with two little kids, she only has so much time. When we're crazy busy it definitely takes a crew on the sales floor."

Liv's hug surprised Brooks. Rita saw it in his face, his eyes, the girl's embrace taking him aback before he returned it. He winked at Rita over Liv's head. "I get artwork from this one and

cookies from you. I love knowing your family, Reet.”

His light words inspired her smile. “Well, we like you, too, and while all this chitchat is fun, it’s not exactly getting the job done. I’ve got to get Skeeter home for bed in just a little bit.” Skeeter.

In all this time, everyone had forgotten that Skeeter was alone in the store.

A crash of something breakable and most likely valuable fixed that.

Liv and the three adults crowded through the door to the showroom. Scattered pieces of a vase lay shattered on the floor, remnants of dried flowers strewn among the broken pottery. Skeets’ face wore a mix of fear and belligerence, not a pretty combination. “It was an accident.”

Liv stepped in first. “Skeeter, it’s all right, I’ll pay for it. I shouldn’t have left you alone out here.”

“I’m fine alone. There’s too much stuff all over the place is all.”

Her tone said they were treading dangerous ground, never a good thing.

“But you weren’t supposed to touch things, Skeet.” Rita stood her ground, not wanting the situation to fly out of control but unwilling to downplay Skeeter’s responsibility.

“I didn’t,” she protested, her hands flying up. “I was just backing up and knocked into the stupid thing. Everything’s in the way here.”

Rita colored, embarrassed.

Brooks grabbed a short broom and dustpan from behind the counter. "It is close in here," he told Skeeter. He handed her the dustpan. "If I sweep this up, can you hold this for me?"

She swept him a look of disdain. "I'm not a baby."

"Then stop acting like one," Liv told her. "You were supposed to stay by the window and arrange the birds."

"You were taking too long."

Rita couldn't argue with that. Skeeter wasn't exactly the kind of kid you trusted in a shop full of stuff on her own. Her fault, she knew.

"Hold the dustpan for Mr. Harriman and apologize."

Skeeter glared at her mother, then Liv.

A young man with a large pizza box stepped in the main door. "Your pizza, sir?"

Brooks nodded toward the cash-register counter. "Money's right there in an envelope."

The young man nodded.

Toots accepted the pizza, the teasing scent reminding them supper was at hand.

Rita hoped the smell of food would break Skeeter's standoff. Nope.

"I'm not cleaning it up with him." Her look said she had sized Brooks up and recognized a foe.

"Then clean it up on your own." Brooks handed her the broom. "We're eating."

Dangerous move. Rita watched as Brooks followed Tootsie

out back, the scent of fresh-baked, thick-crust pizza assailing their senses.

Liv eyed Skeeter and the mess. "I'll help since I'm the one who left you alone."

Rita hesitated, wanting to push Brooks' point and make Skeeter clean up the mess herself since she rejected his help so rudely, but wanting peace, as well. A full-blown Skeeter attack in the wood shop would not be pretty.

"That's nice of you, Liv."

"It's just a stupid old jar," Skeets sputtered. She pushed the broom toward Liv grudgingly. "He's got too much junk here."

Her comment brought Liv's back up. She straightened and eyed her little sister. "It's not junk."

"Whatever."

Liv's hazel eyes went smoke-toned in a heartbeat. "Don't 'whatever' me, Skeets. You weren't supposed to be anywhere near this table or this vase and I offered to help you because I felt bad for leaving you alone and because Brooks is a real good guy for letting us do this stuff." Liv took two steps forward, her body language offering a stern warning to errant little girls.

Like Skeeter cared.

"You don't 'diss' what Brooks has in here. Got it?"

Skeeter met the stare-down one-on-one, either brave or foolhardy. "I don't care what he has. I want to go home. I hate this place."

"Skeets, let's get this done," Rita interjected. "Come on. I'll

sweep. You hold the dustpan.”

“No.”

“You’d prefer to wait in the car?”

“I’d prefer to go home. Now.”

“That’s not an option.” Liv stood her ground, gaze set, eyes fuming. “Brooks let us work here, ordered us pizza and just gave me a job. We’re staying.”

“I’m not.” Skeeter whirled and flounced toward the door.

Rita caught her arm. “Do you want to go without TV and treats the rest of the week?”

“N...no.”

“Then rethink your choices.”

The lower lip thrust out, a sure signal of Hurricane Skeeter making landfall.

She ballyhooed at the top of her voice, shouting the injustice of Brooks, her mother, Liv and life in general.

Liv glared.

Rita prayed.

Skeeter yelled.

“The police station’s right across the street.” Brooks reentered the room looking partly annoyed and partly helpless, an unusual combination. “Cade showed me where he hangs the keys to the empty cells. She’d be safe and we could eat in peace.”

Tempting offer but... “I’ll take her home.”

Brooks moved forward, ignoring Skeeter, which wasn’t easy considering her volume. “That’s not fair to you and Liv.”

“Well, life isn’t always fair, Brooks.” Rita knew that firsthand, didn’t she? Hadn’t she tried everything under the sun to keep Tom happy? In the end, it wasn’t enough. In retrospect, she knew nothing would have been enough to appease Tom’s hunger for power, greed for money and prominence. Oh, he’d played the part well, a showman all the way, his weekly presence at church service a sham that covered the heart of a cheat and embezzler.

Outwardly he shone like a gleaming jewel, a salesman to the max.

And she’d been fooled, like all the rest, at least to a certain degree. That was almost as embarrassing as it was shameful. Some suspected she’d been part of his schemes, his deceit.

Nope. Just clueless. A part of her thought that might be even worse than being complicit. At least complicity indicated intelligence.

“I’ll drop her off, get her settled and come back for Liv.”

“I can bring Liv home.”

Brooks looked less than pleased by her plan. Oh, well.

“Thanks, but no. I’ll come back. My kid, my job.”

Brooks looked about to argue the point, then didn’t. He stepped back, shot Skeeter a look that indicated a preference for strong-arm tactics mixed with relief that Rita was handling her, then shrugged. “I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow.”

“Right.”

Her stomach growled, the scent of hot pizza a reminder of a hectic day and a long time since her last meal.



Skeeter flounced through the door, stomped her way to the car and shoved her way through Liv's supplies to climb into the backseat.

She was a brat, plain and simple.

God, help me. I'm in over my head with this one, and she's adept at picking the world's worst places for her tantrums and tirades. Show me what to do, how to handle her. Help me be strong when a really big part of me just wants her to be quiet. And nice.

Change the things you can...

Her catchphrase of the day, the month, the year.

Skeeter was her responsibility, her job, her child. It was up to Rita to fix the problem, one way or another.

As she passed the small Grasse Bend police station, Brooks' words came to mind. Hmm, jail cells for seven-year-olds?

Definite potential if she didn't get this obnoxious behavior under control, the sooner the better.

The thought of her hard-worked prospectus inspired a wince. How could she even contemplate an undertaking of that magnitude if she couldn't gain enough of Skeeter's cooperation to help with a simple thing like Brooks' front window?

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