



How
WE STARTED

A MACBAINS NOVELLA

NAN DIXON

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A CHRISTMAS CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

A MACBAINS NOVELLA

NAN DIXON

DEDICATION



For my Family — always.

*Thanks to Zach Holman for letting me use Hopper's picture.
And to Tina Stuck and Joyce Stewart who suggested Mac's
dog's names. He was initially Cooper, but now only answers to
Trouble!*

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PRAISE FOR NAN DIXON

DISCOVERY

Wow this is one of the best books I have ever read. ... You've got a winner here.

EDGE OF FRIENDSHIP

A solid 5 star read (really more than that if I could!!!) ... I was completely enchanted with this story. It had wonderful highs, while dropping into a dark and agony filled lows. I would find myself reading and re-reading many scenes as they were such so good that I was savoring each word. I was desperate to see how it would end but at the same time dreading for it to be over.

MAID FOR SUCCESS

Loved it. Thrilled to see this is a start of of a new series. I am eager to see what happens next in the family. The story flowed and kept me turning pages.

POETIC JUSTICE

Continuous, fast-paced action, spine-tingling suspense and steamy hotness abound inside this book! This was a thrilling and suspenseful read and I loved every single word.

DANCE WITH ME

DANCE WITH ME by Nan Dixon is a heartfelt, emotional and well-written story that truly fits the description in the book—a journey of healing, hope and love.

STAINED GLASS HEARTS

STAINED GLASS HEARTS by Nan Dixon is simply absolutely incredible. It's one everyone MUST READ.

INVEST IN ME

I fell in love from the beginning and didn't want it to end. It has an excellent and spellbinding wonderful plot and in-depth characters.

SOUTHERN COMFORTS

...is a book about learning how to give and receive without any strings attached. It's about caring and trust and loyalty; and relying on those you love to help make your dreams come true. **RT TIMES - Page Turner**

THE OTHER TWIN

Nan Dixon will become a favorite author. Part of series but can read as a stand alone. Fun story that's hard to put down. "One more page...just another chapter..." until soon you've reached the end.

A complicated story that reflects the many threads of real life that so often includes knots of problems in addition to the gradual unraveling of past hurts when placed in the light of love and real caring. A story I couldn't put down.

UNDERCOVER WITH THE HEIRESS

So much more than a romance novel.

This was definitely a book I was not able to put down! I took the tablet with me everywhere! **Fabulous Brunette Reviews**

THROUGH A MAGNOLIA FILTER

...a heartwarming story that showcased the importance of family, following your dreams, and true love. I thoroughly enjoyed this tender heartwarming story. **LAS Reviewer**

A SAVANNAH CHRISTMAS WISH

FRESH PICK

...is a book that has you frolicking in gardens, battling storms and falling in love...A book of warmth and love. It will leave you smiling.

TO CATCH A THIEF

Not your everyday Contemporary genre, a little suspense, a little love and definitely entertaining... **Our Town Book Reviews**

A SAVANNAH CHRISTMAS WEDDING

Another winner. Love this series

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CHAPTER ONE



“**Y**ou did what?” Michael, Mac, MacBain tried to keep his voice down, but it echoed in Granddad’s office.

Trouble, Mac’s six-month old golden retriever whined. Then he slunk from the dog bed in Granddad’s office and bumped Mac’s hand.

“It’s okay, boy.” Trouble hated conflict. Mac stroked his dog’s silky hair, trying to ease his worry. “It’s fine.”

“Here, Cooper.” Granddad held up a dog treat.

The dog stayed right next to Mac. “He doesn’t answer to Cooper anymore.”

“Trouble.” Granddad shook his head.

“Well, he was. Is. That’s how he got the name.”

“Trouble,” Granddad called. “Here, boy.”

Granddad tossed the treat in the air. Trouble caught it and retreated to his bed.

“What did you do?” Mac wanted to raise his voice again, but ... it would upset his dog.

“I did what I had to do. I fired the cleaning crew and found a new company,” Granddad repeated.

Granddad was Joe to his friends. And Joe hadn’t met a person who wasn’t a friend. Mac loved the wily old man; he loved working with him. But Granddad was up to something.

“I said I would find a new cleaning crew.” Mac leaned over Granddad’s scarred desk. “You didn’t have to take that on.”

He wasn’t messing things up with his grandfather. He had plans. But his grandfather might be trying to interfere, so he wouldn’t need to pass the torch of leading MacBain Construction to Mac.

“No need to look. I found our new vendor.” His grandfather waved his hand. “I’ve already told her she has the job.”

Something was off. “We always get at least two bids.”

“Not this time,” Granddad said. “It’s not necessary.”

“Why not?”

“I know her company will meet our needs.”

This wasn’t making any sense. “I’ll check their references.”

His grandfather winked. “I’m her reference.”

Mac shook his head. Granddad had not trained him this way. They always got at least two bids and checked references. Sure, a cleaning company didn’t have an impact on their construction company’s liability, but this didn’t make sense. “Are you trying to screw up our ... bet?”

Granddad cackled. Actually cackled. “With a cleaning company change?”

“You challenged me to complete all six houses in the Shoreview development.” If he finished by Christmas, he could finally take some of the workload off Granddad’s shoulders. “Now I have to break in a new cleaning crew.”

“If you think that little change will stop the completion of those houses, we’ve got bigger problems.” Granddad tipped back in his chair. “I found a lovely young woman who wants the business.”

“Who? Where?”

“Her name is Patricia. Patty. She works in the coffee shop.”

“Coffee shop.” Mac’s teeth were going to crack under the pressure of clamping his mouth shut.

“Yes. Morning Break. She also owns a cleaning service.” A confused frowned covered Granddad’s face. “It might be her mother’s.”

Mac had noticed Granddad’s confusion more and more even though he was only seventy-one.

Joe rapped his knuckles on his desk. “She’ll be great.”

Mac pushed out of his chair, walked to the window and stared into the parking lot of the strip mall in New Brighton, a suburb of Saint Paul. Trouble moved to his side. “How can we trust that this ... this company will get the job done?”

“I know.” Joe crossed his arms on his chest. “They’re called instincts. You should hone yours.”

Instincts over evidence? Never. “Granddad—”

Joe held up a hand. “How long have I been running this company?”

Mac sighed. “Almost fifty years.”

“And have I been successful?”

“Very.” But the company could be bigger. Better. He planned to take it further than his grandfather had ever dreamed.

“When I told you the last cleaning crew needed to go, you said you would let me hire the next group.” Mac didn’t rely on how he *felt* about a person. He relied on *results*.

“They failed because the kids took over the company.” Granddad raised an eyebrow.

Trouble moved to Granddad’s side.

Mac turned and sat on the window frame. “I won’t fail.”

“You have a lot to learn.”

“I’ve been working for you since I was twelve.” How much more could Granddad teach him?

His grandfather understood Mac loved the construction business. Loved to create things.

A smile creased Granddad’s face, still suntanned even though it was October. “You’re staking the knowledge you’ve gained in thirteen years over my fifty years of experience?”

Maybe. But Mac would never say that. “You’ve been a great teacher.”

“I know. I taught you the construction business, from the ground up.”

They both laughed at his old joke.

Granddad rubbed Trouble behind the ear. The dog’s leg scratched the air as Granddad hit his favorite spots. “What I can’t seem to teach you is how to treat our employees.”

They’d been over this issue too many times. “You want me to be their friend.”

“I want you to trust our employees to get the job done. People don’t always have to do it your way.”

“But my way is the right way.”

“I know you think that.” Granddad shook his head. “I’m waiting for you to figure out that you’re wrong.”

If Mac said he understood, would his granddad believe him?

Nope.

He pushed away from the windowsill and returned to the chair, patting his leg for Trouble. His dog stayed next to Granddad. “I’d like to meet this new cleaning person.”

“She doesn’t work Tuesday because she has class. I’ll see her at the coffee shop on Wednesday and give her your phone number.”

“She has class?” Had Granddad offered the job to someone still in high school? “How old is she?”

“You have so much to learn.” His grandfather sighed. “Never ask a woman her age.”

Mac chuckled.

“You could meet me at Morning Break at eight,” Granddad said.

“I’ll be on site at eight,” Mac said.

And there was another reason Mac wanted to run the company. He was on the job no later than seven while Granddad leisurely drank coffee at eight in the morning. Apparently with a barista/cleaning girl.

“Then meet her at the sites,” Granddad said. “She needs to see the houses and office to give us the bid.”

“I thought you had the bid.” Mac threw his hands in the air.

“She needs to see the properties first.”

“I thought you’d done that.”

“No.” Granddad smiled. “You can take her around. You’ll love her.”

“How do you know she’ll give us a reasonable price?”

“She’ll be fair.”

Mac pointed a finger at his grandfather. “You’re too trusting.”

“And you’re too cynical. Everyone isn’t trying to rip us off.”

“Some people are.”

Granddad sighed. “When will you learn?”

Trouble barked as if he agreed with Granddad’s question.

Mac muttered, “Traitor.”

Grandfather laughed. “Trouble has a great nose for people. Maybe he can teach you some things.”

“Right. How to sniff crotches?” Mac asked. “Give the girl my phone number. I’ll handle the construction bid.” Mac

would figure out a way this barista wasn't involved with his projects. These houses would finally show Granddad that Mac was ready to run MacBain. Ready to build and expand the construction company his grandfather had started.

If Granddad would loosen his grip on the reins, Mac could start building his future. He planned to build an empire.

No cleaning lady would screw that up.

PATTY PLUMPED her mother's pillows. "I picked up a potential new client at the coffee shop."

Her mom wiggled up, grimacing as she moved. "New client?"

They should rent a hospital bed. After her mom's chemotherapy, everything hurt. If this new job panned out, maybe they could afford the rental. Better yet, Patty should check with her mom's insurance to see if a bed would be covered. And maybe one of those recliners that pushed the person up and saved their strength. Anything to help her mother.

"There's this nice gentleman who comes in for coffee every day. He usually has something to eat and reads his paper." Patty refilled her mother's water glass. She turned on a light to dispel the dark October evening, even though it was only five. The days were short and gloomy this time of year. And the weather forecasters were predicting a long snowy Minnesota winter. Joy.

"Eligible?" Her mother sipped her water. And winced again.

"Mom, he's a client." Patty sat in the chair next to her mother's bed. "And older. Maybe late sixties."

"Too bad." Her mother's smile was weak.

Patty checked the time. "Do you need a pill?"

“Maybe.” Her mom swallowed and took a deep breath. “Yes. I don’t want to start throwing up.”

It was always like this. About six hours after Mom’s chemo, her nausea kicked in.

Patty shook out a pill and handed her mom the water glass. “Can I get you something to eat? Soup? Crackers?”

“Not yet. I’ll wait for your dad. He had to run to the office after he brought me home.”

“I can bring you to your treatments,” Patty said. “I know Dad is trying to take on more clients.”

Her dad had a small CPA practice. More clients meant more income.

“We’ve talked about this before. Dad and I are doing fine.” Her mother swallowed. “Take my mind off my nausea. Tell me about this client. What’s he looking for?”

“He’s in home construction. Joseph MacBain. Although I’ll be dealing with a Michael MacBain.” After Joe had given her a phone number, she’d called Michael. The conversation had been curt, bordering on rudeness. “They have a small office they’d like cleaned twice a week. But the real money is in the construction cleaning. They have six houses that will be finished in the next few months, and they just fired their last cleaning group.”

“MacBain Construction.” Her mom tapped the comforter. “I’ve cleaned one of their houses. The Declan’s home in North Oaks. You’ve been there. You would have been ten.”

Ten. That would have been after Nanna died. Before then, Nanna had watched Patty while Mom and Dad worked.

She tried to recall the Declan’s house. “Did it have lots of brick? Wood floors. Great woodwork? Oh, and the stairs had a landing?”

“That’s the one. It had a nice open feeling.”

“I guess.” Not that she remembered much.

To keep her hands busy, she refilled her mother's glass. "I'll mention that when I bid the jobs."

"I wish I could help you out." Her mother caught her hand. "I don't want you worrying about keeping Murphy's afloat. You need to concentrate on graduating."

"Your housecleaners don't call me too often. I make sure they have their supplies and bid any new houses." Although Patty hadn't bid any in the last month. She patted her mother's thin hand. "You're still writing the checks. If it's too much, I can take that over."

"No. It keeps my mind from this." She waved her hand at her chest. "I'm worried about your schooling."

"I'm fine. And I'll be done in less than seven months." She knocked on the wooden tray set next to her mother's bed. Once she graduated, she could earn real money and help her parents more. "Your job is not to worry, it's to get well."

"But construction cleaning is a lot of work. And you haven't bid that many jobs."

"I'll figure it out. Plus, I can always ask your advice." Patty didn't want her mother to stress. They'd lost too many jobs because her mother couldn't work. They needed this opportunity. "I may have to hire more people."

"You can check with some of our previous cleaners."

"I will." Her mother separated past cleaners into separate folders. Don't Hire Again. And Do. "Maybe there are students who want to pick up extra cash for Christmas."

"Good idea." Her mother pleated the satin on the blanket. "Have them come on as independent contractors."

"I'll figure out how many hours are needed. Then we'll decide. Don't worry about it."

Her mother nodded but didn't look convinced.

Damn. Now they both would be worrying about their new client. And she wanted her mother to focus on fighting her breast cancer.

MAC WAS MEETING Granddad's barista to walk her through what they needed. This way, he could convince her she couldn't handle the work or the pressure of meeting his deadlines.

Especially if she was in high school.

No one was screwing up the houses he had on the line. Not even his granddad.

As he pulled up to one of the houses under construction, his car phone rang.

"MacBain."

"This is Patty from Murphy's Maids. I thought I would let you know I'm leaving now."

"Good."

After he hung up, he checked his watch. They'd agreed to meet at four. She had fifteen minutes before she was late. She could be coming from Eagan and not be here until six if traffic was snarled.

"Let's go, Trouble." He opened the passenger door for his dog, and they headed into the house. The crew was gone, but Jacob's truck was here. Jacob was the job supervisor.

Mac walked into a quiet house, so different from the hammering, screw guns and music that usually filled the space.

From his pocket, he pulled out a rawhide bone. Trouble snatched it out of his hand and hauled it to the dog bed Mac had left in what would be the house's formal living room. "I'm looking around. Remember. No chewing the wood this time."

In the two story entry, he scooted past the drywall crew's scaffolding. They'd gotten most of the downstairs rock hung. He would schedule in the tapers for next week.

"Hey, Mac." Jacob stared down from the stairway opening.

Mac took the temporary stairs two at a time. “How’s it going?”

“Better. The master bedroom window finally arrived.”

“Did they get the size right this time?”

“Fits like a glove.” Jacob led him into the master.

Mac checked the window installation. Looked tight. Couldn’t have sloppy work during the Minnesota winters, or hot summers for that matter. “Good.”

“I gotta say, it’s easier to work with angles, but the curve on the bow window looks nice.” Jacob patted the open framing on the window seat. “And the extra storage will be a plus.”

The wife had wanted cedar storage put there.

“Just make sure everything gets insulated,” Mac said.

Jacob’s jaw tightened. “I always do, boss.”

Jacob followed Mac as he checked out the other bedrooms. The crew had gotten most of the drywall up. And when he moved through the bathroom in the Jack and Jill bedrooms, he saw the waterproof rock was installed.

“Gus resigned today,” Jacob said as they headed downstairs.

“Is he the guy who couldn’t read the blueprint and framed the wall in the wrong place?”

“He’s the guy you tore into.” Jacob took a deep breath. “People make mistakes.”

“Not on my builds they don’t.” Mac flipped open the project binder that sat on a sawhorse in the kitchen.

“If you’d let me handle the problem, I wouldn’t be short a carpenter. Now he’s working for Colfax.”

“Good. He can screw up their builds.”

“Mac.” Exasperation filled Jacob’s voice. “He had potential. Now I have to break in another carpenter. Let me do my job. Please.”

“Sure.” This whole project was *Mac’s* job.

Jacob sighed.

Mac pointed at the timeline. “We’re behind on the drywall. I’ll come out tomorrow.”

“Don’t.” Jacob held up his hand. “I added another rocker for tomorrow. We’ll be ahead by end of day.”

“Make sure you are.”

Jacob shook his head. “I need to pick up my kid.”

Mac said goodbye to Jacob. Then he checked his watch. The barista was late. Okay two minutes. But late was late. He refused to wait.

“Trouble, let’s go.” Mac headed to the front door.

Outside, tires crunched on the dirt and rock path to the house.

Trouble whoofed, stretched out and moved to the door, his tags jingling.

Damn. He’d actually hoped he could leave and tell Granddad the woman hadn’t shown up.

He stepped out and watched a lime green Volkswagen Bug park in what would be the driveway, and the driver’s door opened.

“That is one ugly car,” he couldn’t help saying.

“But the price was right.” The brunette that exited the car hauled out a backpack before closing the door. And she wasn’t a high schooler.

Patty was hot, in a girl next door kind of way. Even hidden by her university sweatshirt, he could tell her body rocked. Maybe cleaning houses kept her in shape. And she filled out her jeans ... *excellent*.

She nodded at his truck. “Your truck’s not much better.”

“Yeah.” He was embarrassed she’d heard his comment, but his truck ... sure there were lots of miles on it and the truck bed was dinged up, but it ran. “Sorry.”

“Michael MacBain?” she asked.

“That’s me.”

“And who is this handsome guy?” She knelt and scratched both sides of Trouble’s head.

He swore his dog groaned in joy. Then he rolled over, exposing his belly.

“The exhibitionist is Trouble. Obviously he’s shy.”

She laughed and rubbed Trouble’s belly. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you?”

Trouble moaned in joy.

She stood and held out her hand. “Patricia Murphy.”

He shook it, trying not to fall for someone who liked dogs. “You know you’re late, right?”

“Late?” She checked her watch. “Didn’t we agree on four?”

“Yes, but it’s after four.”

“She flipped her watch toward him. “No, I’m early.”

Her watch said 3:59.

Shoot. He always set his watch five minutes ahead. But he wasn’t admitting his mistake. “I expect people who work for me to be on time.”

“And I was.” She had greenish gold eyes, and though her words were mild, her eyes flashed sparks at him.

She walked up to the entrance and stepped into the house. Digging in her backpack, she pulled out a notebook and pen. “How many square feet?”

“Thirty-two hundred.”

Patty looked around. “And the basement?”

“Add another thousand.”

“Okay.” She nodded and headed farther into the house. “What are you looking for?”

“Trouble, stay.” He pointed to the bone and bed.

Trouble obeyed.

“Well trained too,” she said.

“Sometimes. Food’s his weakness.” He changed gears from dog to work. “I’m looking for two major cleanings. One right before the finish carpenters start on the stain and varnish for the trim, railings, cabinets and doors. The other cleaning right before the final walk-through with the future owners. There may be quick requests for a cleanup if needed.” He added, “And you wouldn’t get much lead time on those requests.”

“Good to know.” She didn’t appear shaken by his demands. “Take me through the house and the timeline.”

He walked her through all three floors. She asked questions. Lots of questions.

He checked out her exceptional ass as he climbed the stairs behind her. It was right in front of his face.

But he wasn’t interested in starting anything with her, or anyone. He had to focus on finishing these houses. His bet with Granddad was at risk. Any distraction might interfere with his goals.

Besides, he wanted her gone. Then he’d vet his own cleaning team.

She paused a couple of times, once at a window where she tugged on the label, the other at the foot of the basement stairs and kicked at the dirt floor. “When does the concrete get ...”

“Poured,” he finished for her. “Soon.”

“Joe said you want everything in the houses finished before Christmas.”

“Yup.” Because if he did, Mac could begin accelerating the projects they had underway. His granddad wasn’t as ambitious as Mac. Mac wanted to expand.

But if his grandfather fired anymore crews, he’d know Granddad wasn’t serious about him taking over.

“Do you have a master timeline for all six houses? I need to make sure we have the right staffing.” Every other time she’d asked a question she’d looked him in the eye. This time she didn’t.

Like she was lying.

“I have a master schedule,” he said. “I’ll ... I can send it with Granddad or courier it over.”

“With Joe is fine. She peered out the dining room window. “It looks like there are about ten homes under construction, do you want me to bid all of them?”

“MacBain only has six. There are three on this street.” He should probably have her tour the other houses, but if she didn’t ask, he wasn’t volunteering. He’d already given her more time than he thought necessary for a cleaning group. “There’s one house on the next street. And then one in each of the two cul de sacs.”

There were thirty lots in the development, but MacBain had only bought six from the developer. Sure, it limited the need to draw on construction loans, but it also limited their potential revenue.

When he was in charge, he’d be the developer selling other contractors lots.

Provided his granddad gave him more control.

And he planned to expand into commercial construction. Office buildings, strip malls.

He could see it.

“I’ll need to know each house’s square footage and the number of rooms.”

“I’ll get that to you.” She wasn’t looking like this would be difficult. And damn, she asked good questions.

Maybe she would work out.

PATTY WRACKED her brain for any other questions. She'd already asked everything her mother had suggested and a lot of her own questions. They needed this business, and Patty wasn't failing her mother.

It was a pity everything needed to be done at the same time she would be taking finals and finishing projects and papers. Who needed sleep? At least the construction sub-development was close to her campus apartment. Assuming her car held up.

"Do you have a problem with the work being done at night?" she asked as they moved to the first floor entry.

"I prefer it. I don't want you underfoot when the crews are working."

"Good." Because she had class and project meetings during the day. "Do you know how many windows are in each house?"

"Why?" Hostility wafted off this guy. A scowl covered his face.

Trouble whined from the living room.

"Everything's fine, boy," Mac said, his voice soft and calm. The dog trotted over and set his head on Mac's leg.

Pity Mac didn't use that tone of voice when talking to her. He'd seemed almost angry as he'd shown her the house.

"If they all have stickers, it will take time to get them off and I'll need to make sure we have tall enough ladders." She pointed at the two story high entry windows.

"Oh." He sat on an overturned bucket, and Trouble plopped next to him. "We'll leave ladders when your team is in."

"Good." She nodded. No way would she let him know she *was* the team. Or that Murphy's Maids didn't own ladders that would reach that high. "That will work."

"Any other questions?"

"Is there anything you think I should know?" she asked.

“Yeah.” He stood, towering over her even though he was maybe a half foot taller than her 5’ 7”. “I can’t have any missed deadlines. I want things done right the first time without any errors. That’s critical. Nothing can screw up staining and varnishing in a clean dust-free space or closing walk-throughs.”

“Got it.” It was like he assumed she would screw up.

“Let’s go, Trouble.” He and the dog headed to the door.

She was dismissed. Patty shut her notebook, hoping she’d gotten everything. “Once I get the master plan, what should I do if I have additional questions? Ask Joe?”

“No.” He locked up the place as she stepped down the temporary steps. “Call me.”

“Okay.”

He grunted.

She stopped by her car. “Have I done something wrong?”

“What?”

“You seem ... resentful.” Although a better description might be angry. And arrogant.

He shoved a hand through his hair, knocking off his ball cap. “My granddad was supposed to let me hire the cleaners. Then he fired the current group and hired you. Without even getting a bid or references.”

“Joe, I mean your grandfather, is very nice.” Too bad she wasn’t working directly for Joe.

“Sometimes he’s too nice.”

Implying that he shouldn’t have offered Patty the opportunity? She didn’t want to lose this job. “Did you have someone else in mind?”

“No, but I’ve got a lot on the line here. I don’t have wiggle room for other people missing my deadlines.” He waved a hand at the house. “The drywall guys are behind by a half day.”

She straightened her shoulders and made a promise she hoped she could keep. “I won’t get behind or ruin your timeline.”

He grunted again. “When can I get your bid?”

Shoot. She had a paper to finish tonight and a project team meeting tomorrow. Plus work. And she needed to run everything by her mother. “Give me three days.”

“Three days? Really?”

“Just like you, I want to get it right.” She smiled as she walked away. Bet he never thought she’d get the last word in.

CHAPTER TWO



“Hey Joe, good to see you,” Patty called out. “Your usual?”

“You betcha.” Joe pulled out a twenty. “Did you finish your paper about me?”

She chuckled. “I did. Thanks for your help.”

She’d needed to write a paper on business plans and goal setting and had interviewed Joe. He’d talked about starting his company and the challenges of developing a business plan in the early years. “Thanks for the interview.”

“My pleasure. I’m sure you’ll get an A.” He handed her a manila envelope. “Mac sent you a copy of the development timelines.”

“Great. I hope I can make sense of it.”

“You’re bright. You will.” He winked. “If something doesn’t make sense, give Mac a call. You have his number, right?”

“Yes.” She took his money and made change.

Joe dropped his change into her tip glass.

“That’s too much,” she protested, putting his egg sandwich into the toaster oven.

“Excellent service should be rewarded.”

“Thank you.” Each dollar helped and the extra ten would be even better. “I’ll bring everything to your table.”

“You’re a sweet girl.”

She laughed. If Michael, Mac, had called her “girl” she would probably short his coffee, but she didn’t mind Joe calling her that.

Patty poured his coffee into an oversized mug and added a dollop of half and half. When the sandwich was steaming, she placed it on a tray with napkins and brought it to the small table where Joe read the paper.

“Here you are.” She unloaded the tray. “I could bring you some fresh fruit too.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’ve been serving me for six months and ask me the same thing every time. Have I ever said yes?”

“Never. But I want you to stay healthy.” She squeezed his shoulder. He was such a nice guy. “Young men like you can’t live on egg sandwiches and coffee. I want you to keep coming in for years and years after I’m gone.”

“I may not hang around that long.” He raised a bushy eyebrow. “How’d it go with Mac yesterday?”

What could she say that would not describe his grandson as an ... ass? “Professional. He was very, umm, professional.”

Joe’s laughter boomed out. “He was a jerk.”

Patty froze, not wanting him to see she agreed with his statement.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’m trying to get him to ease up on people. I should have been there when you checked out the spaces.”

“I can handle him ... I mean the bid. Although I regret deciding to take the Negotiating Strategies class *next* semester. It might help dealing with ... Mac.” Mac fit him better than the formal *Michael*.

She wanted to reel the words back. Joe was giving her a chance, and she was dissing his grandson.

Joe patted her hand. “Don’t worry about that.”

She hoped someone would walk into the shop and rescue her from this conversation, but no one waited at the counter. She didn't want anything she said to Joe to get back to Mac. "Any suggestions on things I should include in the bid?"

"I can do better than suggestions." He dug in his jacket pocket and pulled out some folded papers. "Here's the contract the previous cleaners gave us. And the rates they were charging."

"Is that legal?"

"I read through it before I copied it." He pushed the papers toward her. "There aren't any prohibitions on me giving you a copy. Remember, they failed to perform."

"Thank you, Joe." She hadn't even thought about a contract. Eventually she would have gotten there. Mom had a short agreement she used for her home cleaning clients. This contract would need to be ... more. She wasn't sure how much more, but she would know by the time they were at the contracting stage. Her current focus was pulling together the perfect bid.

She scooped up the papers, then blurted, "Why are you helping me?"

Joe grinned. "I like you. And my grandson, let's just say he wasn't happy I stepped in on these *negotiations*. I don't want my actions to screw up your business."

"I'd rather negotiate with you," she muttered.

His laugh filled the small coffee shop. "I think you and Mac are perfect for each other."

The bell on the door jingled and a group of customers entered.

Perfect for each other? No way. Mac was a jerk.

"Don't get any ideas." She squeezed his shoulder one more time. "This better not be a matchmaking set up."

THE PHONE RANG. Trouble raised his head from his bed in the living room of Mac's apartment. Mac pushed away from the kitchen table where he'd spread out his files, rocked back and grabbed the phone from the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

"Hi. It's Patty Murphy again. Are all six entries two stories?"

He should have given her the blueprints. But he didn't expect cleaners to need copies. In the last ninety minutes, she'd called three times. Obviously she was working on the bid.

Some of the questions were his fault. He should have said he was building three different models, two of each house. There were a couple of differences, but he couldn't imagine they would affect her bid.

"I can get to the development in five minutes," he said. "We could do a quick review of the other models being built. It might be easier."

"Umm, yes. I can do that. I have to cancel ..." There was the sound of rustling paper. "I can leave in a couple of minutes."

"Where do you live?" That way he could figure out how long it would take her.

"Dinkytown. It should take me about twenty minutes."

"I'll see you then." Mac checked the time. Shit. It was already seven. He'd planned to only work until six, but he'd lost track of time. Again.

"Trouble, let's go." The dog sprang up as Mac pulled on his leather jacket.

"What do you think she had to cancel, boy? A date?" He shook his head at the idea that dating and Patti Murphy were ever combined in a sentence by him.

Well, he had thought of her off and on over the last two days.

He beat her to the house, got Trouble settled with another rawhide bone and decided to install the last of the drywall in

the master bedroom. As he screwed in the final sheet, Trouble barked. Tires crunched on the drive. Dusting off his hands, he hurried downstairs.

By the time he and Trouble joined her outside, she'd pulled her bag out of her neon green Bug. She wore well-worn jeans and a university T-shirt. Her reddish hair was caught in a ponytail. Damn she had nice ... assets.

He ripped his gaze off her ass. "That didn't take long."

"No." She jumped a little. Guess she hadn't heard the door open.

"Do you have everything?" he asked.

"I need my jacket." She tugged it on and pulled out a notebook. Then she knelt and gave the dog some love. "Hey, Trouble. How are you?"

Trouble tried to lick her face and she laughed.

"Trouble. Down." But he envied his dog getting that close to her.

His dog was a chick magnet. Too bad he didn't have time to explore anything with Patty.

"He's a sweetie." She scratched behind his ear as she stood. "Can we walk to all six of the houses?"

He should have grabbed his jacket. But seeing her again had pushed sensible thoughts out of his mind. This was crazy. "We only need to see the other two models. And yes, we can walk."

She locked the car door. Then waited.

"This way." He clipped on Trouble's leash and started walking.

"Why do I only need to see two more houses?" She stumbled a little on the uneven dirt.

He put out his hand to steady her, but she stepped away from him.

Fine. She didn't need him for anything but information.

“We’re building six houses, but people had their choice of models. Only three models were used for the six houses, two of each. There are a few modifications, but they shouldn’t affect how long it takes you to clean.”

She looked sideways at him. “And you’re an expert on that?”

“Yes.” He stopped and turned toward her. Trouble sniffed the brown weeds and lifted his leg. “I know everything that happens on these houses. My future is riding on finishing them on time and on budget.”

“And I want to help you accomplish that.” She lifted her chin. “But I need to make sure the bid is accurate.”

“You’re just one small piece in the balls I’m juggling.”

“Mixed metaphors notwithstanding, this piece of the puzzle,” she used her fingers to make quote marks, “is important to me.”

Mixed metaphors? “Who are you?” he blurted out.

PATTY STOOD as tall as she could, trying to counteract the way Mac used his height and body to intimidate her. “I’m the woman trying to bid this correctly.”

“Hey.” Mac held up his hands. “I’m not minimizing what you and your company will be doing. I want you to understand what’s at stake for me.”

“Since you’ve said it numerous times, I’d have to be dense not to understand.” It may not be smart to antagonize the guy she needed to work with, but Mac ... rubbed her the wrong way.

Other ways for him to rub her floated through her mind. Nope, not going there. The guy was great looking, but ...

“Sorry,” he said.

It was the most insincere apology she’d ever heard.

“Let’s get this done.” Then she could get home and finish drafting the bid.

They were all business as they walked through the two houses. There were significant design differences, but she didn’t think that would make *too* much difference in the bids. It was trying to estimate how long things would take that would be her challenge.

But the contract Joe had given her really helped.

After viewing the other models, they returned to her car. “Thank you for taking me through the other houses.” She patted Trouble and smiled. Her family hadn’t had a dog since Buttons died five years ago.

“You’re welcome.” Mac’s stomach let out a big rumble.

She couldn’t stop her snicker.

Then her stomach did the same. Heat filled her face at the sound.

“Sympathetic stomach rumblings?” Mac laughed.

She couldn’t help laughing and couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed this hard. “I guess I should have grabbed something to eat before leaving the apartment.”

“I’m starved.” Trouble alerted, trying to pull away, but Mac tightened his grip on the leash. “There’s a pizza place about a mile away. It’s pretty good.”

“Oh, well ...” Her food budget didn’t include eating out. Ramen dinners were her go to meal.

He looked down at her. “My treat.”

She hadn’t eaten dinner and the price was right. “Do you think we can be civil that long?”

“For pizza, I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“That would be an improvement.” She slapped a hand on her mouth. “Oh, shoot. Sorry. I ... I shouldn’t have said that.”

He cracked a smile. “It’s okay.”

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.” She blinked. Why couldn’t she keep her mouth shut?

“I’ve been called intense before. And probably other names I shouldn’t repeat.”

“Nanna always said you get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.”

“Good thing I don’t like flies.” He opened her car door. “Let’s go eat pizza. You can ask more questions.”

She should say no. School work and finalizing the bid awaited. But she was hungry. “What about Trouble?”

“He’ll be fine in my truck.” Mac shrugged. “I keep toys and treats in case he has to stay in there.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me.” He helped the dog into the truck. When he pulled out, she followed.

Having dinner with Mac was probably a mistake. Half the time hostility radiated off him. The other half, she thought he might be flirting. His redeeming factor was his dog. Trouble was a sweetheart.

Although, when Mac wasn’t being hostile, he was ... nice. Determined and focused, but also a man she would like to get to know better. She glanced into the rearview mirror. Her hair was a mess, her ponytail half out.

As they waited through a red light, she pulled out her scrunchie and smoothed her hair with her fingers and resecured the ponytail.

Not that he would notice. A guy as gorgeous as Mac probably dated the hottest girls around. His dark wavy hair was a little too long. And there were well defined angles and planes on his face. Those she’d noticed before. His sternness detracted, but when he smiled, his eyes crinkled.

Dangerous.

Mac was a client. She needed to make this her first—business dinner. She would make it quick. How long could

having pizza take?

Patty pulled into the strip mall parking lot and slid into a spot next to Mac's battered truck. Even their choices of vehicles showed how different they were. She drove a small, semi-reliable VW Bug, and he had his musclebound truck with tires almost bigger than her car.

While she stood on the sidewalk, Mac pulled a chew toy out of the glove box and handed it to Trouble. "Behave."

Trouble whoofed, then curled on the passenger seat, the toy in his mouth.

Mac straightened. "What kind of pizza do you like?"

"Mushroom, Italian sausage and basil."

He grimaced. "Mushrooms?"

"Yup." She liked making him squirm.

"We'll go half and half. Does that work?"

"I'd like to look at the menu before deciding." Not that she usually went for crazy combinations.

"Oh. I ... I like to be efficient."

I'm sure you do.

She held the door for him.

He shook his head and grabbed the doorframe over her head. "After you."

It might be a little perverse, but she enjoyed throwing him out of his comfort zones.

A cute waitress waved as they walked in. "Hey Mac, good to see you. Pick any table."

"Thanks, Suzanne."

Patty followed him to a table that looked out at his truck.

"I like to keep my eye on Trouble," he explained.

"Of course."

Suzanne dropped off menus and water. Facing only Mac, she said, “You haven’t been around much the last two weeks. Missed you.”

He smiled. “Work.”

Suzanne leaned a little closer. “All work and no play ...”

He glanced at Patty.

She arched her eyebrows.

“Do you want your usual?” Suzanne asked.

“My usual beer,” Mac said. “Patty, what about you? Do you know what you want to drink and what you want on our pizza?”

Suzanne reluctantly turned and looked at her. Patty took her time perusing the beers on tap. Then selected an amber ale.

“ID?” Suzanne asked.

Patty pulled it out.

The woman nodded and handed it back. “I’ll be back for your order.”

“You’re a regular,” Patty said.

Mac nodded. “It’s close and they make a good pizza.”

“She likes you.”

“Who?” Mac asked.

“Have you asked her out?” She shook her head. “Sorry, that’s none of my business.”

His mouth quirked into a half smile. “No, I haven’t.”

Patty asked, “Do you normally order as soon as you’re seated?”

“I know what I like,” he said. “That wasn’t a fake ID? You’re over twenty-one, right?”

She snorted. “Yes.”

He tapped a finger on the table. “When my granddad first told me about you, I thought you were in high school.”

“Nope.”

He waited for her to say more.

She stayed silent.

Mac finally leaned over the small table. “So how old are you?”

“Old enough to know better.” She snickered. “My nanna always said that.”

“She had a lot of sayings.” He rolled his eyes. “Come on.”

“Twenty-one.” She tipped her head. “And you?”

“Twenty-five.”

He pointed at her T-shirt. “Are you at the U?”

“Yup.”

“And you’re studying ...?” He waved his hand in a *get on with it* motion.

She liked making him work for it. “Entrepreneurial Studies. I’m at Carlson School of Business.”

“You are?”

“Yes.” His disbelief was a little insulting. “I’m in my last semester. Your granddad helped me with a project recently.”

Mac snorted. “Don’t trust him any farther than you can throw him.”

“He’s great.”

“How did he help you?”

“I interviewed him for my planning class. He talked about goal setting and business plans.”

“He did?” Disbelief filled Mac’s voice. “I have to pull those out of him with needle nose pliers. I’m trying to ease him into retirement. He should be enjoying himself, not working so hard.”

“But he said ...”

“Said what?” Mac leaned closer.

Had Joe told her in confidence? She drummed her fingers on the table. "I thought he said he wanted to slow down."

Mac relaxed back in the booth. "He said that?"

"You should probably talk to Joe."

Suzanne dropped off their beers. Ignoring Patty again, she asked Mac, "Are you ready to order?"

Mac looked at Patty and she nodded.

"We'll split a large, thin-crust. Pepperoni, onions and peppers on half," Mac said.

"On the other half, mushrooms and Canadian bacon," Patty added.

Mac scratched his chin. "You can add Canadian bacon to the whole pie."

"Will do." Suzanne brushed against Mac's shoulder as she walked away.

Wow. Just wow. What if she and Mac had been on a date?

At least Mac didn't stare at Suzanne's butt.

He asked, "Any chance I can have a copy of your paper?"

"Your grandfather has a copy."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to bother him."

She didn't believe him. "What's with you two?"

"Like I said, he should be thinking about retirement. We made a ... bet, I guess you'd say. If I finish and close on the six houses under construction before Christmas, he'll start stepping down."

"Can you finish them?"

He grimaced. "Not if he fires any more subs."

"You mean the fact that he fired the prior cleaning service?"

Mac nodded. "He's not supposed to interfere. And then he goes and fires them. They needed to go, but I'm juggling the

crews for the six houses. I don't have time to worry about hiring and interviewing other teams."

He had a lot at stake. "I'll make sure you don't have to worry about the cleaning."

"How did you get into cleaning anyway?" He took a deep draw of his beer.

"My mother. She started Murphy's Maids."

"You work for her?"

"Not usually. I have, I mean, ... she's going through chemotherapy right now." She closed her eyes. She never talked to strangers about her mother's cancer battle. But there was something about him that had her sharing this horrible news. "I'm managing her company."

"Chemo. Cancer?"

Patty nodded. Whenever she talked about her mother's cancer, she choked up. And this was still a business discussion.

"I'm sorry she's going through that." He reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

"Thanks." She hadn't known she was cold until his fingers warmed hers. His sympathy was comforting.

Patty swallowed. "Is your father also in the construction company?"

"He worked for Granddad growing up, but he went to law school." Mac pulled his hand away. "He, my mom and my sister practice in Minneapolis. Dad is minimally involved in the company. He reviews our purchase agreements, contracts and real estate matters."

"And you didn't want to be a lawyer?" She'd thought about going to law school, but the idea of accumulating more student debt stopped her.

Maybe after she started making money.

"I don't like the idea of wearing a suit or working in an office." He waved a hand at his shirt, T-shirt and jeans. "I like

being active at work.”

It gave her an excuse to look at him. He wasn't that much older than the guys she'd dated, but he was a man where the guys she'd dated were still filling out.

He wasn't all that tall, but he was solid muscle. And something ached inside her. What would it be like to be held against his chest, his body?

She would never know. A little lusting after Mac was okay, but nothing else. Besides, he might ask Suzanne out.

Or maybe he just liked to flirt.

“What are your plans after graduation?” he asked, shifting the focus away from him.

She made patterns in the condensation on her mug. “Before my mother started treatment, I wanted to work for a startup company for the experience. Now I guess I'll run my mother's company.”

“What's it called again?”

“Murphy's Maids.” She hoped it sounded more successful than it actually was. Mom had a half-dozen people working for her mostly part-time, but nothing big.

“What do you plan to do with the company? Will you make any changes?”

“I've been using her company in most of my projects. I've had lots of ideas, but I'd planned to pass them on to my mom when she was feeling better. Unfortunately Mom has a lot of treatments to get through.” She pushed away her beer. “There's a bigger profit margin in office cleaning, but Mom didn't like the evening hours.”

“But you do?”

“I think I can make it work. I would hire college students. It would fit their school schedules. And if the offices don't mind, the hours can be flexible.”

“Good idea. But you'd have a lot of turnover. Once they graduate, they'd move on.”

“True.” She’d worried about the possible turnover. “I thought about making training movies on how to clean. I could rent a video camera and customize the training to each office.”

Suzanne brought over a stand for their pizza and set it in the middle of the table. “Your order’s almost up. Do you need a refill?”

Patty glanced at her almost empty mug. She didn’t remember drinking that much. Mac was easy to talk to. “I’m good with water.”

“I’ll take another,” Mac said.

“Will do, Mac.” Suzanne headed to the bar.

“I like the idea of training videos,” Mac said. “That’s a great idea.”

“Thanks.” His compliment shouldn’t make everything go soft inside her, but it did.

“I wonder if I can use video training for some of my work.” He circled his finger around the lip of his beer mug. “You’d spend more time upfront, but it would be worth it. I might look into the cost of equipment.”

“I would have to figure out how to play the videos.” And since Murphy’s Maids office was in Mom’s home, she’d need a place where employees could review the videos.

Suzanne dropped off the pizza and Mac’s second beer. “Enjoy. Let me know if you need anything else. Anything.”

Patty rolled her eyes at Suzanne’s comment. “This smells amazing.” Her stomach rumbled.

Mac laughed and she laughed with him.

“You and Joe have the same laugh,” she said.

“We do?”

“Yes.” Using her napkin, she twirled the pizza pan to place her half of the pizza in easy reach. With a fork, she dished up a slice and the melted cheese formed long strands from the pan to her plate. “Do you have brothers or sisters that work for your grandfather?”

“My sister, Hannah, followed in my father and mother’s footsteps. The favorite child.” He used his fingers to make quote marks. “Ian, my brother, is twenty and doesn’t know what he wants to do, but it’s not construction.”

“Your family doesn’t like you working for your grandfather?”

“They’re attorneys. I don’t fit the family mold.”

“Your parents should be proud of what you’ve done.”

Mac snorted.

Patty took a bite of her pizza, burning the roof of her mouth. She sipped her ice water. “Where do you fall?”

“Middle child.” Mac folded a slice and stuffed almost half of it in his mouth. After he swallowed, he said, “I love this place. I probably have their pizza two or three times a week.”

No wonder Suzanne was ... familiar.

He redirected the discussion away from his family. It made her curious. He was so ... in charge, it was hard to imagine his family didn’t respect that.

But she wasn’t here to explore the MacBains’ family dynamics. She forced herself to focus on the bid she needed to finish tonight. “Back to houses and the bid. I want to make sure the other three houses are not materially different than the three you had me go through.”

“They aren’t.”

“Have you ever had six houses underway at the same time?”

Mac’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe when I was in high school and helping Granddad out. People wanted him to build their homes. He was always working. Even my dad helped out that summer.”

“My mom remembers cleaning a house built by your grandfather.”

“Small world.”

“Do you think everything will come together?” It was wrong to hope there might be delays, but she needed to find workers to help her out.

“Absolutely.” His face hardened. “Nothing, no one, will derail my plans.”

Patty vowed not to disappoint him. She wouldn't want to experience his wrath.

MAC CHECKED THE BILL, added a generous tip and then pocketed his credit card. “Don't forget your leftovers.”

Patty pulled her jacket on and picked up her to go box. “Thank you for dinner.”

“It was nice.” Weird. It had been nice. Patty was easy to be with. If this had been a date ... nope he wasn't dating until all houses were complete.

As they walked out, he was still thinking about her earlier question—*would everything come together?* He'd given the right answer, the only answer. Nothing would mess up his opportunity. Not even a pretty girl holding her mother's cleaning company together while her mother went through cancer treatments. He admired Patty for her loyalty. But not at the cost of his dreams.

He had something to prove to Granddad and his family.

“Night, Mac,” Suzanne called out. “Don't be a stranger.”

He nodded, uncomfortable with the way Suzanne had acted. He always flirted with her. Suzanne was pretty and had a nice body. But there wasn't enough of a spark to have him take it to the next level.

He set his hand on the small of Patty's back, guiding her through the tables. There were definite sparks between them.

Maybe after the houses were finished, he could act on this attraction.

He held the door; glad he'd gotten to it before she'd held the door for him. His parents had drilled etiquette into him, and holding doors was something he did because he was male. It wasn't a sexist thing, it was courtesy. She could bitch if she didn't like it. Although when she'd held the door as they'd entered the restaurant, there'd been a twinkle in her eyes, as if she knew it bugged him.

"I'll finalize the bid tomorrow," she said. "I have a paper to draft tonight."

"Thanks." He'd prefer receiving the bid tonight, but they'd talked until nine-thirty. The time had flown. He hadn't wanted to call it a night, but Patty had *homework*.

Hell, he hadn't heard that excuse since he'd attended the U.

Mac unlocked the passenger door of his truck and Trouble hopped out. "Make it quick, pal."

He waited by Patty's car as she unlocked the door and set her pizza, notebook and bag inside.

"Again, thank you for walking me through the other two models and for dinner," she said.

"No problem."

"Bye, Trouble," she called.

At the sound of his name, the dog came running. He bumped into the back of Mac's legs, trying to wiggle closer to Patty.

Mac put his hands out so Patty didn't get knocked to the ground and ended up with his hands on her waist. "Trouble, down."

But the dog nudged him closer to Patty.

Mac stumbled and stared into her eyes.

Her mouth dropped open. "Oh."

She was close enough to kiss. And nothing in her face was saying no. Mac bent down while pulling her even closer. He wanted a taste.

Trouble barked and danced around, like they were playing a game.

What the hell? This wasn't a date.

He let go and jerked away from her. Holding his hands up, he stepped onto the sidewalk and called Trouble who gamboled over and sat by his feet.

Patty shook her head, like she'd been in a daze.

"Good night." His words were brusque, almost rude.

"Yeah." She scrambled into the car, glanced at him, then backed out of her parking spot.

"Trouble, you almost got me in big, big trouble." He opened the truck door and the dog hopped up.

Being around Patty was too easy.

She made him forget his goals. He'd make sure they didn't meet often. By having dinner with her, he'd failed to check progress on the other three houses. He would have to walk through them tomorrow, and that meant he wasn't making the houses his number one priority.

As he backed out of his parking spot, Patty's Bug turned onto the 35W entrance ramp. He ignored the feeling he should follow her home and keep her safe. That was date behavior, not business.

"We need to stay away from her, Trouble."

Trouble whoofed.

"I don't care if you like her. She's a distraction." Maybe he could call her after he'd taken over MacBain Construction and let Granddad take a well-earned rest.

Again, he thought of following her. The Dinkytown area had more and more crime. It could be all the construction happening there. He wished Granddad had bid on at least one of the apartment buildings that had sprung up in the last few years. He'd even worked up preliminary estimates, but Granddad had said no. He didn't want to take the company there.

Mac did.

Maybe if they had, he'd have met Patty earlier.

He turned in the opposite direction of Patty and forced her out of his thoughts. He'd rented a small one bedroom apartment in Shoreview, not far from the housing development. It would be quiet and he could get a little more work done tonight, but for once the idea of all that quiet didn't appeal. He'd like to have taken Patty there and continued their conversation and then taken her to bed.

Obviously being with Patty wasn't good for him. She was distracting when he had to stay focused. He should never have invited her for pizza.

It wouldn't happen again.

CHAPTER THREE



Patty handed a coffee mug to the customer at the counter. “Have a good day.”

The customer didn’t say anything, just walked away. *Okay.*

She wiped a spill and glanced at Joe as he reviewed the bid she’d finalized the night before. He’d made a lot of notes. Had she made a mess of it?

He looked at her, smiled and waved her to the table.

She hurried around the counter. “What do you think?”

“You’ve done an excellent job. The hourly rates are more than fair, and your estimated hours are adequate. The contract you’re using looks reasonable.” He patted the empty seat at the table. “I have a few ideas. It won’t take long.”

No one waited at the counter so she sat. “Does it look like I’ve never done this before?”

“Absolutely not. I’ve only got a couple of suggestions. First, for the construction houses, I suggest adding in a clause that if something isn’t acceptable you have twenty-four hours to remedy it.”

“That’s a good idea.” Hopefully twenty-four hours would be enough time. Being a full-time student while trying to do these jobs would be challenging.

“Since you’re worried about ladders for the windows, make it explicit that the equipment be on site when cleaning is required.”

“Good.” Patty felt better and better about the bid.

“Third,” Joe said. “If you have to work around excessive construction debris, build in a ten percent hourly increase. You should not have to toss debris into the dumpster.”

“I like it.”

“Here are my notes.” Joe smiled as he handed her the folder. “You did a good job. Has Michael been helpful or a pain?”

“Michael? Oh, Mac.” He didn’t look like a Michael to her.

She chewed on her lip. It was impossible to answer Joe’s question. Mac had been both helpful and a pain. And intriguing. “He walked me through the other two models last night. And bought me pizza while I finished my questions.”

Although they’d spent a lot of time getting to know each other. Almost like a date.

“He should have taken you through all three models the first time you met.” Joe gave her a sly look. “He bought you dinner?”

“He heard my stomach rumbling.” She rolled her eyes. “It was embarrassing. But his rumbled too. He suggested a pizza place close by.”

And they’d talked for almost two hours.

“It wasn’t a date?”

“No! It was business.” Sort of. “I appreciate all your help, and thank you for giving my mother’s company a chance.”

“You’re very welcome. If you want me to walk you through the office, we can set some time up. Then you can pull together the office bid too.” He handed her what looked like a contract. “Here’s the old contract and bid for the office.”

“Perfect. You’ve been so helpful.” She retrieved her calendar, and they set up a time to meet the next day.

“You can drop off the construction cleaning bid tomorrow,” Joe suggested.

“I will.” She hadn’t thought past pulling the bid together. Hand delivery worked.

She finished her shift and drove to her parents’ house. Patty and her mom sat in the cozy kitchen and walked through the bid.

Mom looked pale and her cheekbones were too prominent.

It reminded Patty of Nanna when she’d been going through breast cancer treatment. She swallowed. Nanna had died of a stroke, a side effect of her treatments.

Her grandmother had watched Patty after school. One day while testing Patty on her spelling words, Nanna had grabbed her head and her eyes had gone blank. Then she’d slumped over.

Patty had been ten. She’d cried, sobbed her name, but Nanna didn’t wake up. She’d finally called her dad, barely able to get the words out. Then the ambulance came.

“You’ve done a fantastic job,” her mother said after going through the papers, pulling Patty back to the present. “How much time do you have to find staff?”

“It looks like they’ll want the first cleaning in about a week. If everything stays on track, there will be work once or twice a week until Christmas. Of course the office cleaning will be added into that schedule. I’m looking at that space tomorrow.”

“Maybe I can clean the office.”

“Absolutely not. Your one job is to heal.” She couldn’t lose her mother like she’d lost Nanna. “That’s all you need to worry about.”

Her mother exhaled. “I wish I could do something.”

“I’ve got this,” Patty lied.

She worked in her mother’s office and corrected the contract and bid. Thank goodness for whiteout. Her typing skills were sad.

Bringing the documents into the kitchen, she handed the copies to her mother. "Ready for signature."

Mom signed. "Nice work."

"Thanks. I have to get to class." She clipped the copies together and put them in a folder. "Love you, Mom. See you Thursday. Give Dad a hug from me."

Patty had barely enough time to drive to her apartment, find a parking spot and then walk from Dinkytown to catch the bus to west campus. At least all this walking qualified as exercise. She jogged off the bus and ran up the stairs, rushing into the classroom just as Professor Davis started.

Her roommate, Fran, pulled her backpack off a chair and whispered, "You just made it."

Davis glared at them.

Patty kept her head down and pulled out her notebook and a pen.

"If you finished your reading," Professor Davis said, "You should all know what SWOT is."

No one raised their hands.

Professor Davis looked at her. "Ms. Murphy."

Patty straightened. Davis liked to punish people who were late. "It stands for strength, weaknesses, ummm, opportunities and threats. It's the starting point of strategic planning."

"Very good." Davis nodded and continued her lecture.

Fran nudged her foot. "Brown nose much?"

When the class ended, Fran asked, "Can I borrow the notes you just took?"

"Sure." This was always the way. Fran was a good student but didn't put in the work. They'd been roommates for the last two years, which had been great. Their schedules were pretty similar. But Fran was always borrowing her notes or asking to see any papers Patty had written or completed homework.

“Did you finish that bid you were worried about?” Fran asked as they walked out of the classroom.

“Yes. Now I need to worry about finding people to work with me.”

“What are you looking for?” Fran asked as they waited for the bus to take them to the east bank campus.

“It will be cleaning houses that are under construction.”

“I’m ready to quit at the restaurant.” Fran was on thin ice at her current job. Something about the manager not liking her. “I wouldn’t mind making cash for Christmas.”

Patty grabbed her hand. “Really? You’d work with me?”

“How many hours a week?” Fran asked.

“It will vary. I estimated forty hours for each house, but if I can find two more people, that would be ten to twenty hours a week.”

“That math doesn’t work.”

They climbed onto the campus bus and found seats in the back.

“There are six houses. Assuming they stay on their timeline, there could be two jobs each week, starting in about a week,” Patty explained.

“It might be fun. You should talk to Cali and Sam. We could make a party of it.”

“You’re making this easy.” Patty grinned. “I sure hope the bid is acceptable.”

MAC TILTED BACK in his office chair and it let out a squeal. Trouble’s head popped up, then dropped onto on his paws as he went back to sleep.

Mac was disappointed. Patty had promised she would send the cleaning bid to him today. He hadn’t heard the fax machine

beep. Hopefully she hadn't driven to the development to drop it off.

He should have been specific on how he wanted to receive the contract. But what if this was indicative of the quality of work he could expect from her?

"Something wrong?" his grandfather asked from the doorway.

Trouble woke at the sound of one of his favorite people and trotted to Granddad's side. His grandfather rubbed a hand on the dog's head.

"Patty promised to get me her bid today. I guess there's still time, but ..." Mac's subs faxed their bids to him, but he hadn't given Patty the fax number.

"My fault. I told her to bring it tomorrow when she walks through the office."

Mac clenched his teeth. Patty hadn't let him know about the change. But neither had Granddad. Patty probably expected he and his granddad talked.

Granddad came into the office and sat. Trouble set his head on Granddad's thigh. "I scheduled a walk-through on the office for tomorrow but forgot I have a doctor's appointment."

Mac froze. Granddad had had his annual physical in July. "Why are you going to the doctor?"

His grandfather rubbed his chest. "Just a checkup."

Trouble whined.

He'd read somewhere that dogs could sense diseases. Something about body chemistry and a dog's ability to smell changes.

Trouble bumped his head into Granddad's side. Damn, could Trouble smell that something was wrong with Granddad? Was it Granddad's heart? "You can always reschedule your meeting with Patty."

"I'm tired of emptying my own garbage. Walk her through the place so we can get the bid and have someone clean up

after us. It shouldn't take that long." He held out his hands. "It's not very big."

"You're the one who fired the cleaning company without a backup plan," Mac reminded him.

"Patty's the backup plan," Granddad snapped back.

"Right." After their pizza, he'd vowed not to spend time with Patty, but if Granddad was sick, he'd cover this walk-through for him. "What time?"

"Four."

Mac was usually on site and reviewing the day's work at four. Granted, his supervisors called him with updates, but seeing the work, touching the work was better. "I'll make sure I'm here."

"Thanks." Granddad pushed out of the chair with a groan. "I think I'll head home."

It was only two in the afternoon.

"Are you all right?" Mac followed him out of his office, and Trouble padded along behind them.

"Right as rain. Just tired."

Mac followed Granddad out of the building and let Trouble out. As Trouble did his business, he watched his grandfather climb into his SUV. Was he moving slower? Did his posture slump as he sat behind the wheel?

Granddad should be enjoying retirement, not working himself to exhaustion.

He couldn't lose Granddad. His grandfather was the only one who believed he had worth. He sure never got accolades from his family. He was just their repair guy.

After his grandfather pulled out of the parking lot, he called, "Trouble."

The dog hurried to the door and headed down the hall to the breakroom where Mac kept a water bowl for him.

“Can you tell if there’s anything wrong with him?” Mac asked.

No answer.

He moved to his office and retrieved the latest invoices that needed to be paid. He set them in the accountant’s inbox. Then he called Trouble, locked up and headed to his truck. It was time to check out the day’s progress.

But he couldn’t stop worrying about Granddad. He needed to take any stress off the only person who believed in him.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON A LITTLE BEFORE FOUR, Patty pulled into a strip mall. She looked forward to seeing Joe. He was relaxed compared to Mac’s intensity. Joe had even given her a copy of their prior cleaning bid. The requirements looked reasonable.

Joe seemed to want her to succeed. And if she succeeded, she helped her family.

The good news was that her friend Samantha, Sam, and Cali had agreed to work for Murphy’s Maids on the construction cleaning. And even though Patty hadn’t wanted her mom to do anything, she’d contacted two of her old employees who were interested in the office cleaning.

She was smiling as she opened the MacBain Construction office door.

A buzzer sounded.

It wasn’t a big space. It didn’t even have a receptionist. Wooden file cases lined the walls along with photos of finished homes and a few framed blueprints. A couple of doors opened into offices. The smell of old coffee lingered in the room.

She called from the entry, “Hello?”

Trouble trotted around the corner.

“Hey, boy. How are you?” She knelt and gave the dog a full body rub. The dog moaned under her hands. It was hard to reconcile the sometimes harsh man Mac appeared to be with a man who brought his dog to work.

Mac came out of one of the offices. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Why was Mac so good looking? She tried to dim her smile. “I’m meeting Joe. He’s giving me the office walk-through.”

“Yeah.” Mac pushed his hair back. “He forgot a doctor’s appointment. He asked me to show you around.”

“Oh.” She pushed to her feet and brushed her hands on her thighs. Now she wished she’d put on something better than her jeans.

But this was a cleaning bid. Nothing else.

“He’s okay, isn’t he?” she asked. “He didn’t say anything yesterday at the coffee shop.”

Mac scrubbed his hand on his face. “He said he was fine.”

Fine. It was what her Nanna had always said. It was what her mother said whenever Patty asked how she was. *Fine* wasn’t always fine.

“It’s hard to tell with him.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Oh, wait. Here’s the construction cleaning.” She handed him the file folder with two copies of the agreement she’d typed.

“Thanks. I’ll look at these tonight.”

“Now the office.” She looked around. “What are you looking for?”

“Previously the cleaners came in Tuesday and Friday. There’s only a few of us.” He showed her the offices. Trouble moved to his side and kept pace as they moved around. “The accountant is here once or twice a week. Sometimes a draftsman. This is my office.”

She peeked into the well-organized space. Folders were arranged on a credenza that matched the desk, and blueprints stood upright in a wooden box. The bookshelves were tidy. The only out of place item was a piece of paper sitting in the middle of the large wooden desk.

Nothing personal cluttered Mac's office. No photos, trophies or awards.

"We'd want the floors vacuumed and garbage cans emptied each time your crew is here. Surface dust, but don't disturb anything." He consulted the list he'd grabbed from his desk. "Blinds dusted and windows cleaned every month."

She nodded. The requirements were all in line with the information Joe had given her. "Can I have a copy of your list?"

"Oh, umm, sure. I'll make one when we get to the copier room." Mac ruffled Trouble's ears.

"Thanks." Patty headed to the next office, and Mac waited in the hall.

This office wasn't as ruthlessly organized. Framed photos with family and kids filled the credenza. She wanted to find pictures with Mac in them. She was curious what he'd looked like as a child. He'd probably been just as much of a hunk as he was now. "Joe's office?"

"Yes." He looked puzzled.

"The pictures." She was surprised she'd had to explain how she was able to tell.

"He's sentimental." A shadow of a smile faded as she watched his face.

"I adore Joe. I appreciate that he's offered Murphy's this opportunity." She moved on to a breakroom. A dog dish filled with water sat on a mat. The coffeepot had sludge coating the bottom. She opened the microwave. Something had exploded in there, and whoever had wiped it up hadn't done a thorough job.

"Yeah. I guess I ..." Mac didn't finish.

“Smells like pizza.” She could just catch the scent over burned coffee.

Mac winced. “I forgot to clean the microwave.”

He opened a cupboard and pulled out a dog treat. Trouble plopped his butt down. Mac tossed the treat to him and the dog caught it.

Obviously a routine they’d done before.

Patty couldn’t focus on how cute the man and his dog were. She needed to get the information for this bid and then finish her work on her group project.

“We’d clean everything in here each time we’re here.” She flipped the coffeepot switch to off. “You might want to turn that off before things burn.”

“We, umm, I usually do.” He shifted on his feet. “Things have been a little crazy.”

In the hallway she walked by a panel with a keypad. “You have a security system?”

“I’ll get you the codes.” He walked her through the process of disarming the system.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it.” She sure hoped she or the staff didn’t mistakenly set it off.

She stuck her head into the only bathroom. It had both a toilet and urinal. The idea of cleaning them made her grimace, but it had to be done. She checked out another office and a copier room that housed a massive printer/copier. On the opposite side of the room sat a smaller copier.

Mac made a copy of his list and handed it to her.

“Thanks.”

“Just don’t touch this printer.” He pointed to big machine. “It’s for blueprints.”

“We wouldn’t mess with the equipment.” Although she wouldn’t mind seeing the printer in action.

There were a couple of store rooms. One contained sample cabinetry along with carpet, tile and siding samples. The other was a utility room.

“This looks pretty standard.” She made a couple notes in her notebook. “Can we leave our equipment and supplies in here?”

“Absolutely.”

She and Mom would have to decide what additional equipment was needed. There were a couple of old vacuums still not out with cleaners, but she'd need to make sure they worked.

“You don't need square footage?” he asked, a little grin on his face.

“Nope.” Was he making fun of her? “I have what I need.”

They headed to the front door.

“Wait. I should know where the garbage goes.”

“Follow me.” He led her down a hall to a back door. Pushing it open, he walked out and pointed at a dumpster. She and Trouble followed him out and the door slammed shut.

He swore. “You need to prop the door open or you get locked out.”

“Whoops.”

He stuck his hand in his pocket and then shook his head. “My keys are in my desk. We'll have to walk around to the front door. Come on.”

She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh at his disgruntled expression.

He glanced sideways. “It's not funny.”

“It kind of is.” She couldn't hold the laughter in.

He snorted.

They both laughed as they wound their way by cars and dumpsters in the narrow lane. Trouble circled and sniffed each dumpster they passed.

“I’ve laughed more with you than I have since my mother got her diagnosis.” Patty clapped her hand on her mouth. “I didn’t ... I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You should never apologize for laughing.” He set a hand on her shoulder as they walked. Heat radiated through her sweatshirt. He squeezed then dropped his hand. “And I can say the same thing. I don’t remember laughing this much either.”

They walked behind the long row of stores. The silence was nice. Comfortable. They turned the corner and made the trek back to his office, still not talking.

As they approached the door, she broke the quiet. “I’ll get this bid back soon.”

“Good. The place is getting dusty. Granddad says he’s tired of emptying his garbage.”

“Well, Murphy’s can do that for him.”

They stopped at her car. He rested against the hood, his long legs crossed and a small smile on his face. Trouble rolled in a patch of sunlight on a fringe of grass.

The companionable sense between them evaporated as they faced each other, and her body went on high alert.

She stumbled for something to say. “Will someone always be here when we clean, or will we have keys?”

“Once we see the employee bonding forms, we’ll give you the keys and codes. I’m not in the office much, and Granddad is spending less and less time here. The others who show up make their own hours.”

“Of course.” She tried not to show her ignorance. She couldn’t remember anyone else asking for proof of bonding.

“Do you need help with that?” he asked.

She let out a big sigh. “You weren’t supposed to notice I didn’t know how my mother handled the bonding.”

Or if her mother had ever done that.

He shifted away from the car. “If you have questions, call. I can help. Or I can give you the name of our broker.”

“Thanks.” She unlocked her car, stepping so the open door was a barrier between them. “And thank you for giving me all this time.”

“No problem.” Another devastating smile covered his face. “I like talking to you. I like spending time with you.”

“Oh.” She ducked in her car and collapsed onto the seat. He wasn’t supposed to fluster her. “Well.”

“Call if you want our broker’s number.” He moved away from her car and waved but kept watch as she backed out.

Had Mac been flirting? She had no clue.

It sure would be easier to ignore the way her body reacted if he stayed a jerk.

MAC REVIEWED Patty’s construction cleaning bid before he headed to the work site. It was thorough. She’d even added penalties if they left too much construction debris around. And the price was in line with his budget.

He brought the folder with him as he and Trouble headed to the development. After his walk-throughs, he’d stop at his grandparents’ house and get signatures.

As he drove, his mind was still on Patty. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. The more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted. No one had ever intrigued him as much as Patricia Murphy.

He didn’t want the distraction. Yet he’d flirted with Patty and nearly begged her to call him.

He pulled into the Birch Street house. And blinked. His granddad’s SUV was parked in front. He couldn’t remember the last time Granddad had been here. Maybe when they’d dug the foundation.

He grabbed the folder, made sure he had a pen, walked into the house and called, “Granddad?”

“In the master bedroom.” His grandfather’s voice drifted down from the second floor.

Trouble’s claws clicked on the temporary stairs as he headed to the second floor, looking for his buddy.

Mac took the steps two at a time and strode down the hallway. The tapers had finished. He touched the mud, pleased it was dry. He’d worried that after last night’s rain it would take a day or two to dry.

“What are you doing here?” Mac asked as he moved into the bedroom and found his grandfather in the attached bathroom. “I thought you had a doctor’s appointment?”

The smile on his grandfather’s face was too innocent. “I read my calendar wrong. It’s not until next week.”

Mac frowned. He’d moved his schedule for his grandfather’s appointment. “You could have let me know.”

“I wanted to see the houses.” Granddad held up the project binder. “Everything’s on track or ahead of schedule. The house on Elm Street is ready for electrical rough in.”

“Great. I’ll give them a call.”

“Already done. They’ll contact you for scheduling.”

One less thing on his never-ending list, but Granddad was supposed to be letting him manage these builds. “Since you’re here, I’ve got the Murphy bid and contract.”

“How does it look?” Granddad asked as they walked into the bedroom.

“Good. She’s added some interesting things.”

Granddad rested against the tub. “Like what?”

“Like a penalty if there’s too much construction debris.”

“Smart girl. I thought you’d like her.” Granddad pulled a treat from his pocket and fed Trouble. “Is it acceptable?”

“It’s a fair contract and price.” Mac handed Granddad the folder and a pen. “As long as you’re here, you can sign it and I’ll check this off my to-do list.”

Granddad scanned the details, nodding.

Maybe in a few months, Mac would have the authority to sign all contracts.

Granddad signed the two copies and handed them to Mac.

“I’ll get Patty her copy.” He’d give her a call. Maybe she’d like to get more pizza.

Wait. He’d vowed no more spending time with Patty. She was a distraction, and he didn’t have the time.

His grandfather clapped a hand on Mac’s shoulder. “You’re doing good work here. Exceptional work.”

“Thanks.” It was nice to hear him say that. Granddad was the only one in the family who respected Mac’s career choice.

Granddad stroked the slipper bathtub. “Nice choice. They sure went high end.”

“They did. I can’t wait to see the walk-in closets. It will be all wood with a small cedar closet.”

“I walked through it. Man, the closets are bigger than the bedroom of the first house your grandmother and I lived in.” Granddad wiped his hands. “This house is ahead of schedule. I’ll bet the owners are happy.”

“They are. Although they’re asking for changes.”

“Nothing new there.” Granddad handed the binder to Mac. “How did the office walk-through go with Patty?”

His grandfather’s question was too nonchalant.

“Good,” Mac said.

Granddad stared at him. Waited him out, and they locked gazes for what felt like minutes until Granddad said, “Good.”

“You seem focused on this girl,” Mac finally said.

“Girl? Pretty sure she’d take offense at that.”

“You call her girl,” Mac said.

“I’m old,” Granddad explained.

“Well, she takes offense at pretty much everything I say,” Mac muttered.

“What?” Granddad asked.

“Nothing.” They descended to the first floor. Trouble headed to his bed.

“Patty’s bright and a real go-getter.” Granddad skirted a stack of flooring acclimating in what would be the formal dining room. “Her family’s having a tough time. Since we needed to change cleaners, I thought we should give her mother’s business a shot.”

Mac worried there was more to Granddad’s interference than just helping out the Murphy family, but he refused to ask.

“I’m heading home,” Granddad said.

“Trouble,” Mac called. His dog scrambled to his paws and joined them in the entry.

“Family dinner on Sunday. Two o’clock,” his grandfather said.

“What’s the occasion?”

“I’d like to see my family.”

“I’m pretty sure I can make it.” Mac didn’t mind spending time with his grandparents. It was his own family that made him uncomfortable. He was the odd man out. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong with you or Grandma?”

“Come to dinner and find out.” Granddad headed out the door, then turned and asked, “Why don’t you bring Patty?”

Mac stumbled on the front door’s temporary steps. “What?”

“Why don’t you bring Patty?” Granddad asked again.

“Because she’s a ... a vendor.” Just because he was attracted to her, didn’t mean he would act on his attraction. “I don’t bring vendors to family dinners.”

“Come on.” Granddad unlocked his SUV. “She might like to get away from the stress in her life.”

“She might want to spend time with her family and not ours.” Would bringing someone to a family dinner make being with his family easier or harder?

No. He wasn't asking Patty to a family dinner. That was asking for trouble.

“Go home. Relax. You don't have to check the other houses. I've done that.” Granddad climbed into his vehicle. “See you tomorrow.”

Relax? That wasn't in his plans. Not until he was in charge.

CHAPTER FOUR



Patty drummed her fingers on the apartment phone. It had a cord long enough to pull into her bedroom.

Mac had said to call if she wanted his broker's name. Mom suggested they get two bids; one from her broker and a second one.

She'd already called Mom's broker. And she could easily call her mother's other contact. Instead, she decided to call Mac. Unfortunately it might not be a business call, it might be because she wanted to hear his voice.

This was worse than high school.

But if she could help her mother's business, it was worth it.

Besides, Mac had a deep soothing voice. And when he wasn't acting like he had a stick up his ... he was fun to be around. He'd been much nicer lately.

She pulled out Mac's number and dialed. As the phone rang, she stretched out on her bed. It was the quietest place in her and Fran's small apartment.

Mac answered. "Hello?"

Yup. His voice sounded great over the phone.

"Hi. This is Patty. I'm taking you up on getting your broker's name. My mom wants a second bid."

"Sure," Mac said. "Hang on, I'll pull it."

“Thanks.” In the background she could hear a drawer opening and closing. She wrapped and unwrapped the cord around her finger.

“Here it is. It’s the Baxter Agency.” He rattled off a number. “Talk to Ben. You can tell him I referred you.”

“Will do.” She searched for anything to keep him talking. “Assuming you accept our bid, do you know when you want us to start cleaning the office?”

“ASAP. It’s a been a while.”

Which meant she should charge a little more for the first cleaning. Her mother had suggested it. They did that for homes and added a few more services in the first cleaning. She’d run numbers by Mom tomorrow. Then they could get the bid out Thursday. “If we can get into the space, we could come on the weekend.”

“Once everything is signed, we’ll work out how to get you keys. Oh, I have the signed construction bid.”

She grinned. “Thanks for the business. You can have Joe bring it into the coffee shop.”

“I guess I could do that.” He paused and then asked, “Other than the bid, what are you doing tonight?”

She froze. His question had caught her off guard. What with the on again off again flirting, she didn’t understand what was going on. “I’m, umm, working on a project for my Strategic Planning class.”

“With Davis?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I matriculated from the U.”

“Oh.” For some reason she didn’t expect him to have needed college for his career path.

“You didn’t think I’d gone to college.” Even through their connection his disappointment was clear.

“I ... I ...” she stumbled, trying to find an excuse and then went with honesty. “You’re right. I didn’t think you needed a

college degree for working in your field.”

A bark of laughter filled her ear.

“Sorry.” She felt her cheeks. They were hot. Thank goodness Mac couldn’t see how red they were. “Who am I to talk? I’m trying to keep my mother’s cleaning business afloat.”

“We’re a pair all right.”

The silence wasn’t uncomfortable. It was ... nice. “I should finish my project.”

“Too bad. The Gopher basketball team has a game tonight.”

“I thought they didn’t play until January.”

“They don’t play Big Ten games until then. These are non-conference games. They’re fun.”

“I don’t have much time to watch the university’s sports, other than catching a few football games.” But the last game she’d gone to was two years ago. Now she only caught the scores in the *Minnesota Daily*.

“That’s just wrong.” Eagerness filled his voice. “I have season tickets. I like to bring some of my crew and vendors. We’ll have to catch a game.”

“I don’t know.” She had so much on her plate; studying, class, cleaning *and* now he wanted to catch a game. But this didn’t sound like he was asking her for a date. Technically she was his vendor.

“There’s always time for basketball.”

“Did you play?” she asked.

“In high school. I was a point guard. When I was a senior, we went to state. Lost in the semi-finals to the eventual champions. I might have played Division three or even two, but I wanted to go to the U.”

“I played all through high school,” she said. “Forward.”

“What other sports did you play?”

“I ran cross country.”

“Do you still run?” he asked.

“Only to catch the bus.”

Mac laughed.

She settled deeper into the stack of pillows. “It feels a little weird that we have this in common.”

“We might have to try a little one-on-one to get your skills up to speed.”

Now that sounded like flirting. If she were brave, she’d ask. And if he were flirting, did she want that?

“I’ve got to go,” she said reluctantly. “I’ll get you that bid soon.”

“Thanks.”

They said their goodbyes.

She blew out a breath. Mac wasn’t like anyone she’d ever met. And damn it. She was attracted to him.

PATTY GAVE the last customer in line her change. When the woman walked away, she sagged against the coffee shop counter. On this first Friday in November, there had been snow flurries, and it brought everyone who drank coffee into the cafe.

“Wow, what a run of customers,” her co-worker Gabby said.

“I know.” Patty checked the tip jar. “Unfortunately they’re all broke students like us.”

“That’s the problem with working near campus.”

“It sure is.” But Patty wouldn’t be working here much longer. As soon as Mac gave her the timelines, she’d be limiting her hours at the café. She didn’t want to leave the

owner in the lurch, so if the café had trouble filling shifts, Patty had promised she would help out.

She turned and cleaned up the coffee grounds she'd spilled during the rush.

The bell jingled over the door.

"Hey, maybe our luck is changing," Gabby whispered. "Mmmm, hot one coming in."

Patty couldn't help laughing. Gabby always searched for hot guys. She gave the counter one more swipe and turned around.

"Oh." Her heart fluttered a little.

Gabby was right. He was hot. The T-shirt under his open jacket outlined his great chest. Apparently he was impervious to the falling snow. His windblown hair looked like she should straighten it—with her fingers. "Hey, Mac. What brings you here?"

"I'm meeting my granddad." He pulled a folder of papers out of his brief bag. "I brought the office bid acceptance agreements."

"Thanks." She'd worried Mac would push back on the additional charges for their first visit.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gabby patting her heart. Patty pinched her lips together to keep from laughing. "Can I get you something to drink or eat?"

He looked at the board. "A large dark roast. Does my grandfather have something he always orders?"

"Yes."

"You can get that too."

"Joe's usual and a dark roast. Got it." She poured both Mac and Joe's coffees. Then she put an egg sandwich into the toaster oven.

"He eats here?" Mac asked.

"Whenever I'm here he does."

She gave Mac the total and took his credit card. As she waited, Mac threw a couple of bills in the tip jar. It made her a little uncomfortable, especially since she couldn't tell if on their phone conversation he'd been flirting or being nice to a vendor.

She tapped the folder. "Do you want us to start tomorrow at the office?"

"Please." Mac pulled out a set of keys and set them on the folder. "I also included the codes for disarming and arming the alarm. Smart work adding additional charges. You'll earn them."

"We will." Like an idiot, she stood there smiling at him. Finally she said, "I can bring the sandwich out if you want to sit down."

"Sure." He picked up both coffees and headed to one of the few empty tables.

Gabby moved next to her. "Who is he?"

"A contractor. That's who I'll be cleaning for. He's Joe's grandson."

"Oh, my. I wanted to flirt with him, but he didn't order anything fancy."

Patty laughed. "He doesn't seem like a latte guy to me."

Gabby frowned. "Maybe I could bring him a sample."

Joe walked in the door and waved.

The timer dinged and Patty put the sandwich on a plate, added a napkin and met Joe at the table as he took his coat off. "Hey, Joe."

"This is service. Coffee and food served by a beautiful, intelligent woman." Joe winked at her.

"Right." But she couldn't stop the blush that heated her face.

"I think I need to tell Grandma what's going on here." Mac's eyebrow was raised.

“Better yet, let’s have them meet.” Joe turned to her. “Why don’t you come for Sunday dinner?”

“Dinner?” she asked.

Mac’s mouth dropped open.

“We’ll eat around two, so come as early as one.” Joe gave an innocent smile. “Mac can pick you up.”

“I ... I ...”

“Granddad,” Mac said.

“You’ve already committed to dinner,” Granddad said. “I just want you to pick up my friend on your way to the house.”

“I shouldn’t.” But she would like to meet Joe’s wife. If Joe was this kind, she must be a gem.

“Do you have a better offer?” Joe asked.

She’d planned to visit her parents Sunday night. “Studying.”

“Take a couple of hours off.”

Mac looked at her. Did he want her to say yes or no?

“I can pick you up around 12:30,” Mac said. Now he was the MacBain smiling. Joe and Mac had the same great smile.

“Perfect.” Joe rapped the table and picked up his egg sandwich. “I can’t wait to have you meet the family.”

“Family?” Her voice squeaked a little. “Joe, I shouldn’t be there.”

“Honey.” Joe touched her arm. “You need time away from work and studying and worrying about your mother. Let me give you a break.”

Kind. Joe was so kind. “Thank you.”

The bell jingled and Patty hurried to the counter.

Going to a family dinner with Mac was probably a mistake. She’d cancel, but not when Joe was around.

PATTY PULLED up to the MacBain offices Saturday morning. Maggie, one of her mother's previous employees, waited in her car.

"I hope you haven't been here too long," Patty called as she pulled equipment and supplies out of her mother's van.

"Not at all. I was enjoying my coffee." Maggie picked up the vacuum and then wheeled the industrial sized mop and bucket to the door. "I'm happy to get the hours at a time my husband can watch the kids. Housecleaning hours didn't work for me."

"I'm glad you wanted the work."

"Keep me in mind if you get other nighttime or weekend cleaning jobs."

"I will," Patty said. "We've got MacBain's construction cleaning contract too. Those hours would work for you."

Maggie would be the permanent cleaner for the MacBain offices, but Patty was helping today.

"I always liked working with your mom." Maggie stopped at the door. "How's she doing?"

"The chemo is rough." Patty unlocked the door and moved to the security panel. She handed the information to Maggie, who disabled the alarm.

After handing Maggie the cleaning sheet she'd created and a set of keys, Patty walked her through the offices.

"I'll start cleaning the office blinds." Patty had bought new tools for the job, but they should recover the cost quickly.

"I'll start in the bathroom and then clean the breakroom," Maggie said.

"Great. Don't forget the inside of the microwave. Something exploded in there."

Patty plugged her headphones into her Walkman and clipped it to her waist. Queen's "We are the Champions" came up. Perfect song to beat the dust, dirt and cobwebs into submission.

She started in Mac's office. While she cleaned the blinds, she sang and rocked along with "Bohemian Rhapsody," adding a little butt wiggle as she worked.

As she finished the blind she twirled in a circle. And stumbled.

Mac leaned on the doorframe, grinning. Trouble sat at his feet; his head tipped like the dog wondered what she was doing.

"I didn't know anyone would be in today." She tugged her headphones around her neck. "I'm done. Just finished. I'll let you work."

She grabbed the feather duster and tried to move past him.

Mac didn't move. "I like the dancing."

She rolled her eyes.

He unwrapped the headphones and put one to his ear, locking his gaze on hers. They were so close she could smell the woody scent of his shampoo. She inhaled a little deeper.

Her music still played "Rhapsody." Mac said, "Classic."

"I like working with music on." She backed away from him and bumped into Trouble.

Mac caught her hand, keeping her from falling over his dog. *Thank you Trouble.*

"So do my crews. So do I." He set her headphones back around her neck. His fingers stroked her chin as he pulled his hand back.

She swallowed. For some reason she felt like she was prey and he the hunter. "I ... work. I need to keep working."

"Right." He finally stepped into his office.

She scurried down the hall. Before cleaning the next office, she leaned against the wall and took in a couple of deep breaths.

If she reacted this much to a small touch, having dinner tomorrow would be too dangerous. She didn't have time to get involved.

No matter how kind Joe was, dinner was *not* happening.

MAC WATCHED PATTY RUN AWAY. The ass she'd been shaking while she'd cleaned disappeared around the corner.

It was harder and harder to keep his hands off her.

He didn't need to be in the office today. He could have approved the timesheets at the apartment and then dropped them off Sunday or Monday. But knowing Patty would be here had been a lure he couldn't resist.

It was strange. She wasn't his usual type of girl. Whoops, woman. Most of the women he dated wouldn't think about cleaning as a career, they'd wreck their manicures.

Not Patty. She was helping her mother. And he admired that more than any woman he'd ever met.

He opened the timesheets and began his review. Pulling out his job spreadsheets, he added the actual hours, then compared them against what he had budgeted. They were over running the hours needed for framing on the final house they had under construction. He made a note to stop by that house first thing Monday. He'd find out if there were problems he needed to solve or if the crew wasn't doing their job. If they weren't, he would make changes.

He could hear Patty moving around the office. Sometimes he heard her singing, sometimes he heard another woman talking to her.

He headed to the breakroom to make a pot of coffee and found the other woman whose voice he'd heard. "Hi, I'm

Mac.”

“Hi, Mac. I’m Maggie.”

When he realized she was scrubbing the mess he’d made in the microwave, his face got hot. He should have done a better cleanup job.

He filled the clean coffee carafe, poured water in the reservoir, dropped a coffee packet into the machine, and flipped on the switch. “Feel free to have coffee when you’re here.”

He left the pot percolating and headed to the bathroom. Another room that was spotless and smelled great. If this was an indication of what Murphy’s could do, he was extremely happy with their work.

He wiped the sink after washing his hands, not wanting to dirty what they’d cleaned.

As he exited the bathroom, he almost ran into Patty. The connection between them clicked in as they stood in the narrow hall. “Thank you for coming in this weekend. The office looks good.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.” Patty took a step back.

Hmm. “Let me get your address.”

Before he even finished the sentence, Patty shook her head. “I’ve decided not to go. It’s not a good idea.”

“Why?” But he could guess why. Their attraction reared up every time they were close to each other or talked on the phone.

He was done fighting it. “Granddad wants you there.”

Her gaze locked on his. “Joe’s a sweet man, but I’m worried he’s trying his hand at matchmaking.”

“You think so?” He pretended he hadn’t thought the same thing. “I’m just worried about him.”

“Why?”

“Because he wouldn’t tell me why he had a doctor’s appointment. Then suddenly he wants to have more family dinners.”

Patty grabbed his arm. “You don’t think something’s wrong with him?”

He might be using his grandfather to get Patty to come to this family dinner, but Granddad had inserted himself into this ... whatever this was. “I’m worried.”

About a lot of things. He worried about Granddad’s health. Worried he was playing matchmaker. And worried Granddad wouldn’t give up control of the company, but Patty didn’t need to know that.

Her hand slid off his arm. “Does he look tired to you?”

“I’m not sure.” He wanted to be honest with her, so he added, “I would like you to come. It might take the focus off me. My family thinks I’m wasting my time in the construction company.”

“Haven’t they seen your work?”

He shrugged. “I got a lot of pressure to go to law or med school. To do something important with my life.”

“And they don’t think building homes for families is important?”

“Not in the least.”

Sympathy filled her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Help me out at this family dinner, please?” The word *please* felt a little strange coming out of his mouth. Maybe he needed to use it more often. “We only have to stay through dinner. My parents will understand I need to take you home to study.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

It might have been a little grudging, but she’d agreed. “Address?”

CHAPTER FIVE



“I don’t know what to wear,” Patty complained to Fran, staring into her closet. “Jeans? What about leg warmers and my one and only mini-skirt?”

“No!” Fran shook her head. “You need to start buying interview clothes. Hang on.” She headed to her bedroom.

Patty sank onto the bed. If she was stuck helping her mother, she wouldn’t need interview clothes.

Stuck? No. Patty wasn’t stuck. She was helping her mother out of love.

But she’d had dreams.

Patty wanted more, had dreamed of doing more. She’d dreamed of building her own company. Never had she thought she’d clean all her life. How could she justify her college expenses as a cleaner?

“We wear the same size, even though you’re taller than me.” Fran flourished a couple of skirts. “You could wear that green sweater that makes your eyes pop. It would go great with this black pencil skirt or if you want a little more casual, my jean skirt.”

“You know my wardrobe better than I do.” Patty pulled out the soft green sweater Fran had suggested.

After stripping to her underwear, she pulled on the sweater, adjusted the shoulder pads and then tried on both skirts.

“They look great, but I like the black skirt better,” Fran said.

“You’re right.”

“Wear your black ballet flats with the black skirt,” Fran suggested. “Do you have black tights?”

“Not my Vans?” She’d bought the black and white checkerboard sneakers with her hard earned coffee shop tips.

“Another no.”

“I’m spending too much energy on this dinner.” Patty pawed through her socks, nylons and tights drawer. “Ta da.”

“Perfect.”

Once dressed, she cleaned her shoes and covered a scuff on one heel with black permanent marker.

She checked her alarm clock. It was noon. Mac wasn’t picking her up for almost thirty minutes.

Patty couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a spare half hour.

She plopped onto the futon she and Fran had found on the street last year. They’d grabbed the futon frame and split the cost of a mattress. It was their sofa.

Fran dug through the fridge. “Are you ready for the test in Davis’s class?”

“I’ll do one more review tonight.” She could take the next thirty minutes and study now.

“Can I read through your notes while you’re gone?”

Patty sighed. “Of course.”

Fran had put together an outfit that would fit in with the MacBain family of attorneys, so Patty couldn’t begrudge her roommate her poor study habits.

Moving into her bedroom, she located her Planning class notebook.

There was a knock on the door. Patty swung by and opened it.

“Hey,” Mac said.

“You’re early,” she blurted out.

He looked good. Under a black leather jacket, he wore a light blue sweater with a darker blue dress shirt showing above the collar. Gray slacks showed off his fit body.

She was glad Fran suggested she wear a skirt.

“Maybe I couldn’t wait to see you.” He smiled. Walking into the apartment, he whispered, “You look good.”

Patty had planned on waiting in front of the apartment building. Now here Mac stood looking like he owned the building.

“Hi.” Fran tugged her hair over her shoulder so it flirted with her breasts. “I’m Fran.”

“I’m Mac.”

“You’re Patty’s date?”

“No,” said Patty.

“Yes,” said Mac at the same time.

“This isn’t a date.” Patty stared at Mac.

He smiled.

“Interesting.” Fran moved around the counter and stood inside Mac’s personal bubble. Fran looked good. Her sweatshirt slouched off one shoulder, and she wore her cutest hot pink leggings.

“I’m not dating anyone right now.” Fran smiled at Mac.

“Nice to know.” He leaned his hip against kitchen doorframe.

Would the two of them make a date in front of her?

Patty might not like that she was attracted to Mac, but she hated Fran setting her sights on him.

She pushed her notebook at Fran, causing her to back away from Mac. “Here are my notes. I’ll need them tonight.”

“Sure. Sure.” Fran didn’t take her eyes off Mac. “You kids have fun.”

Patty forced away her jealous thoughts. At the hooks by the door, she removed her ski jacket. It probably wasn't attorney appropriate, but it was all she had. If she ever had a job interview, she'd have to find or borrow a better coat.

Looking for a job was sounding expensive.

Mac followed her out the door.

"Did you stay at the office all day?" she asked. He'd still been working when she and Maggie had finished.

"Not too much longer." He set his hand on her shoulder and aimed her to a car. A car and not his truck. A Mustang.

"Nice car," she said.

"I bought it in college. Had fun fixing it up." He unlocked the passenger door and helped her scoot into the bucket seat. "Granddad let me keep my car at his place while I got it running. We worked together on it."

Trouble yipped and stuck his nose between the front seats.

"Hey Trouble, hey boy." She scratched behind his ears. "Are you invited to dinner too?"

"He's always invited." Mac headed around the car and slid into the driver's seat. "Most days, Granddad likes my dog better than me."

"That's not true. You and your grandfather are close." Like she and her grandmother had been.

"He's the best." The engine started with a roar. Music blared, some headbanging rock she didn't recognize. He turned down the noise and pulled into the street heading west. Then he merged onto 35W going north.

"Why do you think Joe invited me to dinner?" She wanted to get Mac's take on this strange event. And she wanted to make sure Mac understood this wasn't a date.

"Sometimes I think ..." Mac's words trailed off.

She waited for him to finish, but he didn't add anything else.

“Listen, I’ve got a favor to ask,” Mac said.

A favor. What on earth could a broke student do for someone like Mac? She hesitated and finally asked, “What?”

Mac took her hand. Taking his eyes off the road, he stared at her. “I’d like you to pretend you’re my girlfriend.”

PATTY SHOOK HER HEAD. Shock filled her face, and Mac’s shoulders sank.

“You, you, you want me to do what?” Patty sputtered, pulling her hand away from his.

Mac focused on the road. “It’s my family. They just ... they don’t understand why I work for Granddad. They think I’m lazy.”

“Lazy? That’s ridiculous.”

“Thanks,” he said, relieved at her opinion.

“How would us pretending we’re dating change that?”

Explaining his logic was tricky. “They’ll want to get to know you. And they won’t be questioning my career choices.”

“Have you forgotten I’m basically a cleaning lady?”

He cleared his throat. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Maybe caving in to his granddad’s wish that Patty attend dinner wasn’t a good idea. But they were stuck now. “Just explain that you’re still in college.”

She slipped deeper into the seat and didn’t say anything.

He needed to find a way to get her to pretend with him.

Her weakness was Granddad. She really liked him. It was the reason she’d agreed to come to this dinner in the first place.

“I’m worried Granddad will tell the family something is wrong. Like maybe his heart is failing.” His words rushed out.

She didn’t say anything, just gave a, “Hmmm.”

“Patty—”

—She held up her hand, stopping him. “Let me process, okay?”

He should have lined up his reasoning. In any other situation he would have thought through any arguments she might make, and his counter arguments would be ready. And perfect.

But Patty threw him off his game.

“Patty—”

Her hand flashed in his face again.

Exhaling, he concentrated on the road. Plenty of traffic on the interstate. When he reached the I-694 junction, he turned east. His fingers tapped on the gear shift. He had to convince Patty this was a good idea. They would be at his grandparents soon, and he needed an answer.

“Why do you think telling them we’re dating will help? This is all about you, right?”

“No.” *Maybe.* “I have the impression Granddad is trying to set us up.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her nodding.

“And my parents and sister usually mock my job and career choices.”

“When Joe can hear them?” Patty pressed a hand to her chest. “Aren’t they making fun of him too?”

“Sometimes. But they usually catch me alone.” It was why he spent as little time as possible with his family.

“That’s ... wrong.” She fell silent again.

At least she saw the unfairness and the arrogance of his parents and sister. The jury was still out on his brother. When his parents started ragging on him, Ian faded in the background. Hell, when Mac wasn’t there Ian probably got jerked around. Maybe they just needed to feel superior over all the peons.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, not able to stand the quiet.

She let out a puff of air. “I’ll take the heat off you for your parents, but I won’t lie. That will have to be you.”

“Lie? I’m offended.”

“You want me to tell your family that we’re dating.” She shifted and faced him.

“We’ve had one date,” Mac countered.

“We have not!”

“The pizza.” Granted he’d argued with himself about that night, but it had felt like a date.

“That wasn’t a date. That was a vendor having a meal with a client.”

“Usually vendors take me out.”

“I ...” That shut her up. “Do you want me to pay for my dinner?”

“No! I want you to not disagree if I say we’re dating.”

“Okay.” Patty crossed her arms. “But if Joe asks, I’m telling him the truth.”

“Thanks.” Relief had him grinning. “Unless there’s something wrong with Granddad. Then I’d like you to ... go along with the ruse.”

Patty touched his hand. “I hope there isn’t anything wrong with Joe.”

“Me either.” He took the Rice Street exit and headed north to North Oaks. Score one for him.

PATTY DIDN’T LIKE the idea of lying to Mac’s family. It was wrong and she already regretted agreeing to this ... lie. She would make sure Joe knew the truth.

Unless Joe announced he was sick.

She still didn't understand why Joe had invited her to a family dinner.

"You MacBains are strange," she whispered as Mac pulled into a long driveway that wound through mature pine trees.

"Don't I know it."

Trouble stood in the backseat and whoofed.

"We're here, boy," Mac called to the dog.

"This is beautiful." The stone and cedar house blended in with the woods. The ranch style home spread across a small hill.

"One of Granddad's designs," Mac said. "At least, his ideas, but he worked with an architect."

Mac parked the car behind a Lincoln Continental and a small Cadillac. An older model Blazer pulled next to them.

They clicked their seatbelts open.

"That's Ian, my brother." Mac turned and spoke quietly. "I want to confirm we're on the same page."

"Yes," she held up a hand, "but it doesn't give you any ... liberties."

"Liberties?" His eyebrows knit together.

"Liberties. PDA." She could feel her face warm as she blushed.

"PDA?"

She covered her face with her hands. "Public display of affection."

"Oooh." He snorted a laugh. "No kissing?"

"No."

"Hugging?"

She shook her head. Could this be any more embarrassing?

"At least let me hold your hand." He pulled her hands away from her face and held them.

She stared at their interlaced fingers. “This won’t work.”

“It will.” Grinning, he raised her fingers to his mouth. “Can I kiss your fingers?”

He didn’t wait for her answer. He brushed his lips over her knuckles.

There was a rap on the windshield. Trouble barked and his tail beat against the seat. A male called, “You plan on sitting in your car all afternoon?”

Patty tugged her hands away.

Mac’s younger brother looked like him with the same brown wavy hair with reddish highlights and the same gray eyes. He was laughing.

Hopefully not at her.

“Go away, Ian.” Mac jerked his head.

Ian leaned a hip against the hood of the car.

“He was always a pain,” Mac muttered. Louder he asked, “Are you ready?”

“I guess.” She opened her car door, swung her legs out, but couldn’t stand because of her tight skirt. “I need help.”

“On my way.” Mac started to climb out, but his brother held out his hand. “Let me.”

Trouble bolted out of the car and raced around the front yard, sniffing and marking his territory.

Patty held Ian’s hand and he tugged her up. “Thank you.”

“What the heck is a pretty woman like you doing with this lowlife?” Ian tucked her hand under his arm and walked her toward the front door. “You don’t need help, you need rescuing.”

Before she could disagree, Mac ran over and pulled on her other arm. “Hands off, bro.”

Ian didn’t let go.

“Hey.” She stopped walking and yanked her arms out of their grasps. “I’m not a wishbone.”

The brothers held up their hands.

“Thank you,” she said to Mac’s brother.

“You’re welcome. I’m Ian.” He held out his hand. “The good-looking brother.”

“I’m Patricia, but everyone calls me Patty.” She shook his hand.

Ian held on longer than necessary. “Nice to meet you.”

Mac gave his brother’s shoulder a little push, forcing Ian to step away and drop her hand. He said, “Ian’s the lazy charmer of the family.”

“Better than being the blue collared, serious one.”

“At least I don’t depend on Dad and Mom to support me.”

“You don’t depend on anyone,” Ian snapped back. “Besides, I’m in college.”

The brothers’ chests puffed out like stupid roosters as they threw verbal jabs at one another.

“I should have driven my own car,” Patty muttered, ignoring the two idiots. She wasn’t getting in the middle of a family tiff. Trouble joined her as she walked to the door.

And Mac wanted her to pretend they were dating. Not going to happen. It was obvious Mac brought some of the problems with his family on himself.

She rang the doorbell.

A woman a little older than Mac opened the door. She had the MacBain brown wavy hair and wore a great gray sweater and slacks outfit. The sweater looked soft. Was that cashmere? This must be Mac’s sister, the attorney. A pearl necklace hung round her neck.

“Hi, Trouble,” the woman said as the dog nosed his way into the house.

“I’m Patty. Joe invited me to dinner.”

The woman looked around her shoulder. “Are those my brothers?”

The two idiots were still toe to toe. At least she couldn't hear what they were saying to each other. "Yup."

"I'm Hannah. Come on in. Granddad said he'd invited you." Hannah closed the door on her brothers. "Maybe we should lock them out."

"Not a bad idea."

Hannah snickered. "I can see why Granddad likes you."

"Joe's a gem." Patty took off her ski jacket, trying not to be embarrassed in front of Hannah. So she couldn't afford cashmere. One day she might. "I understand you're a lawyer."

Hannah hung the coat in the closet. "Yes. I'm a trust attorney."

"Is it interesting?"

"Sometimes," Hannah said.

Hannah led her down a wood paneled hallway that opened into a room filled with blue and green furniture. The wood floor shone like a mirror. Patty didn't want to gawk, but the house was wonderful. Huge widows overlooked a lot filled with trees that angled down to a lake.

"I understand you're finishing your degree," Hannah said.

"Entrepreneurial Studies."

"That's what idiot brother number one graduated in."

"That would be Mac?"

"Michael to the family. What with everyone being a MacBain." They crossed the room and moved through a wide archway into a kitchen. The glorious scent of roasting chicken greeted them.

"This is my grandmother," Hannah said. "Adelaide MacBain."

"You must be Patty." Adelaide handed Trouble a dog treat. He took it to a dog bed set in the corner of the kitchen. Then she wiped her hands on a towel tucked into her apron. She also

wore great looking gray pants, a sweater and pearls. Pearls.
“Welcome.”

“Thank you, Mrs. MacBain.” She held out her hand.

“None of that. Call me Addy.” Instead of shaking Patty’s hand, she pulled her into a hug.

Addy smelled like roses and whatever herb she’d been adding to a pot of mashed potatoes.

“I thought Michael was picking you up.” Addy kept her hands on Patty’s shoulders.

“He did.”

Addy looked toward the front of the house. “Then where is he?”

“Michael and Ian are being stupid,” Hannah said.

Addy’s gaze narrowed. “Would you tell them I would like to see them. Now?”

“Let me get Patty a drink.” Hannah held up a bottle of red wine. “Do you want a glass?”

“Sure.” She let Hannah pour a glass.

Hannah then headed back to the entry to do Addy’s bidding.

“Is Joe here?”

“Follow that hallway.” Addy smiled. “Please ask him to turn off the football game.”

“Of course.” She thought she might want to grow up to be just like Addy. Someone who assumed her orders would be followed.

She took her glass with her and sipped a very nice wine. Not that she was a connoisseur. Ever since Mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer, wine hadn’t been in her parents’ budget. And she and Fran only splurged when they had Italian night at the apartment. That wine was never expensive.

Inside another large room, Joe sat in a recliner. On the TV played the Vikings football team. Trouble hurried over and

bumped Joe's hand.

"Hey, boy. How're you?" Joe gave the dog's ears a good scratch. "Michael must be here."

Joe wore nice gray slacks with a dress shirt underneath a dark blue sweater.

She hadn't gotten the memo informing everyone to wear gray.

"Hey, Joe," she said.

"Patty!" He snapped the footrest down. It took a little adjusting for him to stand straight and give her hug. "I worried you would find an excuse not to come."

"I thought about it." She gave him a squeeze and stepped away. "Addy sent me in with a message."

"I can imagine. Where's Michael?"

"He's ... well, last I saw he was talking with his brother." That was the truth.

"He should be here with his guest."

"I thought I was your guest?"

Joe squirmed a little. "Oh, absolutely. Yes."

"Like I said, Addy has a message for you."

He held up his hands. "Turn off the game and come be with our guests."

"Yup."

He clapped his hands and the television turned off. Then he winged out an elbow. "Let us head to the kitchen. That's where everyone will gather."

He patted his leg and Trouble moved next to him.

"Who have you met?" Joe asked.

"Ian, Hannah and Addy."

"Everyone else will show up soon." He glanced at the TV. "We could watch a few more minutes."

“I just met Addy. I’m not getting in trouble with her.”

He chuckled as they entered the kitchen.

Mac had a beer in one hand and his arm around Addy.
“Why is everyone manhandling my girlfriend?”

Patty froze.

Addy, Hannah and Ian turned and stared at her.

“Is that right?” Joe squeezed her hand. “Your girlfriend?”

When she’d agreed to this farce, she hadn’t expected Mac to just blurt out the lie. Heat filled her face.

Mac gave his grandfather a hug and somehow got in between her and Joe. The guy had a possessive streak she wouldn’t have imagined.

“When did this happen?” Joe asked.

Both she and Mac didn’t answer.

“Joe, will you get a couple more bottles of wine?” Addy asked.

“Sure thing, good looking.” Joe winked at his wife and headed down the stairs.

“Can I help, Addy?” Patty asked, trying to duck away from Mac.

“No, no.” She stirred gravy at the stove.

Two more couples walked into the kitchen. The women wore dresses and the men suits. All in different shades of gray.

Mac should have warned her.

“Mom and Dad, come and meet my girlfriend.” Mac wrapped an arm around her shoulders and aimed her to his parents.

His mother looked like she could head to an afternoon tea—with the queen. She wore a dark gray dress with a matching jacket and pearls. What was with all the pearls the MacBain women owned?

Mac kept his arm around Patty's shoulder as he introduced his parents, Michael and Shirley MacBain.

She whispered to Mac, "Are you a junior?"

He held her a little tighter and hissed, "No. We have different middle names."

Patty smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. MacBain."

Neither of them asked her to call them by their first names. That was fine. It was still hard to call Joe by his name.

Joe, set two bottles of wine on the counter and said, "Patty's finishing her degree. And her mother's company is now working with MacBain Construction."

"Congratulations," Michael said. He looked at Mac. "Did I review the contract?"

"Not necessary."

Mac's dad raised an eyebrow. "Legal review is never not necessary."

"With this contract it was."

"And when did you finally go to law school?" Mac's dad asked. "Oh, wait no, you decided to swing a hammer."

"And I'm good at it." Mac's arm around her shoulder squeezed too tight.

Patty couldn't believe Mac's dad. Her parents would never make this kind of fuss over a career.

"Michael, let it go." Joe clapped his hand on Mac's dad's arm. "Just because you love being an attorney, doesn't mean your children must follow in your footsteps. You didn't follow in mine."

Michael's mouth flattened.

"Sorry to disappoint," Mac said.

Mac guided Patty to the other couple who'd watched the Michael and Mac show. After introducing his aunt and uncle,

he moved to the opposite side of the kitchen and Patty followed him.

“I’m sorry.” Addy gave Mac a hug. “I don’t know what I did wrong raising that father of yours.”

A timer buzzed. Addy patted Mac’s cheek and then moved away.

Michael and Joe were in a heavy whispered conversation. The aunt and uncle, Mac’s mother and Hannah closed their conversational circle excluding her and Mac, and Ian wasn’t in sight.

“I’ve got to get out of here.” Mac pulled her to the back door and onto a large deck. Trouble scrambled out with them.

Even though the early November day had a bite to it, she didn’t suggest they grab their coats.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to keep up with Mac’s rapid steps.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about.” He waved a hand at the house. “Welcome to my life.”

“Your dad ...” she trailed off. This wasn’t her business. At least Joe had stuck up for Mac.

“Takes the cake, doesn’t he? Nothing like feeling supported by my family.”

She didn’t know what to say.

They followed a flagstone path to the lake. Leaves rustled under their shoes, the bright yellows and reds now faded. Fall scents filled her senses; leaves, wet dirt and wood fires. The cold seeped under her sweater.

Trouble crisscrossed the path, the leaves under his paws crunching and crackling. He sniffed the dock segments stacked on the grass above the shoreline and marked his territory. Then he moved to a pile of weeds on the shoreline.

Side by side, she and Mac stared over the bleak, gray lake. The water seemed to mirror Mac’s agony.

She wanted to make him feel better. “I’m sorry my being here didn’t help.”

“No.” He faced her. “This isn’t on you. I made the mistake. I should have known Dad couldn’t resist throwing jabs at me.”

She wrapped her arms around her waist, trying to hold in her body heat. “I’ve heard you talk about the houses you’re building. You’re good at what you do. Don’t let your dad take that away from you.”

He exhaled and stepped closer. Then he set his hands on her waist and rested his head against her like he was defeated. “I’ll never please him.”

Her heart ached for him. She’d been wrong about Mac from their first meeting. He wasn’t arrogant. He knew what he wanted and he went after it. “Then don’t try to please him. It’s Joe’s opinion that matters, right?”

He lifted his head. “Yes.”

She looked into his eyes. “Can I get that in writing?”

A small smile crossed his face. “Probably not.”

As they stood on the shore, things changed. There was a flicker in his eyes.

Her breath caught.

Mac tipped up her chin. “I know you said no PDA, but no one can see us here. It’s not public.”

She muffled a laugh at his logic. But the air changed around them. Now she shivered from something other than the cold.

He bent. Stopped. Waited.

Mac was going to kiss her. She caught her upper lip between her teeth.

He moaned. “Patty. Patricia. Is this okay?”

Her hands slid up his forearms. She could push him away, and he would honor that decision.

But she'd been jealous of Fran flirting with Mac. Jealous of the waitress at the pizza place. Damn it, she wanted him to kiss her.

When she twined her hands around his neck, he didn't hesitate, he took her mouth in a hard kiss, tugging her so their bodies lined up.

He tasted of beer and something sweet. She opened her mouth and touched his tongue with hers. The stroke sent lightning through her body.

As they explored each other's mouths, he pressed her closer. His other hand gently cupped her cheek.

That was the dichotomy of Mac. One side of him was hard, forceful, the other, soft and gentle.

Her heart beat like she'd just run to catch the campus bus. The heat they generated pushed away the cold. Even though she wanted to stay right where she was, she wrenched away from him. She needed to breathe.

Kissing Mac was probably stupid, but man oh man. She'd never had a kiss like that. She dropped her forehead to Mac's chest, breathing hard.

His hand slowly rubbed her back. "Are you okay?"

She drew in a deep breath. "I'm not sure."

He chuckled, his chest bouncing. "I know what you mean."

Other than his discussion with his father, Mac was always in control, or at least that was what it looked like to her. "Did you plan this?"

"Did I plan to kiss you?" He cupped her cheeks. "No. But I would be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it. I've even dreamed about you."

"You dreamed about kissing me?" Her voice squeaked.

"I've dreamed about you." His hands dropped down to her butt, and he tugged her into his erection and groaned.

“Oh. Oooohhh.” He’d dreamed of having sex with her. None of the guys she’d dated ever admitted they’d dreamed about her. This was new and thrilling.

“Is my ... attraction one sided?” Mac asked.

She shook her head slowly. “But I keep telling myself I’m your vendor. It’s like you’re my ... my boss.”

“Do you feel like I’m coercing you?” Panic edged Mac’s voice. He let go and stepped away.

“No.” She caught his hand before he backed up farther. “But I can’t let something happening between us mess up my mother’s business.”

“We won’t let it.” He squeezed her hand. “I promise.”

“Michael, Patty,” Ian yelled from the deck. “Dinner’s ready.”

“It’s nice to know I didn’t lie to my family.” Mac held her hand as they walked up the path. “We’re in a relationship.”

Did one kiss put them in a relationship? She didn’t have time for a relationship in her busy life.

Mac called, “Come on, Trouble.”

For today, or at least for this family dinner, she would act like they were together. Then she would decide if it was true.

MAC COULDN’T STOP SMILING. He’d kissed Patty.

He and Patty sat next to each other at the dining room table. He could take her hand if he wanted or stroke her leg, which he really wanted to do. She’d even listened to his dad rag on him about his career choice and been angry about Dad’s attitude.

Patty handed him the bread basket.

He pulled out a couple of Grandma’s homemade rolls and set one on Patty’s plate. “Try one. They’re amazing.”

“I was saving room for this delicious dinner.” She knocked his foot under the table. Accidentally?

“Just taste the buns.”

“Okay.” She took a little butter and passed the dish on to him.

“Patty?” Mom asked. “What do you plan on doing with your degree? Will you go on to graduate work?”

She’d just taken a bite of the roll and couldn’t answer until she swallowed. “I’d planned on working. I’d like to join a startup company, but that’s been put on hold.”

“Why?” Mac’s dad asked.

“My mother is going through chemo for breast cancer. I’ll be helping her out with her company.”

“I’m sorry about your mother.” His mom sat a little straighter. “She owns her own company?”

Patty nodded. “Murphy’s Maids.”

“Maids.” An appalled look crossed Mom’s face.

Mac set his hand on Patty’s leg, trying to give her support without snapping at his mother for her snobby attitude.

“Yes. It’s a cleaning service.” Patty’s shoulders straightened and she turned to Granddad. “My mom remembers cleaning one of the houses you built in the newer section of North Oaks. Someone named the Declans owned it.”

“Housecleaning,” his mom said under her breath.

Grandma frowned at his mother.

Joe smiled. “That house was a good plan.”

“I remember lots of woodwork.”

“Your mother had you cleaning houses?” Hannah asked.

“Not when I was young.” Patty shrugged. “My grandmother wasn’t around anymore, so if I didn’t have school, I would go to my mom’s jobs.”

Patty wiggled in her chair.

Mac glared at his mother. How dare his parents make Patty feel—less. There must be a way to change the subject.

Luckily Granddad asked, “Shirley, have you had any interesting cases lately?”

“Well, I can’t name any names, but,” and his mom started talking about the custody battle that was all about spousal support and breaking up a trust.

“I’m sorry about my mother,” Mac whispered to Patty. “I hate her ...”

“Condescension?” Patty asked.

“Yeah that. And her elitism.”

“It’s not like I haven’t experienced it before. The worst was in high school. My mother cleaned one of the *in clique* girl’s home. They teased me all the time.”

“That had to hurt.”

She pushed around the chicken on her plate. “I finally learned to be proud of my mom. She had her own company.”

He wanted to hug her. To take her away from the jerks he called his parents. “When dinner is done, we’ll get out of here.”

“Thanks.”

They waited through the meal. And clearing dishes. And then dessert. And Granddad still hadn’t said why he’d asked them to dinner.

As they ate Grandma’s amazing peach pie, Mac’s father finally asked, “Was there a reason you wanted us to get together?”

Joe smiled. “Isn’t being family a good enough reason?”

Mac relaxed. Was that all this dinner was about?

His Dad pointed at Granddad with his wineglass. “I thought you were announcing your retirement and selling the company.”

His aunt, uncle and mother nodded their heads.

Mac's head jerked up. *Selling the company?*

"No. I'm not selling the company." Joe looked down the table. "Michael will be taking over."

At least that was something.

His dad rolled his eyes. "Michael should want more from his career."

"That's not why I wanted us to have dinner." Joe set a hand on Dad's arm. "We don't see each other often. Addy and I discussed having Sunday dinner at least once a month."

"Once a month?" his uncle asked. "That would be nice."

"Maybe even twice." Joe stared at the far end of the table where Grandma sat. "Depending on whether Addy wants to cook."

"Is something wrong, Grandma?" Mac blurted out.

"Just getting old." His grandmother smiled. "And I want to spend time with my family, with the people I love."

Patty swiped at her cheek. Hell, she was crying.

Mac leaned in and whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Can we leave? I need to see my family."

"Absolutely." He pushed back his chair and helped Patty with hers. "Patty needs to get to her parents' house. I'm sorry to eat and run."

He made the rounds and said goodbye. When he hugged his mother, he whispered, "You embarrassed me and you embarrassed Patty. I thought you taught me better than that."

His mother's mouth dropped open.

Patty hugged Joe and Addy and thanked them for dinner, but she only waved to the rest of his family.

"Trouble, let's go." The dog shimmied out from under the table where he'd been sitting next to Granddad's chair. His grandfather had probably been feeding him chicken from his plate.

As they got in the car, Mac let out a sigh. “I can’t believe my mom. I should never have put you through that. Sorry.”

She waved off his apology and held up her hand.

He tapped his finger on the steering wheel. Staying quiet wasn’t his style. He wanted to yell, argue or at least express how sorry he was.

He waited through a couple miles and couldn’t stand it anymore. “What are you thinking?”

She shook her head as if she’d been in deep thought. “I was thinking about what Joe and Addy said.”

“What?”

“After your dad asked why they wanted everyone together.”

“I don’t remember much past the good news my grandparents are healthy.”

“They wanted to be with the people they love.” When he glanced over, her eyes were troubled. “It made me wish I’d spent the day with my family.”

“But you’re going there now, right?”

“Yes. But how many more years will I have with my parents? Or even my brother, not that he’s around much.”

“Where’s your brother?” Had he known she had a brother?

“He’s older. He went to Mankato State and stayed in that area. Pete’s not that far away, but he hasn’t made much effort to help Mom with her treatments. At least he’ll be there tonight.”

“So the burden has fallen on you and your dad.”

“It’s not a burden,” she snapped.

“I get it. But you’re handling a lot.”

“It’s what you do for love, right? If it was your grandfather or grandmother going through what my mother is going through, you’d be there.”

“Yes.” But it was interesting that she hadn’t said his parents. He loved Mom and Dad. He just didn’t *like* them much. Would he help his parents if they were going through something like Patty’s Mom?

He let out a deep sigh.

Yes, he would help. If for no other reason than his grandparents would expect it of him.

He looked for parking around her apartment, but nothing was available. “I forgot how bad parking is here.”

“Just drop me off.” She gathered her purse, turned and petted his dog. “Bye, Trouble.”

Mac parked illegally across a driveway. “I should walk you to your door.”

She unsnapped her seatbelt. “I’m perfectly capable of getting there on my own. Thank you for picking me up.”

She started to open the door, but he caught her hand. “Hang on.”

He tugged her so they met over the gearshift. “Thank you for coming with me.”

Cupping her face, he kissed her. It was as awkward as it was thrilling. He couldn’t get enough of her taste, her scent, and the way she moaned as their kiss grew hot. He wanted to strip off her clothes and get naked with her.

He tried to get closer but was stymied by his car. Finally pulling away, he grinned at the glazed look in her eyes. “We could go to my place.”

She shook her head, as if to clear it. “I can’t.”

“Please tell me that’s regret in your voice.”

She stroked his face. “Yes, but I need to see my family.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“Project team meeting.”

“Tuesday?”

She sighed. “I’m cleaning your office.”

He didn't even ask about Wednesday. She would be cleaning the Birch Street house. "What about Friday or this weekend?"

"We'll figure something out." She pressed a brief kiss on his lips. "See you around?"

"Absolutely." He got out of his car and stood in the open door, watching her walk to her building. She waved before unlocking the door.

He waved back and then reluctantly slid into his car, not sure what he would do with the rest of his day. For once, he didn't want to work.

He could return to his grandparents' house, but his family might still be there. That was a no go.

He could call his best friend, Derrick, and see if he could wrangle an invitation to watch football at his house. Mac had helped haul Derrick's big ass TV into his apartment.

But none of those ideas appealed to him.

He wanted to be with Patty.

Instead, he headed his car north to his apartment.

For the first time in a relationship, he was the person pushing to see each other. It had always been the girl, whoops, woman, nagging when they would see each other. He rolled his shoulder, but his irritation didn't ease.

He didn't like the idea he was needy. Hell, had Patty even agreed they were dating?

Being with her had disaster written all over it. But, damn, on Tuesday when she cleaned, he would be at the office. Then he would sort out his feelings.

CHAPTER SIX



Patty pulled into a parking spot in front of the MacBain offices. Mom had talked to Holly, another one of her former cleaners, so this would be the last time Patty needed to clean here. She was meeting Maggie and Holly, would give Holly the necessary paperwork, but Maggie would walk Holly through what needed to be done.

Since Patty was early, she would finish the last of the quarterly cleaning she hadn't completed the Saturday she and Maggie worked.

The office lights were on and the door unlocked. When she headed to the security system, it was already disarmed. "Maybe Maggie is early too."

Back in one of the offices a phone rang. And Mac answered. A charge went through her. Mac was here.

On Sunday he'd listed off possible nights they could get together, but their schedules hadn't meshed. And over the last two days, she'd come up with logical reasons they shouldn't date. She was incredibly busy. So was Mac. She was a vendor. Her mother's company could be affected if she and Mac were in a relationship.

It was plain he wanted sex. And after kissing him, so did she. But she couldn't risk it. She didn't hook up. That was not who she was.

Instead of interrupting Mac, she left her bags in the utility room and picked up the cleaning supply bucket. She had time

to clean the breakroom lights and vents. She hadn't gotten to them the first day they'd cleaned.

She positioned a ladder under the fluorescent band of lights and began wiping them clean. The flying dust made her sneeze but she powered through.

"You need a mask." Mac's voice came from the doorway.

She sneezed again. "I didn't bring any."

"Hang on." He disappeared.

She kept cleaning. The faster she worked, the faster she could escape the dust. And Mac.

When he walked back in, she said, "Your previous cleaners must not have cleaned your light fixtures—ever."

"Well, there's a reason they aren't here anymore." Mac handed her a mask. "Try this."

"Really?"

He held it out. "We use them for sanding."

"I'll look so elegant." But she climbed down the steps and pulled it on.

"You look good in anything." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

"What are you doing here?" The mask muffled her voice.

"Waiting for you." He pushed the mask off her face and kissed her.

Any arguments they shouldn't be together floated away. She got with the kiss quickly. Kissing Mac was as good as she'd remembered.

She heard a bell. Mac pulled away and muttered, "Damn."

Female voices could be heard in the office entrance. Patty pushed back her hair. Yikes! Half her hair hung out of her ponytail.

She ripped out the binder and twisted her hair into a messy bun.

“Stop in my office,” Mac whispered as he headed for the door. Then he winked.

Her face went so hot, she had to hope her blush cooled fast. Blowing out a breath, she met the cleaners in the utility room. “Hi, Maggie. And you must be Holly.”

“I am.” The short, wiry woman with her brown hair pulled into a low ponytail shook her hand. “You look like your mother.”

“Thank you.” Patty handed Holly a folder. “Here’s the paperwork we need.”

“Is it okay if I bring this home? After your mother called, I told her I’d like to see her. I can drop this off with her on Thursday.”

“Doesn’t she have a treatment Thursday?” Patty asked.

“She does.” Holly smiled. “I went through chemo five years ago. I asked if I could sit with her at the clinic.”

And Mom had said yes? “That’s wonderful. Maggie will walk you through the normal cleaning in here. I’ll finish the light fixtures I didn’t clean the first time we were here.”

“Thanks. They’re filthy,” Maggie said.

“Awful.” She headed to her ladder and dirty lights. One thing kept her going, Mac wanted to see her in his office.

That sounded way too intriguing.

She finished the light fixtures and vents and put away the supplies. Stopping in the bathroom, she brushed the dust out of her hair and changed her messy bun into a ponytail. She couldn’t do anything about her ratty paint-spattered sweatshirt that had a hole in the armpit.

This was not the way she wanted to look the next time she saw Mac, but she hadn’t expected him to be at the office.

“I’m heading out,” she said to Maggie and Holly. “Is there anything you need, or do you have questions?”

“We’re good.” Maggie checked with Holly who nodded. “Supplies should last at least a month. If not, I’ll let you

know.”

“Good. It was great to meet you, Holly.”

Patty slowly walked down the hall. She had mentally prepared herself to stop whatever was going on between her and Mac. One look, one kiss, and she’d caved. Big time.

When she stopped in his doorway, his back was to her. His shirt stretched over all the lovely muscles she’d touched. That thought had heat rushing through her body.

“Hey.” Her voice cracked a little.

He glanced up, a grin on his face. Then he stared at her jacket. “You’re leaving?”

“I am. Maggie and Holly are still here.”

He moved from behind his desk and stood in front of her. “How are you? How was your mom on Sunday?”

The heat between them ramped up. “My mom was good. Still not eating, but she loved having my brother there.”

“And you.” He ran a finger along her cheek. “How are you?”

She shivered. “I’m ... confused.”

It was the easiest way to explain what she was feeling, but confusion didn’t explain this pull she felt toward Mac.

He stepped closer. She backed up and bumped into the door.

Mac tapped the door shut.

Her breath rasped in her ears.

“Confused.” He dragged out the word, making it sound like sin and seduction encased in a six foot hunk of man. “I’m not confused. I’m attracted to you.”

“Why?” she blurted out.

He used his finger and tipped her face so she looked him in the eyes. “You fascinate me. And I can’t stop thinking about you. That kiss ...”

She fascinated him? “About that—”

Dragging her closer, he covered her mouth with his.

Everything inside her melted from the heat flaming through her. His tongue touched and stroked while his hands explored. She wrapped her arms around his neck, needing to hang on.

Her back was against the cool door, but Mac’s body generated enough heat to melt her clothes off. She clutched his shoulder muscles, digging in with her fingers. His erection bumped her stomach. *Oh, my.*

No one had ever kissed her like this. She’d wondered if Sunday had been a fluke. Nope. This was no fluke. This was dangerous.

One of Mac’s hands pushed under her sweatshirt and his fingers caressed her skin, covering her breast.

She wanted more. Wanted him.

Breaking off the kiss, she gasped, “Wait. Mac, stop.”

“I can’t seem to stop myself.” He rested his head on her forehead. “Are you okay?”

Still confused. “I ... we barely know each other.”

His eyes were dilated. “I know some great ways to change that.”

She dropped her arms. “I’m sorry. I’m not leading you on, but ...”

He stepped back and they were no longer touching. “Did I misinterpret something?”

She blew out a breath. “No. It’s ... I’m not ready for the next step.”

“Sleeping with me?” His voice had a deep growl that echoed in her core.

“Yes.”

He closed his eyes.

Cold, she wrapped her arms around her stomach. “I’m sorry.”

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Have you eaten dinner?”

A handful of last night’s popcorn probably wasn’t considered dinner. “No.”

“There’s a place a couple of blocks from here. Let me feed you.”

She looked at her sweatshirt and then touched her hair. “I look terrible.”

“Not to me.” He brushed dust out of her hair. “With the place I have in mind, it won’t matter.”

She should be keeping her distance, but Mac was so ... appealing. “Okay.”

MAC TRACKED Patty’s neon green car as she followed him to the bar and grill. Hard to miss her car.

Around Patty, he lost control. It was becoming painful. He adjusted his dick in his jeans. At least his erection was subsiding. Not the way that stupid little head wanted, but Patty was worth waiting for.

He found a spot in the crowded parking lot and waited as she parked. At least she hadn’t changed her mind.

Was that her appeal? She was a challenge? He had to work just to eat dinner with her. Every step forward was hard fought.

She joined him near the bar’s front door. “Are you sure I’m not too grungy?”

He put an arm around her shoulder and steered her inside. “Not in this place. It will be too dark to notice any dust.”

The place was as dark as he remembered. He waited for his eyes to adjust and then guided her into the main room, searching for an empty table. “Over there.”

The table had an empty beer pitcher and mugs on it. A server gave a wave, not looking at him.

Whoops. He recognized her. Becca, no Bev. She was why he hadn't been in the bar for a while.

They'd gone back to her place once. Once had been enough.

Bev swept up the dirty dishes, still not looking at him. "I'll be right back."

"Do you come here often?" Patty asked.

"No." Not anymore. Maybe they should go somewhere else.

Bev returned and wiped the table, dropping menus on the still wet surface. Then she looked at him. "Mac?"

"Hi, Bev." He opened his menu.

"That's all you're going to say?" Bev's voice carried over the buzz of the bar. "Just hi, Bev?"

Patty's eyes widened.

He set down the menu. "I think I said everything on the phone."

It had been a jerk move to tell her they weren't dating over the phone, but after their one beer-infused night together, she hadn't stopped calling. Hell, he didn't even know how she'd gotten his apartment phone number. He'd never given it to her.

"You're an ass," Bev said.

"Do you want us to leave?" he asked.

Bev looked at Patty. "Are you on a date?"

"Yes." Mac stood up. "Let's go, Patty."

Bev glanced over her shoulder and then stopped him. "Wait."

The bartender glared at Bev. Mac thought he was the manager or owner.

“If you leave, it will probably cost me my job,” Bev whispered.

“Then can we have a different server?” he asked.

“You’re stuck with me. And you’d better give me a big tip.” Bev shook back her hair. “What are you drinking?”

Mac didn’t trust her not to spit in his beer, but he didn’t want her to lose her job because of him. “I’ll have a Sam Adams.”

At least that would be in a bottle.

Bev turned toward Patty. “And you.”

Patty handed Bev her ID. “The same.”

Bev looked at Patty’s ID, rolled her eyes and dropped it on the table. Then she spun away and headed to the bar.

“Will she poison us?” Patty whispered.

“I was only worried about spit in my beer. Poison? Man, your mind is a crazy thing.”

“She acted like a woman scorned.”

“We went out once.” And they hadn’t gone out. They’d drunk too much and gone to her place. Sure, before that he’d flirted whenever he’d stopped at the bar, but he and Bev had only been together once.

Damn, this dinner might ruin his plans with Patty. He wanted her to come home with him tonight.

“Their burgers aren’t too bad.” He reopened the menu. “What looks good to you?”

She checked out the menu. “I’ll have the mushroom smothered chicken sandwich.”

“Mushrooms again?” He couldn’t stop his wince.

She laughed. “Yes.”

Bev dropped their beers off. In a frosty voice, she asked, “Do you know what you want?”

They gave their orders.

Bev whispered to Patty, “He’s hot but a real jerk.”

Then she pivoted on her heel and stomped away.

“Wow.” Patty shook her head. “What did you do?”

“I ... I didn’t call her.”

Patty tilted her head. “You slept with her.”

It wasn’t a question.

He swallowed. “We both had a lot to drink.”

“Hmmm.” Patty picked up her bottle and took a sip.

He took a pull of his beer. Didn’t taste tainted. “It didn’t mean anything. She didn’t mean anything.”

Patty held up her hand. “I don’t need the specifics.”

But he wanted to explain, except his explanation wouldn’t make him look very good. And he wanted her to think he had it all together. “I’m sorry I picked this bar.”

“I’ll bet you are.”

“First my parents show how little they think of my career, and now this.” He sighed. “Not the way to impress you.”

“Your parents are wrong.” She laid her hand on his. “Don’t let this go to your head, but I’m more impressed because you had to fight their expectations. I’m glad you had Joe.”

He flipped his hand over and entwined their fingers. “Thank you.”

He might not need her approval, but it felt good to receive it. And maybe all wasn’t lost between them. Maybe she would still come home with him.

As they waited for their food, they slipped into an easy conversation about the progress of the houses and her classes. They both relaxed.

“You’re easy to talk to,” he said.

“You too.”

Bev dropped off their food and left with a glare.

“I’m afraid to ask her for ketchup,” Patty whispered.

He solved the problem by taking a bottle from an empty table. “Here.”

“So where is Trouble?” she asked.

“At my apartment. Hopefully not chewing my sneakers.”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, he would. He’s destroyed a few pairs.”

She dipped a fry in the ketchup pool on her plate. “Isn’t living in an apartment hard on a large dog?”

“I thought about renting a house, but then I’d be pulled away from work too much.”

“Why?”

“Mowing. Shoveling.” He held up both hands. “I’d rather dedicate that time to work than something that needs to be repeated.”

“You could hire someone to do that.”

His mouth dropped open. “They’d revoke my man card.”

She laughed and gave him a long look. “I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“Care to expand on that thought?” he asked, leaning closer.

“Not on your life.”

They eased into a comfortable conversation while finishing their meals.

“Do you want another beer?” he asked.

“No. I need to study.”

He nodded at Bev and mimed writing a check. She shrugged. This was the last time he would visit this bar.

Bev dropped off their tab. “I hope you enjoyed your meal.”

“Thank you. It was good,” Patty said.

“Don’t let this guy fool you,” Bev said before heading to another booth.

Mac thought about forgetting her tip, but Joe's voice in his head had him leaving more than he normally would.

"That is one angry woman." Patty slid out of the booth.

He took her parka and helped her pull it on.

"Thanks." She looked over her shoulder. "I don't think anyone but my parents have ever helped with my coat."

"If nothing else, my family drilled manners into me." He set his hand on her lower back and guided her to the door. "Just think of the things I've exposed you to. Angry servers, disgusted parents, superior sisters."

"What more could a girl ask for?"

"Right." When he pulled open the door, the cold air slapped at them. "Feels like snow."

"It does."

He walked her to her butt ugly VW. Taking her hands, he backed her against the car door. "Can I convince you to come to my place?"

She tipped her head and looked him in the eye. "I can't."

Disappointed, he cupped her cheek and kissed her. She opened for him and their tongues found each other.

Heat blew through him and like earlier, his dick was ready for action. He tugged her closer, and her arms wrapped around his neck.

Coming up for air, his breath puffed out in a cloud. "I want you."

She rolled her hips. "I can tell."

He let his forehead rest on hers. "Can we get together tomorrow?"

"We're cleaning the Birch Street house."

"Right." And a reminder that his first priority wasn't getting laid. It was finishing the houses and proving to Granddad that he was ready to take over the company.

He stepped away from Patty and didn't try to plan another date.

"We should be there no later than three," she said. "Does that still work?"

"Yes. The crew will be gone."

"Good." She smiled. "Thank you for dinner."

He waved and watched her drive away.

It was probably for the best that she hadn't come back to his place. He was forgetting his priorities. But boy did he have regrets.

PATTY CHECKED THE TIME. "Where the hell are you, Fran?"

Fran had promised to be at the apartment no later than two-thirty. It was three o'clock.

Patty paced their small living room. She would give Fran ten more minutes and then she'd leave. Cleaning on her own would take twice the time.

And one of her profs had assigned a massive amount of reading she had to start on. This was going to be a long night.

When the ten minutes were up, she pulled on her coat and headed to the door. She'd made a mistake hiring Fran.

As she locked the door there were footsteps on the stairs.

"Pats, are you leaving?" Fran called.

"I have to go clean." She tried to keep the bite out of her voice, but failed.

"Aren't we going together?"

Patty turned from the doorway and crossed her arms. "You're late."

Fran checked her watch. "I thought we were leaving at three."

“No. That’s when I wanted to be there. And it’s three-fifteen.” Had she given Fran the wrong time? “We were supposed to leave at two-thirty.”

“Oh, shoot. I’m sorry. Let me throw my stuff in my room and pull on cleaning clothes.”

Patty unlocked the door and held it open for Fran. Then waited in the hallway. Could she have given Fran the wrong time? She swore she remembered Fran confirming she would be home by two-thirty.

“I’m ready.” Fran came out, pulling on her jacket. She wore jeans and a cut off sweatshirt that exposed her stomach. Her hair was pulled into a perky side ponytail.

“You might get cold,” Patty said as she relocked the door.

“I’ll be fine.” Fran flipped her ponytail as they walked down the stairs. “I’m hoping that hunky Mac will be around.”

Patty hadn’t told Fran about kissing Mac. It had been nice to keep that to herself. “I have the codes to get in the house. I don’t expect Mac to be at the site.”

Fran pouted. “I was hoping.”

“Let’s go. We’re late, and I have pages and pages to read tonight.” She unlocked her car. It already held their cleaning supplies and equipment. “Did you get the reading done?”

“Some. I’ll do the rest before class.”

“But it’s so many pages.”

“I know.”

Patty snapped her seatbelt on and turned the car to 35W. They were almost an hour behind schedule. She should have done her reading while waiting for her roommate. Or called Cali or Sam to work with her on this first construction job.

Fran turned the radio dial and “Material Girl” blared out. “I love this. Did you bring a radio so we have music when we clean?”

“I brought my Walkman.”

“Oh.” There was Fran’s pout again. “I didn’t think to bring mine.”

“There might be a radio on site.”

“Or we could trade off.” Fran tapped out the beat of the song on the dash. “You could use it the first hour and I could use it the last.”

“You think this will only take two hours?”

“Isn’t that what we talked about?”

“No. I expect *we’ll* be there four hours.”

“Oh.”

Other than the music, they drove in silence. Patty eased her car in front of the house, avoiding the worst of the ruts. “Let’s unload.”

Fran pulled out the big broom/mops and brushes from her side of the car while Patty picked up the buckets of supplies.

At the door, she entered the lockbox code and pulled out the key. After unlocking the door, she carefully put it back. She didn’t want to lose it.

“Can you bring up the shop vac?” Patty asked. Her mother had suggested she take the one from her parents’ house. With all the nails and screws, she and her mother had worried they would destroy a regular vacuum.

“I guess.”

Patty ignored the way Fran dragged her feet as she headed to the car to pull out the last piece of equipment. Time to clean.

“We’ll start upstairs,” she said once Fran came back in the house. “Hopefully any dust we stir up will settle down here and then we’ll clean it up.”

Fran stood with her hand on her hips. “I guess I didn’t think it would be this—big.”

Patty wondered if Fran had listened to anything she’d said. “Let’s haul everything upstairs.”

She'd better explain again why they were cleaning. "We'll be getting the sawdust and dirt off everything. Our main focus is cleaning the woodwork so they can stain. But that also means cleaning the floors so Mac's crews don't kick up any dust."

"I get it." Fran spotted a radio and brought it with them. "Score."

Patty had planned that they would each take a room, but she didn't trust Fran. "Let's start in the master closet."

Patty led the way. Fran plugged in the radio and found her favorite pop station.

After donning masks, they brushed the walls. Then Patty vacuumed the walls and floor while Fran wiped the baseboards and trim with tack cloth. They both cleaned the cabinetry.

"One room done."

Fran ripped off her mask and sneezed. "This will take forever."

Which was why Patty had wanted to be here almost an hour ago. "Bathroom next."

They bumped into each other in the smaller room but got it done and moved into the master bedroom.

"I want to live here." Fran sank onto the window seat.

"It's pretty great." Patty handed her a broom. "Same drill."

They would need one of the ladders Mac had promised to leave on site to clean the ceiling coving. She ran downstairs and found a step ladder in a library. With lots and lots of bookshelves. She groaned at the thought of getting all those surfaces clean. Now she wished the house had a phone so she could get one more person here to work. Two would be even better.

"We've got to pick up the pace, or we'll be here until two in the morning," Patty said.

"I'm working as fast as I can." Fran flipped up the music. "I love this song."

At least they couldn't talk over the music. Patty wiped walls, vacuumed and cleaned the coving while Fran took on the window seat, baseboards and framing for the doors.

When the music shut off, Patty had just finished the walls. She turned so fast, she had to grab the ladder rung to stay on.

"I thought you'd be a lot farther." Mac stalked into the room. His gray eyes looked more like steel tonight. His jaw was clenched. Trouble stood by his side.

"We started later than planned." Patty finished the last section of the coving and came down the ladder. She left her mask on, hoping it would hide the blush she felt burning her face. "Hey, Trouble."

The dog came over and she rubbed his head.

Fran pulled off her mask and stretched, showing off her belly. "This is a lot of work."

Mac nodded but turned to Patty. "Are you sure you can finish?"

She chewed her lip. She wanted to pretend they would but didn't want to lie. "I'd feel better if I could get to a phone and call another person to work tonight."

"Come on. I've got a car phone in the truck." Mac headed out the door. "Trouble, come."

"You have a car phone? I've heard of them," Fran said. "Can I see yours?"

"Fran, please start on the next bedroom," Patty said, wanting to roll her eyes. "I'll join you as soon as I can."

"Oh. Umm, sure." Fran flipped her hair, but Mac was already stomping down the stairs.

Outside, Trouble moved to a pile of construction debris and sniffed around. As she and Mac walked out to his truck, he snapped, "I thought you said you could handle this job."

"I can, but you left a few things out," she lashed out at him. "Like they put three walls of bookshelves in a library."

And a huge closet of cabinetry in the master. That would have been nice to know.”

“Oh.” He looked a little sheepish. “Those changes happened right after you went through the house.”

“That’s a lot of woodwork to clean.”

“I guess you haven’t seen the built-ins in the kitchen and dining room?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He held the passenger door for her, then moved around to the driver’s door. After starting the car, he handed her the phone. “Do you know the number?”

Shoot. She should have brought her file. Next time she would leave it in her car. “I’ll ... get it from my mother.”

She punched in the numbers and waited. Her dad answered.

“Hey Dad, is Mom still awake?”

“She is.”

“I need a phone number for Cali. Any chance you can have her find it or have her tell you where it’s is?”

“Sure. Hang on.”

As she waited, she turned to Mac. “I’m glad you have a car phone.”

“It helps.” He frowned. “Why were you late? Every other time we’ve made plans you’ve been on time or early.”

She considered throwing Fran under the bus. Instead, she stared at the house. “There was a misunderstanding on what time I told Fran we were leaving.”

He frowned. “I can’t imagine *you* gave her the wrong time.”

Neither could she.

“Here’s the number,” her dad said.

Mac handed her a scrap of paper and pencil. At least he was prepared. She wrote and repeated the number. “Thanks, Dad. Love to you and Mom.”

As she dialed Cali’s number, Mac stared at her. At her mouth. It made her remember his lips on hers.

When Cali answered, Patty blinked and refocused on the call. “Hey Cali, any chance you can come work at the construction site now? I’m sorry this is such short notice.”

“Sure. I’ve got time. And I could use the money.”

“Thank you. Do you need directions?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll give them to her.” Mac held out his hand for the phone.

“Cali, I’ll let you talk to the contractor. Mac will give you directions.”

She mouthed *thank you* to Mac and slipped out of the truck before she could do something foolish like kiss him.

MAC HUNG UP THE PHONE. He didn’t want to delay the staining, but damn, what if Patty didn’t get everything cleaned?

He’d actually thought he could count on her.

She was right that the built-in changes would add extra time to the cleanup.

But that wasn’t the problem. When Patty had told him there’d been a misunderstanding on the time, she’d done that thing. She hadn’t looked him in the eye. And she always did.

It was like she was lying. Was Patty ruining his chance of proving to Granddad that he could run MacBain?

Instead of going into the house, he and Trouble checked the progress on the other five houses. By the time he’d made

the rounds, he'd relaxed. Another car was parked in front of the house. Good. If they worked all night, so be it.

So why did he want to volunteer to help her? And why did he think he owed her an apology? He hated apologizing.

Inside, music blared over the sound of the vacuum. It must be this new person, Cali, running a shop vac on the stairs. Patty wiped the banister spindles and Fran cleaned the handrail.

They must have finished upstairs. He checked his watch. Almost seven. There was hope.

Fran noticed him, smiled and stretched. Why was she at a construction site with her belly showing?

He had no interest in Patty's roommate. If he'd met both women in a bar, he'd have gone for the most obvious one—Fran. But since meeting Patty, he couldn't stop thinking about her.

"Patty?" he yelled over the blare of some pop rock song. When it came on in his truck, he always changed the station. "Got a minute?"

Patty didn't look up until Fran gave her a nudge and nodded at him.

He waved.

Patty skirted around Cali and joined him in the entry.

Between the vacuum and music, he couldn't hear himself think. Taking her arm, he led her into the library off the entry and closed the French door. It didn't completely cut the noise, but it helped.

"I thought my crews were bad, but you're all going to ruin your hearing," he said.

She laughed. "Probably."

He stepped closer. He could pretend it was so they could hear each other, but he just wanted to touch her. Hell, he wanted to kiss her ... and more.

“I should have let you know about the additional cabinetry.” He stroked her cheek. “Sorry. I’ll ... why don’t I provide pizza for you and your crew?”

She laid her hand on his but didn’t push him away. “I should have thought of getting food. I will next time.”

“I’ll call it in, pick it up and bring it back for you.”

“Thanks.”

They didn’t move, just stared at each other. Bending, he kissed her. Not the way he wanted, just a brief kiss that stirred him up. “I’ll be back.”

After the three women decided on their toppings, he went to his truck, called in the order and included a pizza for himself.

He’d have dinner with Patty. Date number two.

“HE KISSED YOU.” Fran pointed a finger at Patty.

Patty moved to the final spindle. “Yes.”

“You said you weren’t dating.” Fran shoved her hair over her shoulder.

“Things changed.” She stared at the two story entry. “Those walls will be a bear to clean.”

“I wanted him.” Fran grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

Patty put her hands up. She’d never fought with a girlfriend over a guy. “Fran, he’s making all the moves. I didn’t go after him, *he* kept asking me out.”

“But ...” Fran frowned and eyeballed Patty. “I’m ...”

“You’re prettier.”

Cali unplugged the shop vac. “Get over it, Fran. He only looks at Patty.”

“Let’s start in the dining room.” Patty led the way.

Cali took the shop vac and Fran the radio.

Fran always got the guy she set her sights on. Would Patty have to watch her make a play for Mac, or would Fran give up?

Fran had stretched, preened and flipped her hair. Mac hadn't drooled or even watched.

The dining room now had built-in cabinetry. She took one of the broom/mops, not sure what to call it, and wiped the walls. Cali grabbed the other and started on the opposite wall.

"Fran, can you vacuum?" Patty asked.

"Fine." Pouting, Fran plugged in the vacuum.

After they cleaned the walls and floor, they all took a section of cabinets. It was fun wiping away the sawdust and construction debris and then wondering what color stain they would use.

"Pizza's here." Mac stood in the doorway, his hands resting on the framework about his head. His Henley shirt exposed a small amount of his tan stomach, and a line of dark hair ran down the lower center of his abs.

Trouble bumped his nose into Patty's leg. "Hey there, Trouble."

Fran stared at Mac.

"Let's eat," Patty said.

They washed with water. Patty muttered, "I wish I'd brought soap."

Mac bumped against her. "This is the manly way. The construction way."

She dried her hands with paper towels. "You don't have any women working on your crew?"

"No." He took the paper towel roll from her. "Wait, yes. My electrician's daughter works for him."

"You should have more than that."

"Probably."

They gathered around the sawhorse table and pizza boxes. Trouble settled under the plywood looking for morsels.

Patty made sure she stood next to Mac. She didn't want Fran to get too close, so sue her.

"This is great pizza." Fran stared at Mac. "Thank you."

"Patty liked it when we had it a couple of weeks ago." He opened the second box. "Now this is real pizza, not that garbage with mushrooms."

The pizza he'd opened was covered in meat. He dropped a chunk of ham to Trouble, who snapped it out of the air.

Patty pulled a mushroom off her slice and waved it at him. "Best topping ever."

"Gross."

He'd bought a six pack of Coke and the cans sizzled as they opened the tops.

"This is nice of you," Fran tried again to get Mac's attention.

"I needed to apologize to Patty."

"No need," Patty said.

"You didn't know about all of the woodwork," he said.

Cali asked, "How many houses do you have going up?"

Mac gave her the rundown, and Patty had a chance to eat her first slice and start on a second.

"I'm heading out." Mac wiped his hands on a paper towel and boxed his all meat pizza. "With the three of you here, looks like you'll get things done."

"We will." Patty might not get all her assigned reading in, but she would meet her commitment to Mac.

"Good." He pulled on his jacket. "Can you walk out with me?"

As she and the dog followed him to the door, she could almost feel the darts from Fran piercing her back. "What's up?"

He pulled her close with his free hand. “I wanted to say goodnight.”

This time she was ready for his kiss. Ready and wanting. She clung to his back as the kiss exploded.

When they separated, they both dragged in deep breaths.

“Go out with me this weekend. Friday. Saturday. Hell, spend the weekend with me.”

He wasn't just asking her out; he wanted to sleep with her.

She thought about all the things she had to do. How full her life was. She should say no. This job was interfering with her studying. And she wanted to spend more time with her mother.

Instead, she said, “Yes.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Mac checked the pot roast in the crockpot. He stabbed the potatoes and carrots with a fork and then sampled both. Grandma's next instructions said to turn the temp down to low so they wouldn't get soggy.

Inviting Patty to dinner was probably a mistake. He'd sworn he wouldn't get involved with her. That she would pull his focus away from his work.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her. Maybe being with her would even him out. Then he'd be able to focus on the houses instead of putting himself in her path so they could be together. Having dinner with her should ease this ... obsession he had over Patty.

As he tugged on his coat, he checked the small table in the kitchen one more time. Everything was set. He'd even found a couple of squat, half-burned candles. They might have come from a woman he'd dated a couple of years ago. She'd loved burning candles.

His sheets were changed. He'd bought a new toothbrush, just in case. It was in the medicine cabinet. He didn't want it sitting in the bathroom and putting pressure on her.

The apartment was clean, and Trouble was spending Saturday night with Granddad and Grandma. When he'd pick up the crockpot of food, he'd asked them to take care of Trouble. Granddad had given him a long look.

It had been embarrassing, but he hadn't taken back his request. He wanted time alone with Patty.

He drove his Mustang. Picking Patty up in his truck didn't sound classy, so he drove the car. He wanted to show her he was more than what his parents called blue collar.

He circled the block twice before finding a parking spot near Patty's apartment. He wedged the Mustang between another car and a no parking zone. Hopefully the cops wouldn't ticket the car before he ran the block and a half to Patty's apartment and escorted her back.

He followed someone through the security door and climbed the stairs to her door. The scent of pizza filled the hallway.

He swept his hair back and tugged on his leather jacket. Then he knocked.

Fran opened the door and hung on the frame. "Hi, Mac. You're looking good. Real good."

"Hi. I'm here for Patty." He kept hoping Fran would get the idea he wasn't interested.

"Come on in." She partially blocked the doorway.

"Thanks." Instead of brushing against her, he held out a hand until Fran stepped backward.

"Patty," Fran called.

"Almost ready," Patty said from a room down the hall.

Mac pulled her jacket from the peg next to the door.

"Where are you two going?" Fran asked, her finger twisting her blonde hair.

"Dinner." Fran didn't need to know where they were going.

Patty came out of a room stuffing her keys into a purse. He'd never seen her carry a purse, only a backpack.

"Hi." She smiled.

He grinned. Seeing her made him ... happy.

She wore a blue sweater that hugged her curves. Her dark jeans cupped her fabulous ass, and she wore boots that had her

head coming up to his shoulders.

“Stunning.” He held her jacket.

She turned to let him slip it on. “Thanks.”

Fran made a disgusted noise.

“Enjoy the game,” Patty said to her roommate. “Say hi to Cali and Sam.”

“Right.”

As they walked out the door, Mac heard the locks clack. “I have a feeling she doesn’t like us dating,” he whispered.

Patty glanced at the door. “She was fine helping me dress for dinner at your grandparents. Then she met you.”

“No sooner met that they looked.” Maybe that would impress her.

“What?”

“Shakespeare, I think,” Mac said. “Had to memorize stuff for school.”

“Are you saying you’re interested in Fran?”

“No!” He stopped her on the steps and stood so they were eye to eye. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because the full quote is ‘no sooner met that they looked, no sooner looked but they loved.’” Distress filled her voice. “I know there’s more, but that’s all I remember.”

He blew a breath through his lips. This night wasn’t starting out like he’d planned. “It would only be true when applied to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on.”

He took her shoulders. “I have no interest, none, in Fran. Just you.”

“Don’t even pretend you were interested in me at our first meeting.”

“Okay. You’re right.” He chuckled. “I was still mad at Granddad, but you stood up to me. Made me pay attention to

you.”

Her eyebrow arched up, but she didn't comment on his confession.

As they walked out of the building, snow was falling. Big fat flakes covered the cars parked on the street.

“Wow.” She tipped her head up and let the huge flakes cover her face. “It's beautiful.”

“You are.” He brushed the snow off and kissed her, licking the cold flakes from her lips.

“Mac.” That was all she said.

They stared at each other. Snow lingered in her hair.

Being with Patty felt—right.

He took her hand as they walked to the car. They should probably both be wearing gloves. He had some in the truck but not his car.

He settled her in the car and looked for his scraper. Apparently that was in the truck too.

He turned the car on and let the wipers push things away. Then he brushed off the back window.

“First real snowfall,” she said as he started the car. “I haven't paid any attention to the weather. Are we supposed to get much?”

“I haven't either.” He flipped on a station that reported on the weather and pulled away from the curb.

“So where are we eating?” she asked, holding her fingers in front of the vent.

“It's a surprise.”

They talked a little. Listened to the weatherman say they could expect two to four inches of snow.

When he took the exit near the housing development, she asked, “Are we eating in one of the houses you're building?”

“Not a chance.”

“Then the pizza place.”

“Nope.” He smiled as she kept guessing.

When he pulled into the apartment garage, she went quiet. He parked in his assigned stall next to his truck. “I thought we could eat at my place.”

“You cooked?”

“Sort of?” He played with the ends of her hair. “My grandmother put something together for me.”

“Oh.” She chewed her lip.

“Are you okay with this? Eating at my place?” He regrouped. “It’s probably better than being on the road with the people who’ve forgotten how to drive in snow.”

“Right. Sure.” She took a deep breath and opened her car door. “What’s for dinner?”

He locked his car and took her hand. He liked holding her hand. “Pot roast.”

“Comfort food on a snowy night.”

In the apartment he hung her jacket in the closet.

“It smells good,” she said.

“My place isn’t much.” He tapped his finger on his thigh. “I wanted to be close to the housing development.”

“You are that.” She wandered into the living room.

He had an old leather sofa he’d had when he’d been at the U and as big a TV as he could afford a couple of years ago. A desk anchored the other corner of the room.

Even the little bit of Patty’s apartment he’d seen felt more like a home than his place.

“Where’s Trouble?”

“At a sleepover with Granddad.”

She laughed. “A sleepover?”

Because Mac wanted a sleepover—with Patty.

“I have wine. Would you like a glass?”

“Yes please.”

He pulled the cork. Damn, he should have let the red wine, what did his parents always say, breathe? Well, it could breathe in the time it took for him to turn on the oven and put in the bread wrapped in foil.

He was a beer drinker. There wasn't any need to let a beer breathe. But tonight he was trying to be classy.

He poured two glasses. Hopefully she wouldn't notice they didn't match. At least he knew not to pour it farther than the bell of the wineglass.

She stared at his bookshelf. His diploma. “You graduated summa cum laude.”

“Yes.” He detoured to his cassette player and hit *play*. His Marvin Gaye cassette played softly in the background.

“Didn't your honors impress your parents?” Patty asked.

“My grandparents, yes.” He stiffened his spine. “My parents figured anyone could do that with a business degree. It wasn't law school after all.”

“What were their undergraduate degrees?”

“Mom's was English and Dad's journalism.”

“And did they graduate summa?”

He chuckled. “Only cum laude.”

“They're idiots. Not because of their grades but because of the way they treat you.”

“I wish ...”

She waited. “Yes?”

“I wish I didn't care what they thought. I wish it didn't matter.” Their evening was veering off his plan. He held up his glass. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

They sipped the wine. It tasted good. The liquor store owner had helped him pick it out.

“Nice,” she said.

“Are you ready to eat?”

“Yes.”

He unplugged the crock pot and brought it to the table. “Hang on, I have bread warming.”

“This is wonderful.” She opened the pot. “Do you have a knife and spoon?”

“I ...” He fumbled around looking for a pot holder.

After pulling out the bread, he set it on the table. Then he found a sharp knife and a spoon. He’d had women over for dinner before. But he’d fed them pizza or used the community grill and cooked steaks. He shouldn’t be this much of a klutz.

Was it because she was different? He’d have to think about that.

“This just falls apart.” Patty placed meat on his plate and took about half the amount for herself. Then she added potatoes, carrots and peas to her plate. “It smells great.”

She handed him the spoon and he served himself. “Grandma put everything together. Otherwise we probably would have had pizza, again.”

“That was nice of her.” She cut a small piece of meat and paired it with a slice of carrots. Chewing, she moaned. “Delicious.”

“No one makes pot roast like my grandmother.” Pride filled his voice.

“This would be a good dish to make for my mother on her bad days.”

“How’s she doing?”

Patty’s smile slipped away. “The treatments sap her strength, make her nauseous, and then she doesn’t eat.”

Boy, he sure knew how to show a girl a good time. Covering her hand, he said, “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

Tears hung in her eyes. “I wish I could do more.”

They pulled apart and kept eating, but he’d lost his appetite. He opened the foil on the bread and pulled out a couple of slices. “I made the bread.”

“Made the bread?” she teased.

“Well, I bought it, sliced it and put herbs in the butter.”

“This is better than if I’d made you dinner.” She took a bite of the bread. “It’s good too.”

Things smoothed out, and he didn’t say anything more to bring back Patty’s sadness. They talked, they ate, and when their legs bumped under the small table, desire blossomed.

He’d never thought about how small his galley kitchen was. He wasn’t here that much. As they cleaned the dishes, they brushed and bumped into each other.

“Sorry,” Patty mumbled.

“I’m not.” He took the plate out of her hand, set it in the sink and pulled her in for a kiss.

“My hands are dirty,” she protested.

He didn’t stop. Just pressed his mouth to hers and their tongues met in that now familiar way. She tasted of wine and comfort. And he wanted more.

He pulled away, his breath panting a little. “Please let me make love to you.”

“I was hoping you would ask.” She stood on her toes and kissed him.

All the blood rushed to his dick. He tugged her closer, setting his leg between hers.

When she arched back, he trailed kisses from her ear to her collarbone. She hummed, and he not only heard the sensuous sound but felt it with his lips.

“Dishes,” she moaned.

“They can wait.”

“Nope.” She wiggled away and he sighed.

Washing dishes had never been so fun. She stroked each plate and made sexy noises.

“Damn, I may not last,” he muttered, adjusting his jeans.

“I never knew cleaning could be foreplay.” She pulled off her sweater and revealed a tight shirt with skinny straps.

“Not fair,” he gasped.

“You can take off your sweater.”

Even though his hands were wet he reached behind his neck and pulled the sweater and T-shirt off.

Her wet soapy hands covered his chest.

“Two can play that game.” He tugged up her shirt and found a lacy bra. Dipping his hands in the soapy water, he covered her stomach and slid his hands around to her back and unclipped her bra.

Patty let it slip off her arms and he kicked it aside.

“My, my, my,” he whispered. “You’re gorgeous.”

When he smoothed his wet hands over her breasts, she arched back, thrusting them toward him. Under his thumbs her nipples pebbled.

“Are we done with the dishes?” He squeezed the words out. “We have to be.”

“Yes.”

“Thank God.” That was all he needed. Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her to his bedroom.

Once he set her by the bed, he found the matches and lit the candle on his dresser.

She pushed off her jeans and socks and stood with her arms crossed. Her lip was caught between her teeth.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, feeling stronger every minute.

She nodded. “I’m not ... I haven’t done this much.”

“Are you on birth control?” he asked.

Even in the dim light, he watched her cheeks grow red. “Yes, but do you have condoms?”

“Yeah.”

He may not like it, but that was the new reality. He opened his end table and pulled out a couple, tossing them on the bed. Then he unsnapped his jeans and pushed them down his legs, toeing off his socks in the process.

He tossed their jeans on the chair then closed in on her.

“You’re beautiful.” Her ran his fingers along her arms, brushing the top of her breasts.

She dropped her arms, giving him access to her nipples.

He had to taste them. He took one nipple in his mouth while rolling her other one between his fingers.

She moaned as he pinched it.

He couldn’t hold off much longer. Cupping her butt, he set her on the bed. Then he covered her body with his. “Am I too heavy?”

“You’re wonderful.” Her hands explored his chest while he worked her breasts. Her hips rocked against him.

If she kept that up, he wouldn’t last. Rolling, he pulled her on top of him.

She bent and took his nipple in her mouth.

Too much. Hooking his thumbs in the sides of her underwear, he tugged them down, then rolled again and shoved his off. He tore open the condom and pulled it over his erection.

Gritting his teeth, he lifted her on top of him and gasped, “You’re in control.”

She straddled his thighs, and he filled his palms with her breasts. Easing down, she guided him into her body. “Yeeess.”

Her head tipped back and she rocked against him. Setting him on fire.

Knowing he was on the edge of his climax, Mac touched and rubbed where they were joined. “Come for me.”

She fell forward. Their hips rocked and clashed. It wasn’t pretty but every stroke took him higher.

Her body gripped his as she came. “Mac!”

He thrust hard and let go, calling her name.

Their breaths heaved together as Patty melted onto his chest. Using what little energy he had left, he caressed her back. “That was amazing. You’re amazing.”

She tipped her head toward him. “Amazing.”

“And you worried you didn’t have much experience.” He squeezed her butt. “Lady, you rocked my world.”

She ducked her head.

He inhaled and rolled so she lay on her side. Then he hauled himself off the bed and went to the bathroom to deal with the condom. When he looked in the mirror, he saw he wore a shit-eating grin.

Back in the bedroom he glanced out the window and the world was white. He climbed into bed and held out his arm. She set her head on his shoulder.

“I should get dressed so you can take me home.”

“It’s really snowing out there.” To prove his point, he got up and pushed back the curtains.

She sat up. “Oh, wow.”

“You don’t want us to skid off the road, right?” He let her curl against him again.

“Of course not.” She cuddled in. “I should let Fran know I won’t be home.”

“Wasn’t she going to a game? Is she home yet?”

Patty checked his alarm clock. "She's probably still at the game."

"Do you have an answering machine?" he asked.

"No."

He rolled and covered her body, his second wind coming. "Then we should stay right where we are. For safety's sake."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I believe you're right."

CHAPTER EIGHT



“I’ve got it.” Patty set down her slice of pumpkin pie and ran for the front door. It was a little swollen. She put her back into opening it. “Hi!”

Mac brushed the snow off his leather jacket and walked into the house. Trouble bounded in behind him.

“Hey, Trouble.” She scratched his head.

Mac bent close and whispered, “Hey, sexy.”

His deep voice sent a chill through her.

“Mac.” She wanted to scold him, but didn’t. Her family was in the family room watching a Thanksgiving football game.

Over the last two weeks, they’d barely been apart. She’d worried dating Mac would have her dropping too many of the balls she juggled, but even though she wasn’t getting much sleep, she had tons of energy.

She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Trouble sniffed everything. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Normal.” Mac closed the door using his hip. “Grandma outdid herself. Granddad kept feeding Trouble.” His dog’s head popped up at his name. “Yeah, you. And my parents ...” His voice trailed off. “Like I said, normal.”

“I’m sorry.” She kissed him.

“I didn’t expect anything else.” He cleared his throat. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Good. My brother brought his girlfriend. She’s lovely and helped Mom and me pull the food together. Dad even made the gravy. Peter had to set the table. Boy did he whine.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It was. Is.” She picked up her pie plate. “Do you want pie?”

“Sure.”

Patty nudged Trouble away from the counter and served Mac a slice.

“Thanks,” he said. “How’s your mom feeling?”

“They skipped her last treatment, so she could recover.” Patty bit her lower lip. “I think she wanted to enjoy the holiday.”

“I’m glad she did.” He took her hand. “Are you sure Trouble won’t be a problem?”

“I think my family will love him.” Patty changed the subject. “Before I drag you back to meet everyone, I wanted to confirm that my crew can still clean the next two houses tomorrow and Saturday?”

“Yes. You have through Sunday. No one’s working again until Monday.”

“Good. I’d like to get that out of the way and then start prepping for finals.”

“It looks like the house on Birch Street will close a week from Friday.”

“So the deep cleaning needs to be done by Thursday afternoon?”

“The final walk-through is scheduled for five PM. You’re sure you can handle it?”

“Absolutely. Enough work talk.” She handed him his pie. “Tell me something funny from your dinner.”

“Funny.” He snorted. “The turkey was resting on the island and Trouble decided to check it out. Before I could grab him,

he'd nosed the foil off the bird."

"Oh, my."

"At least he didn't pull it off the counter."

"It was good you were in the kitchen."

"My grandparents and brother were there. Everyone else was watching football. I'd rather be in the kitchen than with them."

Her heart ached for him. He was so decisive in every other area but dealing with his parents. "If I had invited you to dinner, would you have come?" she asked.

He laughed and his eyelids went to half-mast. "Around you I always do."

She elbowed him. "I mean would you have come to Thanksgiving dinner with me?"

His voice deepened. "Does that mean I'm your boyfriend?"

"Isn't that what we are?" She stopped. "We're exclusive, right?"

She'd assumed they were. What if Mac didn't?

"Of course we are." He wrapped his arms around her. "You're probably the longest relationship I've had since high school."

"Oh." She leaned back to look at him. "I guess it's the same for me."

"How long do we have to stay at your parents?" he whispered.

"I'm staying here tonight."

He rested his forehead against hers. "Tomorrow night then?"

"Yes." She pulled away from the magnetic force that was all Mac. "Bring your pie, and I'll introduce you to my family."

They all sat on the big leather sofa in the family room. "Hey everyone, this Mac and Trouble."

Her dad muted the sound as she made introductions.

Trouble moved straight to her mom, his tags jingling. He set his head on Mom's lap.

"You're a handsome boy." Her mom smiled as she petted the dog.

Mac shook Peter and his girlfriend's hands and then her dad's. As Mac sat next to Patty on the loveseat, he offered, "Mr. Murphy. If you'd like, I could fix that swollen door for you tomorrow?"

Mom clapped her hands and Trouble whoofed. "That would be great. I can't open it anymore."

"We can't impose," her dad said.

"It's no problem. I'd fix it today, but my tools are in my truck."

"You're too kind. Thank you," her dad said.

"What time is good for you?"

"Anytime in the morning," her mother answered.

"Hey man, you're making me look like a bad son." Peter laughed.

"You can help." Mac laced his fingers with Patty's.

Once her dad turned the sound back up on the game, Patty said, "You're making a great impression on my parents."

"I want to."

And he made an even better impression on her. She'd never felt this way about any guy. He was different from her first impression. He was good and kind. And whenever she saw him, she couldn't stop smiling.

For the first time ever, she thought she might be falling in love.

PATTY PUSHED AWAY from the kitchen table. Since Fran and Sam were deep cleaning one of Mac's houses, she'd decided to work on the kitchen table instead of in her bedroom. She'd almost finished drafting the last paper for her Strategic Planning class. Professor Davis put more weight on the papers than on her final exam, so Patty felt good about her class grade. She would take a break, revise, and then type it up.

Standing, she stretched and touched her toes. Her body was sore from cleaning Friday and Saturday. She grinned, and maybe from sleeping with Mac Friday and Saturday night. The weekend had been fantastic. They'd stayed at his place and she'd brought her homework. Working together had been ... nice.

She poured a glass of water. It was seven o'clock. Fran and Sam should be almost done with the Birch Street cleaning. As soon as she finished her paper, she would head to the house to double check.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"What the hell, Patty?" Mac yelled into the phone.

"Mac? What's wrong."

"Birch Street hasn't been cleaned."

"Fran and Sam were supposed to be there at three." Four hours ago.

"Get here. Now." Mac hung up.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She quickly called Sam and left a message with her roommate. Then Cali.

"Can you meet me at the housing development and help clean?"

"I guess." Cali hesitated. "How long do you need me?"

"As many hours as you can give me."

“I have a test tomorrow, but I’m done studying. I’ll get there as soon as I can, but it’s snowing.”

“Thanks.” Snowing? What else could go wrong. “It’s the Birch Street house.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Or not.

She made one more call to Maggie, who agreed to come help.

They would get this done. She couldn’t let Mac down.

She stepped into her boots, tucked her sneakers in her backpack and grabbed keys. Tugging on her coat, she locked up and ran downstairs. Where the hell were Fran and Sam? They’d been good workers for the last month.

Four inches of snow covered her car. Even the elements were against her. She dusted off the back window and saw all the cleaning stuff still in her backseat.

Fran had Patty’s extra car key, and she and Sam were supposed to grab the equipment and take everything to the house.

What had happened?

She started her car, put the defroster on high and pulled out her scraper. There was ice under the snow, and she put her shoulder into clearing the window. This was taking too long.

With the windows finally cleared, she got in and jockeyed back and forth to get the car over the snow pile. What if she couldn’t get to Mac’s house?

The wind whipped the snow and her wipers barely kept her windshield clear. She’d given up seeing out the back window. At least there wasn’t much traffic.

On the interstate she stayed in her lane; afraid her car wouldn’t clear the snow piles outlining the lanes. Her tires slipped on the ice hidden by the snow. She slowed down.

A red car zipped by her.

“Idiot. You’ll probably cause an accident.” She strained forward, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. She wasn’t risking her or other people’s lives.

Peering through the falling snow, she slowed for the curve where highway 36 and I-35W met. The red car sat sideways on the shoulder. The driver must have spun out on the curve.

At another time she would have stopped to help, but she had too much at stake.

When she drove into the development one lane of the road was cleared. Her shoulders relaxed. She hadn’t wanted to get stuck and have to schlep the cleaning equipment and products up to the house. As it was, she parked on the street, afraid she would get stuck in the driveway. The lone vehicle in front of the house was Mac’s truck.

Where were Fran and Sam?

She took a deep breath, gathered the tools of her trade and trudged to the house, making two additional trips to grab everything. It was time to face Mac.

She opened the door and Trouble barked. She stomped off the snow before stepping into the entry. “Hey, Trouble.”

“Where the hell is your crew?” Mac stalked into the entry.

This angry man wasn’t the Mac she’d made love to two days ago. This was the man she’d first met. The one who hadn’t wanted her working on his houses. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“What the hell kind of business woman doesn’t know where her crews are?”

She shrugged off her ski jacket. *Don’t engage. Don’t hook into his anger.* “The kind who has another crew coming right now.”

He looked pointedly out the sidelight of the door.

“We’ll have the house cleaned before tomorrow’s walk-through.” She pulled in the equipment and supplies. She might as well set up in the kitchen.

After kicking off her boots, she put on her cleaning sneakers. There still might be nails and other nasty things on the floors.

She hadn't been here since she and Sam had scrubbed the labels from the windows. Thank goodness they'd done that in advance.

In the kitchen, stainless steel appliances looked amazing and the light oak cabinetry and the golden granite gleamed. "I love the kitchen."

Mac grunted.

"There's paper still covering the wood floors." she said. "Your crew was supposed to remove it."

"Damn it." Mac stood with his hands on his hips. "Is everyone trying to screw up my closing?"

"Maggie and Cali are on their way." She braved walking over and setting a hand on his arm. "We'll get it done."

"What if I hadn't stopped by?" Mac shook her hand off. "I'll get the paper up."

Grabbing a bucket of products and the vacuum, Patty headed to the stairs. "I won't let you down."

It was almost childish, but she wanted to cross her fingers.

In the first bedroom, the new carpet smell assaulted her. She shook her head, not sure if the smell was the carpet or glue. Standing in the middle of the room, she decided to clean windows first.

Running downstairs, she found a small ladder in the living room and carefully carried it up the stairs. She didn't want to bang the walls.

When she saw the flash of headlights, Patty had cleaned one bedroom and started on the master.

She hurried to the entry. "Thank you, Cali!"

"I thought Sam and Fran were cleaning tonight." Cali tossed her coat on top of Patty's.

“I don’t know where they are.” She put her arm around her friend. “I really appreciate this.”

“No worries. But my test is at nine AM, so I’ll need to get some sleep.”

A ripping sound erupted from the dining room. Must be Mac pulling up the paper from the wood floor.

“I started upstairs.” Patty led the way. She went back to cleaning windows, and Cali wiped the closet cabinetry.

“When I grow up, I want a closet like this,” Cali said.

“I swear it’s almost the size of our apartment.”

By the time Maggie arrived, they’d finished the master suite.

“Thank you for coming.” Patty peered out the front door. “How are the roads?”

“Getting bad,” Maggie said. “My husband insisted I take his four wheel drive car.”

“We’re upstairs,” she told Maggie.

“Patty?” Mac called.

“Let me see what Mac wants.”

“Hi, Maggie,” Cali called down from the second floor. “We’re working upstairs.”

“On my way,” Maggie said.

She found Mac kneeling in the kitchen. “Yes?”

“Do you have something to take off the glue?” He pointed at a section of floor under the island.

“Acetone.” She dug through one of the buckets she’d left in the kitchen.

The sharp smell like nail polish remover had tears backing up in her eyes. It couldn’t be because Mac was acting like a jerk.

She knelt next to him with the acetone, paper towels and a scraper. It had been a good combination when they’d removed

the window labels.

He took everything from her. "I'll do it."

He was as cold as the snow outside.

"Fine." Let him clean what *his* crew should have done. She would take care of her responsibilities.

But her heart ached.

How COULD Patty have let this happen? Mac rubbed on the sticky remains of the tape and then used the scraper, making sure not to scratch the stone. She knew how much these houses meant to him.

He would have words with Jacob too. The laborers should have pulled up the paper. He took a deep breath. He'd have to cool down before they had that conversation.

One more floor was covered in paper, the library. He took care of it. Then he stripped off the protective runners on the stairs and from the other carpeted rooms and gathered the ones Patty and her crew had removed upstairs. As he pulled up the final runner in the living room, another set of headlights flashed in the windows.

Trouble's tags clanked as he moved to the entry.

Had Patty called in more employees? They'd finished upstairs and were already working on the main floor. The vacuum ran in the family room.

Two women exited the car; one slipped and slid through the icy snow. He recognized Fran as the stumbler but not the other woman who kept Fran upright.

"I told you Patty would be h-h-here," Fran said as she and the other person walked inside. "They brought all the s-s-stuff. And that's Cali's-s-s car."

"We should have been here hours ago." The other woman took off her coat.

“Who cares-s-s.” Fran swung her hands around. “It’s just housecleaning.”

Mac cared. And Fran was drunk.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Mac said.

They both jumped. Trouble whined.

Fran tripped on the pile of boots, coats and gloves. “There’s the s-s-sexy contractor.”

“Get out.” Mac jabbed a finger at Fran. “You’re fired.”

“What? What?”

“You’re fired. Get out of my house!”

“Mac? Fran? Sam?” Patty came around the corner. “What’s going on?”

“I just fired Fran for you.”

Patty’s face went to stone. “You what?”

“She’s hours late and comes here drunk. And she doesn’t *care*.”

“Patty.” Fran stood there wringing her hands. “I sh-should have ...”

Patty slashed her hand through the air.

“Patty,” Fran pleaded.

“Give me a minute,” Patty said to him.

“No.” He leaned against the wall. He wasn’t going anywhere.

Patty went over to Fran and Sam.

“I’m sorry, Patty, I tried to get here earlier.” Sam waved at Fran. “I ...”

Patty stared at Fran, shaking her head.

Why wasn’t she kicking the bitch out?

“Leave. I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” Patty said softly. “We’ve got this handled.”

“I’m sorry.” Sam bit her lip. Were those tears in her eyes? She had the gall to hug Patty. “Do you want me to stay?”

No way would Patty buy this crap.

“No.” Patty patted her shoulder. “Make sure Fran gets home.”

When the two women left, she rounded on Mac. “Don’t you ever speak to my employees like that again.”

“Employees?” He pushed off the wall and got in her face. “You mean screw ups.”

“That’s my problem, not yours.” She drilled her finger into his chest.

He knocked her hand away. Everything inside him ignited. “Did you believe that crap? No way did you believe Sam’s tears. That’s bullshit.”

Trouble whined.

“All you need to worry about is whether we get your house clean.” She took a deep breath. “That’s all. You overstepped. If you have a problem with my staff, come to me.”

“I have a problem with your staff,” he snapped back. “Fran was drunk.”

“I caught that.” She crossed her arms. “You can’t fire my staff.”

“Someone has to.”

Patty shook her head. “Not you.”

“What if I hadn’t stopped? Do you think they would have gotten things cleaned?”

“It’s being handled.” Her chin went up.

“Because I was on the ball and you weren’t.” He had to focus. He should never have gotten involved with Patty.

“We’ll get everything done.”

“I trusted you.” His words cut through the air like broken glass.

“And I’m living up to our contract.” Her eyes burned holes through him. “And that’s all there is between us now. A contract. You and I are done.”

“You’re so right.”

“I need a ladder to clean these windows. You’re supposed to have left the right equipment for us.”

“I’ll get the f’ing ladder.” He stomped into the garage. What did she mean they were through. *He* was the injured party. He’d planned on breaking up with her.

Mac yanked the tall ladder into the hall. And banged the wall. Swearing, he carefully carried it into the entry and set it up.

Patty had disappeared.

He didn’t trust her to get everything done. He would check in the morning. And if the place wasn’t clean, she was fired.

“Trouble, let’s go.”

“I THINK THAT’S IT.” Patty and Maggie folded the ladder she’d used to clean the tall windows in the entry and family room. Cali had left an hour ago, and she and Maggie had finished before midnight. Success. She didn’t need to stop by tomorrow so there was no chance she’d run into Mac.

Her anger had driven her to clean like a maniac.

“I didn’t think we’d get it done.” Maggie folded the cloths they used and put them in the buckets, then she stuffed used paper towels in the garbage bag. “What should we do with the garbage?”

“I’ll throw it in the dumpster.” Patty still steamed from her confrontation with Mac. He was an ass.

She pressed on her chest. Everything hurt.

And Fran. She was angry and felt ... betrayed.

As they bundled up for the snow and cold, she said again, “Thank you, Maggie.”

She would talk to her mother about giving Cali and Maggie a bonus.

After Patty locked the door, they started their cars and cleared the snow together.

“Drive safe,” Maggie called.

“You too.”

Patty’s car fishtailed as she accelerated on the unplowed road. Her wipers barely kept up with the falling snow. At least following Maggie’s taillights kept her from driving into the ditch.

The interstate had one lane plowed, but it took her twice the travel time to get home. And since her day was ruined, she couldn’t find a parking spot closer than three blocks away. She zipped her coat and trudged through the snow.

When she opened the apartment door, it was almost one. The place was dark, and she tripped over Fran’s boots.

Fran’s door was closed. At least Patty didn’t have to deal with her roommate’s betrayal tonight.

As she got ready for bed, she couldn’t stop thinking about Mac. She’d foolishly thought they were a team. It had felt like they worked well together.

She swallowed back tears as she stripped off her clothes and pulled on flannel pants and a T-shirt.

How had everything gone bad?

It was Mac’s fault. He thought he always knew what to do. He had to be alpha.

It was good she’d found this out now. Before she’d fallen harder for him.

A tear dripped down her cheek. If this was good, why did she hurt so much?

Damn it, she’d fallen in love with him.

That had to stop. Right now.

CHAPTER NINE



Trouble bounced and jumped in the snow outside of Mac's apartment, his tail and feathery fur covered in the fluffy stuff. After last night's storm, the world was a winter wonderland.

"Let's go, Trouble." Mac opened the truck door.

He wished he could be as excited as Trouble, wished he had the enthusiasm of his childhood. But he still fumed over how Patty had let him down.

Today and tomorrow were the start of his success, and she'd almost ruined it. Not her exactly, but her stupid management style. She shouldn't trust her business to friends.

She needed to be ... harder. She was a ... a soft touch.

So why was Granddad's voice in his head saying, "*What I can't seem to teach you is how to treat our employees.*"

Patty wasn't an employee; she was a contractor.

He stopped at the Birch Street house, needing to make sure Patty had done her job. Jacob met him there.

Now that the place was cleaned up, Trouble would need to stay in the truck. "I won't be long."

Luckily it wasn't too cold, but he wouldn't linger.

"Jacob," Mac called as he took off his boots and set them on the paper mat in the entry. Patty must have found the paper roll in the garage and cut some to keep things clean.

He should have thought of that.

And there went Granddad's voice again. "*Employees don't always have to do it your way.*"

His conscience now had a name—Granddad.

"Place looks great," Jacob called from the kitchen. "The cleaners did a nice job, but they bashed the mud room wall."

"Not their fault. I did that bringing in a ladder for them."

"You were here?"

"I stopped on my way home. It was lucky I did. Why didn't the crew pull up the floor coverings?"

Jacob pulled out the list Mac had created. "It's not on the check list."

Damn it. It was his fault. "I'll add that to our check list for the rest of the houses."

"You don't need to do that. I will."

"But ..." Mac had to make sure everything was done.

"It's my job. I almost added it, but you don't like me changing your lists."

"Oh." Right.

Together, they walked through each floor. Other than a couple of places where the paint needed to be touched up, everything was ready. Patty and her crew had made the house shine.

He'd yelled at her; she'd broken up with him and still she'd done a better job than he'd expected.

"I'll touch up the paint and then the house is done," Jacob said.

Mac shook his hand. "Nice work."

Jacob blinked and then smiled. "Thanks, boss."

Maybe he didn't thank his crews often enough.

"When the buyers do their walk-through, can you join us?" Mac asked.

Jacob grinned. "Yes."

As Mac drove to the office, he worried that instead of emulating Granddad, the man he admired, he was becoming his dad. His dad was always critical, always looking to cut a person down.

The idea didn't sit well with him.

PATTY DABBED whiteout on the error, blew on the correction and then made a cup of tea while it dried. Checking the time on the stove, she saw she only had forty minutes to type her paper and get to class. Guess it was a no-shower day.

If she kept making mistakes, she would be late and Professor Davis would be all over her. But she was tired. And heartbroken. And ... disillusioned.

She should have stuck with her instincts that a relationship with Mac was wrong. Now she had a broken heart and worried he would cancel their contract.

No more mistakes. After finding her place in her draft, she started typing again.

Fran's bedroom door opened and the bathroom door closed. Patty would have to deal with her. When the shower came on, she was relieved. She'd have a fifteen minute reprieve.

She typed and finished the next page and rolled another one in. When Fran entered the kitchen, there was only one more page left to type.

Closing her eyes, Patty took a deep breath and looked at Fran.

"Do we have any aspirin?" Fran asked.

Patty pointed to the correct cupboard.

Fran took her time opening the bottle and pouring a glass of water.

Patty waited. Crossed her arms.

“I’m sorry.” Fran shook her head.

“Are you?”

“I ... of course I am.” Fran frowned.

“Why?” Patty asked.

“Why?”

“Yes.” Patty kept her voice low and steady instead of screaming like she wanted to. “Why did you arrive drunk at work, four hours late?”

Fran twirled her water glass. “Leo, that cute guy from my econ class, wanted to have a drink to celebrate the first big snow. He’s from Florida.”

“You had a job to do.”

“It’s just cleaning.”

Just cleaning? “It’s my mother’s company and my reputation on the line.”

“Mac was an angry jerk.” Fran pouted. “I can’t believe he tried to fire me. Thank goodness you were there.”

“I don’t think you understand how important this is to Mac.” It hurt to say his name. “Or my mother. Or me.”

Fran waved off her concerns. “Come on, it’s just cleaning.”

She had to do it. She had to fire her roommate. “I’m sorry, with that attitude, I can’t have you working for Murphy’s.”

“What? It was one screw up.” Fran sat at the table. “You can’t fire me over that.”

Patty’s hands squeezed into fist. Then she relaxed her fingers and went back to her paper. “I can’t let you screw this up.”

“Please.” Fran touched her shoulder. “I ... I was wrong. I’ll be better. I will.”

Patty swallowed the tears trying to fall. This was her friend. Maybe she deserved another chance. “I’ll think about it.”

MAC MISSED SEEING PATTY. She hadn't cleaned the office in the last two weeks, and he'd had Jacob schedule the last three construction cleanings.

He'd been avoiding her.

But Jacob was dealing with HVAC problems at one of the last two houses. Mac was here to ensure Patty's crew showed up and did their job.

He pulled into the fourth house scheduled for its final cleaning. Patty's green VW was there along with a second car.

"I have to leave you here," he said to Trouble. He didn't want dirty paw prints blamed on him.

Straightening his shoulders, he opened the door. Music blared in the family room. He heard laughter and Patty's voice.

Damn. His body ached. He missed her. Maybe ...

After two weeks he couldn't remember why he'd wanted to dump her. Unfortunately she'd dumped him.

He climbed the stairs. It looked like they'd finished here. He checked the bedrooms and the bonus room this house had. Everything looked great. The family moving in would love it. A new house for Christmas. His crew had even installed the nursery's sailboat border. It looked good. Homey.

The couple had told him they were living in a two bedroom house, and their toddler and newborn were sharing a room. Sounded like a blueprint for losing sleep.

This house would help.

He lingered in the nursery. Did he ever want kids? All his energy had been focused on taking over from Granddad. He'd never thought beyond that goal.

What if he had a son with Patty's eyes and smile?

He shook his head. That wasn't even a possibility. Patty had broken up with him.

Time to face her.

In his socks, the three woman crew didn't hear him approach the family room. Patty stood on a ladder cleaning windows. Cali vacuumed, and someone cleaned the built-ins flanking the fireplace.

"What the hell!" he said.

Patty's eyes narrowed. "Is there something wrong?"

Mac pointed. "Why is Fran here?"

Fran bit her lip and took a step away from him.

Patty vaulted off the ladder, not safe, came over and dragged him into the kitchen.

"I don't want her on my properties," he said.

"She's sorry about what happened and she's been working hard."

He paced the length of the kitchen. "How can you? She came to work drunk."

Patty crossed her arms and stood like a barrier, keeping him out of the family room. "She apologized. I accepted her apology. It won't happen again."

"How will you ever be a good boss if you let that shit go?"

"At least my crew doesn't act like they're afraid of me."

"What?"

"I've talked to Jacob. He's worried he'll screw up and get fired. Fear isn't the way you get people to do their best."

"We're not talking about me. And look at these houses. People who have fear don't do this nice work."

"Maybe that's because Jacob runs interference." Patty glared at him. "Have you had any problems with Murphy's work on the last three houses?"

"No. They've been ... acceptable."

"Acceptable?" Patty laughed. "What a compliment. They were better than *acceptable*. At least Jacob called and said

how happy the new owners were.”

His mouth dropped open. Why was Jacob calling his girl—well she wasn't his girlfriend anymore. He snapped his jaw shut.

“Right.” Patty jerked her head at him. “Murphy's is living up to our contract. Why don't you leave us alone. We'll finish in the next hour. Then you can come back and criticize.”

She turned on her heel and headed into the family room.

Criticize? He wanted to pull her back and argue. He wasn't the bad guy here. He gave compliments. But he remembered the surprise on Jacob's face when he'd said *nice work*.

Mac pulled on his boots and headed to the truck. Was it possible both Patty and his Granddad were right? That he didn't treat his employees well?

Shouldn't the work speak for itself? But he had experienced a fairly high employee turnover.

As he unlocked the truck, Trouble barked. At least his dog was happy to see him.

THE MORNING BREAK manager had begged Patty to give her a few hours on Friday morning. She should have said no, she had a project that was a quarter of her grade due by five today and another deep clean on Sunday.

And she wanted to see her mom and help with the Christmas decorations. Mom didn't have the energy to decorate this year.

Instead, she headed to the coffee shop. Only two hours. And then she'd type up the project paper.

She entered through the back door and hung up her coat, backpack and replaced her boots with sneakers. Pulling her hair back, she washed her hands and backed through the swing door.

“Thank you for coming, Patty,” the manager said. “I have to run home while you’re here. You’ll be alone for a bit, but I’ll be back.”

“No problem.”

Patty wiped the counter and took orders from a dozen people. Working kept her mind off *that man*.

“Why, hello!” Joe stood in front of her.

“There’s one of my favorite people.” She grinned. Joe couldn’t help that his grandson was an ass. “You’re usual?”

“Please. You’re not back working here, are you?” Joe asked as she poured his coffee and heated his breakfast.

“No. I’m helping out for a few hours.”

“Good. I’ve heard you’re doing a wonderful job on the houses.” Joe patted her hand.

She made change for him, which he put directly into the tip jar. He was so nice. “Not sure who would tell you that.”

Joe’s eyebrows pushed together. “Mac.”

“That’s nice.” She swallowed. “I’ll bring your breakfast out.”

“Thanks.” He stared at her for a moment before nodding and walking to an open table.

The toaster oven dinged, and she pulled his egg sandwich out with hot pads. After slipping it on a plate, she brought it to Joe. “Enjoy.”

Joe looked over at the counter. “There’s nobody in line. Sit and tell me how things are going.”

She tried to will the people out on the sidewalk to come in. No luck.

“I need more hours in the day,” she confessed, sitting down.

Joe nodded. “Mac has you cleaning and you have your school work. And your mother.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Finals start in ten days.”

“Wow. You barely have enough time to eat.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Why don’t you and Mac come for Sunday dinner. That will take cooking off your plate. It would be the four of us. And Trouble.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I couldn’t.” Apparently Mac hadn’t told Joe they weren’t together anymore.

“We’ll keep it simple.”

She set her hand on Joe’s arm. “Mac and I aren’t dating anymore.”

“You aren’t?” Joe’s face drooped. “What happened?”

The bell jingled. *Finally*. She stood. “You should ask Mac.”

She headed to the counter. She would miss Joe.

Too bad Mac wasn’t more like his grandfather. Joe was easy to love. Loving Mac just broke her heart.

MAC HEARD the main office door open. Trouble stood, stretched, gave a little whoof and trotted out of Mac’s office.

“Mac,” Granddad called from the hallway. “My office. Now!”

Mac pushed away from his desk and followed Trouble into Granddad’s office. “What’s up?”

Granddad pulled off his winter coat and tossed it on the coatrack. His face was ruddy. Not like his skin looked after coming in from the cold. This was something different. Something unhealthy.

“What’s wrong with you?” Granddad slammed his hand on his desk.

Trouble whimpered and cowered behind Mac’s legs.

“It’s okay. We’re okay.” He patted Trouble’s side. Was Granddad having a stroke?

No. If he were having a stroke he wouldn't be able to speak, but something was wrong.

“What did I do?” Mac asked. He couldn't think of anything. He'd almost finished the houses. Hell, was that the problem? “Are you worried I'll win the bet, and you're not ready to give up control?”

His grandfather sank into his chair. His shoulders slumped. “You fool.”

Mac frowned. Was the old man losing it?

“What happened to you and Patty?” Granddad's voice was resigned.

This was about Patty? “I don't share my ... love life with anyone in the family.”

“Interesting choice of words. Love life.” Granddad raised his eyebrows. “You fell in love with her.”

“I ... no. I ...” Was that why this hurt so much? He'd fallen in love with Patty? He'd never been in love. In lust yes, but not love.

Did he love her?

Maybe? But ... “Patty dumped me.”

Granddad leaned back in his chair, a little more life in his eyes. “Why?”

Mac paced to Trouble's bed and then crossed the room and sat in one of the guest chairs. Resting his elbows on his thighs, he said, “Her crew didn't show up to clean the first house that closed. Birch Street. They were scheduled to start cleaning at three. I stopped by at seven and no one had started. Patty scrambled and called in other people. Then Fran, her roommate, came in drunk. Fran was supposed to have been there at three.”

“Drunk?”

“Yeah. I fired her. Fran, not Patty.”

“Wait. You fired Fran? But she's Patty's employee.”

Mac rolled his shoulder. When put like that, he had been a little—high-handed. “Patty took exception to my ... actions. I told her she had to fire someone who came drunk to work *and* didn’t care about doing a good job.”

Granddad shook his head. “I assume you apologized.”

“Why would I? If someone comes late and drunk to work, they’re fired.”

“But Fran wasn’t your employee.”

“But ...” Granddad was right. He knew he was. “Patty *didn’t* fire Fran. She let her keep working. On my houses.”

Granddad gave him a long, sad look. “Have the houses been cleaned to you *standard*?” Granddad made quotes with his fingers.

Mac hesitated. “Yes.”

“I will say this again.” Granddad held his gaze. “Quit focusing on the steps and instead, focus on the end results. You don’t know all the answers. If Patty is delivering, that’s all you need to worry about. That applies to all our employees and subs.”

“But ...”

Granddad shook his head. “I know a lot of what you do and how you act is the direct result of wanting your parents’ approval. I’m mad at the way they treat you. But *you* don’t have to control everything. You’re there to lead. To set expectations.”

“But ...”

“Do you still have Jacob and the other supervisors call you with a daily status report and then go check to make sure everything they said is true?”

“That’s just good management.”

“That’s terrible management.” Granddad slapped his hand on his desk, and Trouble’s head popped up. “I don’t double check every task you do.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“You have to let go. I thought being around Patty had changed you. You were—lighter.” Granddad heaved out a sigh. “I’m surprised Jacob hasn’t left. He’s good at what he does. You shouldn’t second guess all his decisions.”

“I don’t.” Mac slid back in his chair. “Do I?”

“You do. This is what I’ve been trying to get you to understand. *Trust* your team. Have they ever let you down? Let me be more specific. Did Patty let you down?”

He stared at Granddad. “No.”

“Jacob?”

“No.”

Granddad went through all the subs, rattling them off. None of them had let him down.

Mac ran his fingers through his hair.

“If you want to run my company,” Granddad pointed a finger at him, “you’d better learn how to treat your most precious assets—your people.”

Granddad waved him out of his office. Trouble, the traitor, stayed for a dog treat.

Trust. He’d never trusted anyone but his grandparents. Everyone else he’d loved had put strings on their feelings, trying to make him something he wasn’t.

But when he was around Patty, he’d been ... happier. As busy as they both were, he’d made time for her and hadn’t ridden his crews as hard.

In his office he let the weight of his granddad’s disappointment pull him down. Unless he figured this out, he shouldn’t take over MacBain.

From his center drawer he pulled out a legal pad. Organizing his thoughts, he did what he did best. He made a list of how he had to change.

WHEN THE SECURITY BUZZER RANG, Patty was wrapping her scarf around her neck. She answered, “Yes?”

“I have a delivery for a P. Murphy.”

“That’s me.”

She never got deliveries. Hopefully it wasn’t a cancelation on the Murphy’s contract with MacBain. It would be just like Mac to send that by courier.

She tried to hook into the anger that had fueled her for almost three weeks, but all she had was sadness. She missed Mac.

If it was a letter, she wouldn’t open it. She needed to concentrate on her last final.

There was a knock on the door. Taking a deep breath, she opened it.

“Here you go.” The guy handed her a box.

Flowers. It looked like flowers.

Patty checked her watch. She had five minutes before she started her trek across campus.

In the kitchen, she set the box on the table and ripped open the paper. Nestled in the box was a flowering plant. She eased it out and set it on the table. “A Christmas cactus.”

The red blossoms were gorgeous against the deep green stalks.

She opened the envelope inside the box. The typed note read—

I’m sorry.

I screwed up.

You were right. I’m as prickly as this cactus, but being with you makes me a better person.

How can I make this up to you?

Love, Mac

The note slipped out of her hands. *Love, Mac?* Had he meant that or had some clerk made a mistake?

She slipped the card into her backpack.

Her heart pounded as she rushed out the door. The cold took her breath away. Half jogging, she made it to the shuttle stop. Perfect timing. A bus pulled up and she even found a seat.

Love, Mac.

She didn't know what he expected of her. But she couldn't think about it. She had a test to take.

In the classroom she picked up a blue book, found a seat and pushed away thoughts of Mac.

Impossible.

PATTY Poured a cup of tea for her mother and set the pot on the tray she'd brought into the living room. The tea was designed to boost Mom's energy, but her mother was gaunt and had dark circles under her eyes.

Patty swallowed as worry churned in her stomach.

"Was yesterday your last chemo treatment?" she asked.

"For that cycle. Then my final cycle starts in the new year." Mom waved it away. "How was your test?"

"I think I did all right." She'd done better than all right. "No. I rocked it."

Her mother's smile added life to her face. "That's my girl."

The Christmas lights twinkled on the tree they'd put up last weekend. Pointing at a plant, Patty said, "That's a huge poinsettia. Did Dad pick it up?"

"No." Her mom shook her head. "It came from MacBain Construction."

"From Mac?"

Mom pulled a florist card from the pile of cards sitting next to her chair and handed it to her. “Wasn’t that nice?”

Patty read.

Mrs. Murphy,

Happy holidays. Thank you for being part of MacBain’s success this year.

Here’s to a healthy and happy New Year for you and your family,

Mac

No *love Mac* on this one. She reread the card. “That was nice.”

Did MacBain send Christmas gifts to all their subcontractors? Or had Mac done this specifically for her mother?

“Why are you frowning?” her mother asked.

Patty tapped the card on her chin. “I ... I don’t understand him. Do you think this is something they do for all their subcontractors?”

“Probably, but the note is nice.”

Patty agreed.

“How are you and Mac?” her mother asked.

“Confused,” Patty blurted out. “I broke up with him.”

“He was so kind at Thanksgiving. He even fixed the door the next day.” Mom huffed out a breath. “It was the first time I’d been able to open it since I started treatment. Now I regret being nice to him.”

“He can be nice. Sweet even.” Patty had seen that and it wasn’t an act. “He ... there was a problem on the first house we cleaned. He tried to fire Fran.”

“What? The gall of the man.”

Patty smiled at her mother’s support. “There was reason.”

“But she still works for us.” Mom handled the billing and check runs.

“I gave Fran another chance,” Patty admitted.

Her mother patted her hand. “Sometimes you’re a soft touch, dear.”

“I know.” She covered her mother’s almost skeletal hand with hers. “But Fran knows if she messes up again, she’s done. Her screwup has made her one of our best cleaners.”

“That’s a surprise.” Her mother gave her a sly smile. “You thanked Mac for helping straighten Fran out.”

It wasn’t a question. “Mom.”

She couldn’t imagine saying thank you to Mac. Although she needed to thank him for the cactus.

“I’ve already mailed a thank you note for the poinsettia,” Mom said.

“I’m not writing him a thank you note.”

“Then call and thank him.” Her mother took a sip of her tea. “I know you said Fran didn’t have her heart in cleaning, but if Mac helped get the message through to Fran that she can’t half-ass things, it might have been worth it.”

“Mom. Language.”

Her mother chuckled.

“I’ll think about it.”

MAC STARED at the final house. He’d finished all six, on time and in budget. He should be celebrating. The only tasks remaining were Patty’s deep clean, the final walk-through and closing.

He should be jumping for joy. He should be having a celebratory drink.

He could call Jacob and see if he wanted to celebrate this milestone. Ever since he'd talked with Granddad, he'd made inroads on his staff trusting him, and him trusting his staff. The first change he'd made was that Jacob would create the detailed workplans and Mac would review and approve them.

Granddad had smiled at that change.

He could see if Jacob wanted a beer, but he didn't want to spend his time with Jacob.

He wanted to be with Patty.

That ship had sailed. She hadn't said a word about the cactus, not that they'd seen each other since he'd sent it. He'd called her apartment several times, but she was never in. He'd even left a couple of messages with Fran asking her to have Patty call him. Fran always asked whether it was business or personal, and he hadn't lied. He'd said it was personal.

Patty never called.

Her car was parked in the drive along with what he now identified as Maggie's. When he opened the door, Christmas music filled the house.

He pulled off his boots and padded into the kitchen. Fran cleaned windows, Maggie the outside of the cabinets and Patty, his heart skipped a beat at the sight of her, wiped out drawers and cupboards. They all sang "Merry Christmas Darling." He thought a brother and sister duo had recorded the song.

Maggie looked up and smiled. "Hi, Mac. We're almost done."

They stopped singing. Fran gave him a sour look. Patty's face went blank, and she asked, "Are you here to check on our work?"

"No." He didn't need to tour the house. Everything would be clean. "I know everything will be perfect."

Patty blinked. Then frowned.

He took a deep breath and turned to Fran. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. It wasn't my place."

“Oh.” Fran waved her hand. “Umm, no problem. I was out of line. I let Patty know it won’t happen again.”

“That’s good.” He faced Patty. “Can I talk to you?”

Nodding, she tucked the cloth she’d been using into her back pocket.

This conversation required privacy. He led her into the main level laundry room.

“Yes?” Patty asked. No warmth filled her voice.

He swallowed. “I’m sorry. I overstepped. I screwed up.”

“You did.” She crossed her arms.

“I’ve realized I was behaving more like my father than my granddad. I won’t let that happen again. Ever.” Mac held up his hand. “I promise.”

“Wow.” Her arms dropped to her sides. “That’s an incredible insight.”

“Can you forgive me?” He didn’t want to sound desperate, but there was desperation in his voice.

“Oh.” Her stony façade cracked a little more. “It was nice that you apologized to Fran.”

He pushed what might be a small advantage. “Please forgive me.”

“I ... I don’t know.”

He stepped closer. It was a small room so one step brought him within touching distance. He traced her cheekbone with his finger. “I miss you. I miss ... us.”

“I miss you too.” Her voice was barely loud enough to be heard.

“Patty.” One more step. He wrapped his arms around her and just held on.

It took a moment before she put her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. He felt more than heard her sigh.

“I screwed up. I’m an ass.”

“I forgive you.” Tears hovered in her eyes. “You were right to be upset. Fran screwed up. I ... told her I couldn’t use her again, but she begged for another chance. I think what happened shook her up. She’s changed. She’s more responsible now.” She laid her hand on his cheek. “I don’t know if just me being upset with her would have made the difference.”

God, he wanted to kiss her. “I think it would. You have better people instincts than I do. But I’m trying to be better. Because of Granddad. Because of you.”

“Me?” A tear slipped down her cheek.

He caught it with his finger. “Don’t cry.”

“Did you mean it?” she asked.

“Mean what?”

“What you wrote in the note with the Christmas cactus.”

“That I’m an idiot? Yeah.”

“No. And thank you for the plant.” She squeezed her arms around him. “Did you mean how you signed the card?”

How he’d signed ... the light bulb went on.

He snugged her in closer to his body. And it felt—right. “You’re asking how I signed the card?”

She gave him a soft punch in the shoulder. “Yes.”

“I’ve never told anyone this.” He crouched and looked her in the eye. “I love you.”

Her breath came out in a shaky exhale. “I thought maybe, whoever typed the card added that. That you only said to sign your name.”

His shoulders sagged. This was his worst nightmare, baring his heart, his soul, and she didn’t feel the same. She didn’t love him.

He clasped her face between his hands. He’d never seen such doubt in her eyes. “Man, I messed up. I needed to contact you somehow, and you weren’t returning my calls.”

She shook her head. “You never called.”

He dropped his head to hers. “Fran screened your calls.”

“She what?”

“When I asked her to have you call me back, she always asked whether it was business or personal.”

“And because it was personal, she didn’t tell me.”

He picked her up and set her on the washer. Then he stepped between her legs. “I probably deserved to be kept away from you.”

Patty rested her arms on his shoulders. “She should have told me.”

“I was hard on her.”

He curved his hand around her neck and tugged her in for a kiss.

It exploded. He’d thought their previous kisses had been as volatile as a burning propane tank, but this, this was more.

She explored his tongue, his mouth. And her hands stroked his chest.

His hand snuck under her sweatshirt and touched her soft skin.

They broke away, both gasping for breath.

He stared into her eyes. “I love you, Patricia Murphy.”

“I love you, Michael MacBain.”

He clutched her close, the relief at her words running through him like a rip saw.

“I wish we were at my place.”

“Oh, damn. I need to get back to work.” She pushed him away and hopped off the washer. Standing on her toes, she kissed him. “If Maggie can drop Fran off, I’ll drive to your place after we’re done. If not, I’ll drive back up.”

His heart burst. It was like he’d gotten his birthday and Christmas wishes for the decade. “I’ll be waiting.”

EPILOGUE



Patty stared out at her parents' snow covered lawn. The outside Christmas lights and the falling snow glittered.

Mac's car finally pulled in front of the house. She bounced to her feet and tugged on her boots and coat. Even though it was snowing, she ran out and met him as he stepped out of his car. "Merry Christmas!"

Mac spun her around. "Merry Christmas."

When he dropped her back to her feet, he kissed her. The man had mad kissing skills.

She reeled a little, dizzy from either the spin or his kiss. She'd never been this happy. Mac made her so, so happy.

He pulled away and swept snow off her face. "I missed you."

She chuckled. "We were together last night."

"I know." He kissed her again. "I don't like not being with you."

"Mac." She never would have guessed that the man who had been all business and such a jerk could melt her heart with just a few words. "I missed you too."

"Good. I wouldn't want to be alone in these feelings." He looked ... worried. Mac rarely looked worried.

"Is everything all right?" she asked. "Did something happen with your family?"

“Christmas was pretty great.” He broke away and grabbed a box of wrapped presents from his car.

“We should get you in out of the cold.” She led him up the porch steps.

“Hang on,” he said before she opened the door.

“Yes?”

“Granddad gave me the best present.” Mac’s grin split his face as he set the box of presents down.

She smiled, guessing what Joe’s present to Mac had been. “He did?”

“He’s turning over the company to me at the first of the year.” His face held a little bit of awe. “I’ll be running MacBain.”

“You did it.” She threw her arms around his neck. “Congratulations! I’m so proud of you.”

“Patty, you helped me.”

“Me?”

“You helped me become a better employer.” He stroked a thumb along her cheek. “You helped me understand what Granddad was talking about when it came to being a more understanding boss.”

“You would have gotten there eventually.” But his words made her grin.

He took both of her hands. “You make me a better person.”

“That works both ways. You helped me stand up for my mother’s company, to demand respect from her employees. That’s important.”

“I think we should ... continue to ... help each other.”

“Of course. Let me know when you have any other cleaning projects.”

He exhaled. “I’m not talking about *working* together.”

Her heart went as cold as the snow around her. “Are you breaking up with me?”

He dropped her hands and stepped away. “I’m screwing this up.”

She bit her lip. “I thought we’d gotten through the worst. What happened?”

“I fell in love with you.” He thrust his fingers through his hair.

“And I love you.”

“Let’s commit to that. Let’s make this long-term.”

“You want a long term contract?” She pressed her fingers to her forehead.

“I swore I wouldn’t do it this way, but I’m going to make this perfectly clear.” He dropped to one knee in the snow that had blown onto the porch.

“Mac?” Her heart tripled its beats.

“I know this is fast, but I also know you’re perfect for me. We’re perfect for each other.” He dug a small wrapped present out of his pocket. “Patricia Murphy, will you marry me?”

The shock of his proposal dropped her to her knees. “Mac.”

“I know you have to finish school. I know I have to spend extra time working, but I want you there with me. We don’t have to get married right away. Just ... you’re the one. I’ll wait as long as you want to get married, but my future is with you.”

She swallowed the tears trying to burst through. “Yes. Yes. I want my future to include you.”

As they kissed, she imagined years of being together, of working together, probably fighting together, but being together. Through the good and the bad.

She pulled out of the kiss. “Do you want kids?”

He cupped her face. His hands were cold but she didn’t care. “With you, yes. And if I ever treat our kids like my parents treat me, you’ll be there to keep me on track.”

They helped each other to stand. While the snow fell, she unwrapped her gift. The world was muted, the rip of the tape barely disturbing the beauty of the night.

“Just tear it,” Mac suggested.

“I’m keeping this paper forever.” She popped the jewelry box open and gasped. The solitaire diamond with a small circle of smaller diamonds sparkled in the night lit with Christmas lights. “It’s beautiful.”

“If you don’t like it, we can pick another one.” Mac slipped it onto her finger.

“I love it because you picked this ring.”

Mac kissed her. “Just for you.”

The door sprang open and her mom, dad and brother peeked out.

“Did you ask her standing out in the cold?” Mom asked.

“It just kind of happened,” Mac said. Even in the dim light Patty could see a blush filling Mac’s face.

“My parents know about this?” she asked.

Mac brushed a kiss on her forehead. “I asked for their permission.”

“Come in, come in.” Mom had more energy than Patty had seen in weeks. “The champagne is ready.”

They shed their coats and Patty showed her ring around. Flutes were poured. Her dad held up his glass. “Congratulations, Mac and Patty. Mac, welcome to the family.”

Mac caught her hand. Tears stood in his eyes. “I can’t wait for the adventure.”

And Patty knew. Mac would be the adventure of a lifetime.

WANT MORE BOOKS FROM
NAN DIXON?

I hope you will consider leaving a review on HOW WE STARTED. Thank you!

If you haven't read MAID FOR SUCCESS Book 1 in The MacBains series, turn the page!

MAID FOR SUCCESS

The bell on the door clanged as Alex pulled it open and stepped inside. He took a deep breath and scanned the coffee shop. *Good*. Frederick wasn't here yet.

He ordered and took his coffee to a minuscule table, wedging his legs into the small space. He took his first sip and winced. Even the milk he'd added didn't soften the bitter taste. The only positive to his drink—it was hot.

The shop must have changed their supplier since he and Frederick had met here last. Back when he'd made music. Back when life had been easy.

Before.

The bell on the door clanged again, a dissonant grating sound. Frederick came in, saw Alex and waved as he headed to the counter.

Alex traced patterns in the tabletop. He didn't want to disappoint his friend. He didn't want to live through the next thirty minutes of confession time. Only priests should hear confessions.

"Alex." Frederick smiled, holding out his hand.

"Frederick." Alex stood, banging his thighs into the table. "Good to see you," he lied.

"How are you? It's been ages since we talked." Frederick took off his suit jacket and pulled a packet of papers from the inside pocket.

Alex swallowed. It was the contract he'd signed with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra almost eighteen months ago. Frederick let it drop to the table, and it thumped down like a big fat elephant.

"I'm fine." *Not really.* "Let's skip the small talk. It's not done."

His friend tasted his coffee and closed his eyes. "This is the best coffee in town."

Alex took a sip, forcing himself to swallow. Nope. Still bitter. "I don't know if the sonata will ever be done."

Sympathy filled Frederick's eyes. "What I've heard is wonderful."

"Yeah." He'd completed one movement before the magic had died. "I keep trying. It's just ..."

All he'd written lately were commercial jingles. At least he tried. He hadn't finished any.

"How long has it been since your divorce was final?" Frederick asked.

"About a year." Fourteen months, twenty days, two hours and a handful of minutes.

A small smile creased his friend's face. "That long."

Frederick's smile evaporated. Able to control a full orchestra with a searing glare, his expression turned serious. "The orchestra took a risk when they commissioned the sonata."

"I know." Alex's jaw ached from clenching his teeth.

"You need to work. You're too brilliant to let a failed marriage ruin your career."

"I'm trying." Alex's ex-wife had not only destroyed their marriage and the life they'd created, but her actions had sucked out every note and ounce of his creativity.

"I can buy you three more months, but that's it. I'm sorry." Compassion filled Frederick's voice. "That's as long as I can keep the board of directors off your back."

Alex clenched his mug. He'd never let anyone down before, not when it came to his music.

When he'd taken the grant, ideas had poured out of him. He'd barely slept, needing to get the notes written. His music had been joy-filled.

After his world imploded, he'd had trouble writing meaningless dribble.

"Thanks for getting me the extra time." Alex looked into his friend's eyes.

"I'll send the contract update to Aubrey," Frederick said.

"Sure." Maybe his business manager would stop leaving reminder messages about the deadline for a month or two.

"I'll get it done." The lie was as bitter in his mouth as the cold coffee he swallowed.

"You want me to clean ... be a maid?" Kate cringed at the slight screech in her voice. She pushed down the panic trying to burst out.

Her mother's eyes flashed, a clear warning Kate was on a tightrope without a net. "Is cleaning beneath you?"

"I didn't mean it that way." She would never insult the company her mother had started. "But ... I have an MBA." Kate pressed her palms against the conference table that dominated a corner of Dad's office. "My salary is four times what we pay the cleaning crew. Our profit margin will take a hit."

"Katie." Her father leaned a hip against the granite top of his desk. "All your brothers did the same."

She was twenty-nine. When would her family call her Kate, not *Katie*? "My brothers *never* cleaned houses. Hell, they never picked up their rooms."

"Language," her mother said sharply.

Her oldest brother, Michael, snorted and slumped deeper in his chair. She wanted to wipe the smug expression off his face. Why was Michael even in this meeting? Probably to witness her humiliation and report back to their two younger siblings.

Michael grinned. "I worked construction."

"In high school." She forced her lips into a neutral position, trying to keep from frowning. Why would her parents want her working as a company maid? As an account executive, she wined and dined clients. Her role didn't include cleaning their dinner plates.

"Your mother and I have already discussed this." Her father stalked over to the window, staring down on Minneapolis from his twentieth floor office. "If you expect another promotion, you need a better understanding of every branch of the company. That means not only dealing with the leasing clients, but also the Murphy's Maids clients."

"But ..." Kate raised her hands in the air, pleading. "No one else cleaned. There must be another role I could perform. I don't have to scrub floors to understand what a maid does."

"Are you better than your mother?" Her father's voice boomed out.

Uh-oh. The volume of his voice might break his office windows.

"Your mother started Murphy's Maids when she was nineteen," Dad continued. "She worked nonstop *and* graduated with honors."

He moved behind Mom and rubbed her shoulders. She flashed him a grin that excluded Kate and her brother.

Her parents were exceptional. They'd built their own businesses. But shouldn't she be launching off their shoulders and not repeating their efforts?

"Are you better than your mother?" her father asked again.

"No. That's not what I'm saying, it's just ..."

Mother turned and faced her. "What are you saying?"

“I want what’s best for MacBain.” Kate inhaled. Something was wrong with the building’s HVAC. She couldn’t get enough oxygen and her head was wonky. “Is my cleaning what’s best for MacBain?”

“Yes,” her parents said.

She would do anything for the family business, but cleaning didn’t make sense. Not every potential CEO had to get their hands dirty.

She was good at her job. But she wanted more. More of everything. When her father retired, she wanted his position.

She loved her brothers, but they didn’t have the training to run the family business. Every college course, article, and seminar she’d taken attended or read were part of her bigger plan. When her father retired, she wanted to lead MacBain Enterprises.

But her father still hadn’t acknowledged her as his successor. Her hands clenched into fists. She might have to crawl over her brothers’ bodies to get there.

What a lovely image, all three lying in a pile as she stepped over them in a new pair of Louboutin high heels. It would have to be Louboutin; the blood wouldn’t show on the red soles. She’d seen the perfect pair in Saks last week. Too bad they cost \$900. And they sure wouldn’t be practical if her parents forced her to clean.

“I know you’re tough, Katie MacBain,” her father said. “But I’m not having you swing a hammer on any of Stephen or Timothy’s projects.”

If she did work as a laborer, she’d figure out ways to do the job more effectively. She looked at her manicure to keep from glaring at her family.

“I’ve brought in new tenants in a failing economy,” she said. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Yes, you are.” Her mother’s dark brown eyebrows drew together.

“Who will handle my workload?” She had to get out of this. “I’m in the middle of negotiations with both Sorenson Law and Telling Chemicals. They’re asking for massive concessions. I need to concentrate so they don’t ruin the profitability of the Daschle Building.”

Michael stretched out his legs. “What about that assistant you *had* to have. When does she start?”

Katie’s shoulders stiffened. She’d pushed for additional help over Michael’s vehement objections. Was he retaliating because Mom and Dad had finally agreed to her proposal? “She starts Monday.”

“Waste of money,” Michael mumbled. “Typical Katie.”

Why wouldn’t her family call her Kate? *Katie* was a little girl with pigtails. She tucked a wayward strand of her auburn hair behind her ear. *Kate* was a professional.

God, what she wouldn’t give to have been the firstborn. Instead Michael had the honor. She was the only daughter. When the two youngest had come along, she’d been stuck babysitting.

“It will only be one job,” her mother said. “You should be able to work your schedule around the cleaning, especially now that you have an assistant.”

“Katie, if you want to get ahead, you need a strong foundation.” Her father looked pointedly at his desk.

The desk she wanted to fill.

“You’ve done time in marketing, sales and public relations, but we realized you haven’t had any *hands-on* experience in the company.” Her mother stood next to Dad and leaned against the window. A united front.

“But cleaning?”

“Yes.” Her mother didn’t leave any room to argue.

“You’ll have a week to orient your assistant before you start working for Murphy’s. You can manage your department and learn the cleaning side of the business. It’s only one job a

week, but he's an important client. Probably only four hours twice a week."

"You'll still handle the lease renewals," Dad added. "Plus, I remember how slowly the negotiations for Sorenson Law firm progressed five years ago. Their office manager vets everything with the partners. Besides, their lease still has six months to run."

When her father's voice took on that head-of-the-MacBain-clan tone, there was no arguing.

"How long will I have to do this?" Kate asked.

Her mother tipped her head, her brown hair swinging to her shoulder. "As long as we say you do."

Kate had one last weapon in her arsenal. "Dad, two nights ago you complained I was still working at seven-thirty. You said I couldn't focus all my energy on the company. This will make it worse."

"On top of new experience, we're hoping you'll learn balance and how to delegate," Mom said.

God, did they have to act like a tag team?

"But ... cleaning?"

"Katie, this may be a family business, but you're still an employee. If you don't like my management style," her father pointed to the door, "you can always leave."

How could they do this to her? "I want what's best for the company."

If by working at Murphy's Maids she was closer to being named her father's successor, she'd suck up her resentment. "If you think cleaning is the best use of my talents, then that's what I'll do."

Her parents nodded at her. She and Michael pushed away from the table. Her brother started to walk past her. "Kiddo, you need to tame that mouth of yours."

She whipped an elbow into his abs. "Don't call me, kiddo."

Kate manhandled the van's reluctant gearshift into drive. It was mortifying driving the bright green Murphy's Maid van. She missed her BMW, but the cleaning equipment wouldn't fit in her car, not without ruining the leather interior.

She'd tried to convince Lois, her Murphy's Maid supervisor, to let her clean one of their office-building complexes—at night. No go. She was working in the residential cleaning group. Housecleaning!

Well, how tough could housecleaning be? She'd endured a two-hour training video. And she'd helped Lois clean a house the day before.

She wouldn't need her strategic leadership course to figure out the best way of removing the ring around a bathtub. And she'd bet her iPad that Lois couldn't run a project probability analysis.

Kate glanced at her phone's GPS, making sure she was on the right street. Did Murphy's provide smart phones to the cleaners? It would save time and money.

If her directions were accurate, she'd found the right neighborhood. Large older homes were set back on their lots. Trees lined the quiet street, their leaves a freshly unfurled bright green. The color would deepen as spring turned to summer. *Hopefully she wouldn't still be cleaning in summer.*

Passing bright blobs of yellow forsythia, flashes of red and yellow tulips, and jonquils ... or daffodils ... she didn't know the difference, Kate finally pulled to the curb in front of a lovely yellow three-story house with white trim and black shutters. A wide porch held a couple of rattan chairs. Even *she*, an apartment dweller, could tell the gray porch begged for flowerpots.

Kate wrestled the cleaning equipment and supply carrier onto the sidewalk. The buckets were the same lime green as the van. So was the hideous polo shirt she'd tucked into her

oldest blue jeans. The vacuum cleaner banged her leg as she dragged everything up the sidewalk.

Mr. Adamski. Kate sure hoped this client was a kindly, tidy old gentleman.

Lois had warned her. “He’s not happy Martha’s gone. Unfortunately it’s been almost two months since Martha retired, so the place might be dirty.”

Then Lois had handed her a five-page list of written instructions on how and what to clean in the Adamski house. Christ. Kate was anal retentive, but she hadn’t left five pages of instructions for Elizabeth, her freshly hired employee.

Since she was thinking about her new assistant, she set the equipment down and called. “Hi Liz, how’s it going?”

“Nothing I can’t handle yet. I’ve answered most of the questions thrown at me. The one I couldn’t answer, I got your brother’s help.”

She didn’t want her brothers bugging Liz. “Which brother?”

“Michael. Doesn’t smile much, does he?”

“No.” Her brother was too serious. “Call if you have any questions. I can’t imagine cleaning is very challenging.” Kate shivered. “I’ll need mental stimulation.”

“Will do. But don’t worry. I know your filing system and have access to all the active leases.” Liz laughed. “I think I can manage on my own for the next four or five hours. I’ll see you this afternoon, right?”

“Yes.” Kate sighed. Four hours of scrubbing and vacuuming sounded like a lifetime.

“Don’t worry. I won’t sign any new leases while you’re gone.”

Kate laughed as she stuffed her phone into her back pocket. With a big sigh, she climbed the porch steps. Sure, her mother had started this way, but her mother had cleaned houses while attending night school. As demand grew, she’d hired other students looking for work. Then she’d expanded

into cleaning office buildings. Since the college students she'd hired attended school during the day and could clean at night, it was a perfect fit. Lois said they still got fifty percent of their new hires from the nearby colleges.

Maybe Murphy's should establish a work/study program with local colleges. She set everything down again and pulled out her phone, making a note to research setting up a program.

At the door she wound her hair into a bun and wrapped a scrunchie around it. She pushed the bell and smiled when it played a tune. It reminded her of some commercial, but she couldn't recall what product.

The door opened.

She looked up, still smiling. "Hi. I'm Kate from Murphy's Maids."

The man blocking the entrance reminded her of a bear. And he wasn't old. He wasn't much older than she was.

His shoulders filled the doorway and looked twice as wide as his waist. Everything about him was dark. Dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark scowl on his face. "You're twenty minutes late."

She straightened. "I'm sorry." It wasn't like they were negotiating a multi-million-dollar lease.

He didn't move.

She chewed her lip.

His bushy eyebrows pinched together so tight it almost looked like he had a unibrow. He was taller than her brothers, and they were all over six feet.

She stared into his brown eyes, snapping with anger. "Are you letting me in?"

"I'm thinking."

God. Her brothers would tease her endlessly if she failed this job. And Dad and Mom. Shoot. She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't disappoint them. She wanted that CEO

position. She tapped her foot against the wooden floor of the porch. She had to clean this guy's house.

She touched his arm. "Please don't get me fired. This is my first day on the job." She let her gaze drop but looked up at him through her half-closed eyelashes. Let this work. Failure was not an option.

His craggy face softened. When he wasn't frowning, he was ... good-looking.

"I can't be waiting for you every week. You need to be punctual. Martha was never late."

Martha must have been part saint. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"It better not."

The client was a real grump.

He stepped aside and she hauled in the cleaning supply bucket. He grabbed the vacuum. Maybe he'd help clean too.

"Martha knew how I wanted everything," he muttered, glancing over his shoulder. "And one of my first requirements of your company was punctuality. Please remember that."

They moved through the hallway. She loved the wood floors. They were probably maple, but the stain was light and kept the hallway from feeling closed in.

"Here's the kitchen." He set the vacuum down with a thump.

Judging by the white cabinets and golden brown granite counters, the space had been remodeled. Then she took in the stain rings, lumps of food stuck to the counter, and the dishes overflowing the sink. The whole room left a general impression of dustiness. She caught a whiff of something foul, but then all she smelled was coffee. Wonderful.

Adamski poured a cup from the pot. Huh. She didn't know his first name and he hadn't offered her a cup.

Of course she hadn't given him her last name. Her cheeks grew warm. She didn't want anyone knowing what she was

doing.

She waited for him to offer her a cup. Nothing. She tapped her fingers against her leg.

“Did you talk to Martha?” he asked.

She pulled out the five-page list Lois had given her. She hadn’t read it yet. “I have her instructions.”

“Good. I’ll leave you to it. I have to work.” He pivoted and headed out the door, surprisingly graceful for such a tall man.

Unfolding the list, she read.

Mr. Adamski is very particular about the service he receives.

Be on time. He only wants cleaners in the house from 10 until 2 on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Kate planned to propose a schedule change where she would work eight hours in one day. Then she would only miss a day out of her week. And she wouldn’t have to change into regular clothes after she’d done her penance.

Most important rule—Never disturb him while he’s working.

Mr. Adamski and I developed a routine satisfactory to him. Clean in the following order:

Kitchen—do dishes.

Clean all surfaces.

Clean inside microwave.

Every other week, wipe down cupboards.

Once a month clean out fridge.

He’s okay if you throw away dated food.

This sounded like four hours of work right there. And there were five pages of instructions. Maybe she should expect more of her own Murphy’s house cleaners.

With a deep sigh, she began with the dishes. A week’s worth of pans and plates filled the sink. She swallowed at the

sight of dried spaghetti sauce and gross baked-on brown goop in a pan. Snapping on Murphy's Maids green gloves, she filled the sink with steaming water. She might need a power washer to clean the place.

Kate scraped, rinsed and filled the dishwasher. She scrubbed at the countertop until her arm ached and sweat dripped into her ear. She'd only been working thirty minutes, and she already needed a shower.

Once the counters and sinks gleamed, she stretched out her sore back. She deserved a reward.

The coffee aroma lured her to the pot. She poured a cup and found sugar in the cupboard. She sipped, closing her eyes. The man made better coffee than the shop in her office building. "Great coffee," she murmured.

"It should be. I have it shipped in special."

She jumped and almost dropped the mug. Mr. Adamski stood behind her. A smile creased his face, a dimple winking out of one cheek. God, she loved dimples.

Everything on him was large ... his nose, his cheekbones and even the dent in his chin. Rarely did a man tower over her five-foot-eight inches, but Adamski did. Warmth curled through her body. This guy was cute.

She shook her head; she wasn't here to flirt. She was here to prove to her parents that she could handle everything they dished out.

"I'm sorry, the coffee smelled delicious." And she believed in rewarding her efforts. Adamski should be admiring his empty sinks and clean counters.

The muscles in his face relaxed. "Don't worry about it." He poured himself another cup. "I keep the coffee going all day. If you need to make a pot, the coffee and filters are here."

He opened the cupboard above the coffeemaker. At least that was organized.

She'd always resented making coffee at the office. Mostly because she swore her brothers never bothered. They waited

for a staff member to make a fresh pot, and nobody called them on their laziness. But for coffee this good, she'd make a pot.

“So, you just started with Murphy's Maids?” He leaned against the counter.

She wiped the inside of the microwave. She might need to take a chisel to the dried-on food. Hefting out the glass tray, she set it gently in the sink. “First day by myself.”

She scrubbed, standing on her toes, putting muscle into scraping off what looked like more red sauce. How much spaghetti and pizza did this guy eat?

She looked at him. His eyes were the same color as his rich dark coffee.

He topped off his cup. “Are you finding everything?”

She'd only done the dishes, and it had taken half an hour. Frowning, she sniffed. Why hadn't the faint foul smell in the kitchen disappeared? “I'm good.”

She tilted her head. “Cleaning would be easier if you rinsed your dishes after you ate. Then I wouldn't have to chisel and chip at the dishes and pans. I almost threw a pot away.”

He took a step back. “Martha never said anything.”

Maybe she'd overstepped her role, but really. Saint Martha might have wanted to get in as many hours as possible working here, but not her. She wanted to get back to her real job. She bit her lip.

His gaze zoomed in on her mouth. “I'll rinse my dishes from now on.”

“Good.” She wanted him to leave. Let her finish her penance. Wow. She needed to strip off her sweatshirt. The room had gotten really warm.

“I'll let you get back to it.” His hands waved around the kitchen. “Oh, I use the filtered water for the coffee.” He pointed to a spigot on the sink.

“Thanks.” She swallowed and watched him leave. For a big man, he had a very nice butt. Very nice.

She wished they’d met at a bar. They might have dated for a week or two. Maybe she’d have slept with him, at least until she’d gotten this attraction out of her system. She didn’t date a guy for much longer than a month or two.

Until her parents admitted she was the right person to guide the future of MacBain, nothing would distract her.

So, she scrubbed. When Adamski’s home sparkled like the Hope Diamond, he would rave to her parents, and they would free her from cleaning.

Because the alternative was too awful to consider. If Adamski complained about her work, her parents would write her off, and her brothers would tease her until the end of time. And Michael would be named CEO of MacBain Enterprises.

Alex stripped off his headphones and powered off his keyboard. He took a sip of coffee, grimacing as the cold liquid slid down his throat.

Crap. Now he couldn’t even write jingles. What else could go wrong?

He wasn’t hurting for money. His songwriting paid for a near-perfect life. Or at least half the life he’d planned. Meredith and his dreams of a family had been the other half.

Those dreams had crumbled around him. Meredith had made a fool of him and now he could barely sit at the keyboard where he’d composed so many songs—for her.

He closed his eyes and let his chest rise and fall in deep breaths. He’d jokingly promised an award-winning jingle for Gabe. Gabe had stuck by him through last year’s hell. Friends stuck together.

So, he would finish this jingle. Then he would battle the sonata.

Unstructured phrases haunted his nights, but as soon as he started working on the melody and counterpoints, everything vanished. Maybe if he finished the sonata, he could move on. Tuck away his grief.

Alex tapped his fingers against the soundless keys. He needed inspiration to create this jingle for a retail lighting store. *Maybe they'd settle for "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."*

Slipping the headphones back on, he flipped the switch on his electric piano. The melody should be light and bright.

He pictured a little girl with Kate's auburn curls and bright green eyes, gave her a dimple. Sure, he hated his own dimples, but a little girl would look right with a dimple gracing the corner of her smile.

The notes flowed. For the first time in months, music poured from him like liquid gold. He could hear it all: the violins, the horns and the harp. He made a quick note: *add bells or xylophone.*

The words followed. He infused the music with images of light and hope. Always set against a backdrop of a bright-eyed, one-year-old girl with copper-colored curls. Touching the record button, he played the tune one more time. Then he laid down the lyrics.

His gravelly baritone growled out the words. The ad agency wouldn't use his voice, but at least Gabe's client would get an idea of what he was after.

He played it back. Added harmonies, tweaked. His hands shook as he pushed the play button.

The song sounded like he'd imagined. Like the sun rising on a brand-new day. A day filled with hope. Alex let out a massive sigh that ruffled the composition paper on the stand.

He'd broken through. He'd finished a composition. Almost eighteen months of creative drought and all he'd needed was a new cleaner stalking through his door. A good-looking woman with fiery green eyes who told him to rinse his plates.

He tossed his headphones on the console and rolled his chair back from the keyboard.

A vacuum buzzed above his head. Kate with her full, plump lips was in his bedroom. Her lips made him think of what a mouth like hers could do to a man who hadn't had sex in ... too long.

Sure, he'd checked out her ass. Hell, he wasn't dead. Over the last few months, his libido had come back to life. Ripped, torn designer jeans had encased her nicely rounded cheeks. But she was his house cleaner for God's sake.

She was tall. He was a big man, and the next time he slept with a woman, he wanted someone in his arms that wouldn't break. Meredith had been—fragile, model-thin. He'd always worried he might hurt her.

Kate. He liked her name. Her gaze crackled with intensity. He could fall for a woman like Kate.

What the hell was a bright young woman doing cleaning houses?

The man was a pig. Kate threw another pile of laundry into the hamper. Didn't he pick up after himself?

She stripped the sheets off his bed. He probably hadn't changed the bed since Martha retired. She wished she'd kept the rubber gloves on.

The hamper overflowed as she carted it downstairs. He must work out a lot. Most of the dirty clothes were T-shirts and sweatpants. She pushed open the laundry room door and snapped her head back. A foul odor wafted from the space, like something had died. *God, what was it?*

It had to be the smell she'd caught while in the kitchen.

Another pile of clothes overflowed the table next to the washer. That couldn't be the source, could it?

One of her high school chores had been doing her family's laundry. Her brothers' sports clothes had been the worst,

especially Stephen's hockey uniforms, but never this bad. She gulped in a breath and the smell stung the back of her throat.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled her gloves back on and sorted his clothes. There must be a thousand athletic socks.

Family sock-matching Sunday nights had been the worst. She and her brothers had to finish before they could watch TV. Most of the socks had been her brothers, but she'd been forced to match too. Life as the only girl in the MacBain family had been unfair. Who in their right mind wanted kids?

Apparently Adamski liked silk boxers. Mostly black, very nice, but she ran across a series of holiday boxers. Santa Clauses, pumpkins, four-leaf clovers and hearts, numerous heart-covered boxers. Girlfriend?

At least she hadn't found any women's underwear. And she hadn't found evidence of a woman living in the house. No clothes in the closet, no makeup in the bathroom. No condom wrappers in the garbage. Yuck.

With the clothes sorted, she opened the washer. "God!"

Kate jerked her head away, but not before her eyes watered from the stench. The lid slammed shut with a clang.

Shit. Had something died in there? She tried to breathe through her mouth, but the taste had the coffee she'd drunk threatening to come up.

Her brief glimpse into the depths of the washer had shown sheets, towels and moldy socks. Cringing, she backed out of the door and down the hallway into the kitchen.

This was the seventh level of hell!

Kate slapped her hands on the counter and pulled in deep breaths. The smell wouldn't go away. Spores of death probably filled her nose. She would end up with consumption, coughing and weak in bed. Her family would cry by her bedside, sorry for the way they'd treated her. Sorry they hadn't cherished the too few moments they'd had with her before she died.

“I want my office. My *clean* office. Where someone else removes the garbage and vacuums the floors.” She wanted to work at a job that mattered. “I hate this.”

She snatched her coffee mug off the counter and sniffed. Even the heady, rich aroma couldn't clear away the stink.

What she wouldn't give to pull the whole mess out of the washer, find where Adamski was hiding, and throw everything in his lap. If it had been her brothers' mess, she would have done just that.

Grabbing a garbage bag and wishing she had a facemask, she returned to the laundry. With a deep breath, she rushed in.

Throwing open the washing machine's lid, she frantically stuffed the contents of the machine into the bag. The fabric squished and slid through her gloved hands, covered with slime. Something green came up with the clothes. It looked like a piece of meat. She gagged.

Hurry. Hurry.

She leaned over and chased the last mildew-speckled sock around the inside of the machine. *The smell. Oh God.*

She stuffed the final sock in the bag and yanked the draw strings shut. She refused to breathe until she reached the kitchen.

Gasping, she rushed to the back door off the kitchen. Wrenching it open, she stuck her head out and drew in deep gulps of fresh cool air. Even with the bag closed, the stench escaped.

“What the hell?” Adamski's deep voice made the door clutched in her fingers vibrate. “What is that smell?”

She gasped in fresh air again. Would she ever get rid of the taste in her mouth?

“What's wrong?”

He was so close, her eardrums hurt from his shouting.

“I ...”

“Sweet Jesus, what is that?”

Fingers bit into her arm. He pulled her into the room and the door closed.

She fought back with an elbow to his stomach. She needed fresh air. “Don’t!”

She shrugged him away and bumped open the door. She gulped in air laced with the scent of flowering trees.

“Did something die?” he asked.

“Your laundry.” She grabbed the bag and then heaved it onto the kitchen deck. She hoped the crawling mess didn’t eat its way out of the plastic bag and through the decking. Maybe the military needed to know about this possible new chemical weapon.

“What the hell did you do?” His face looked a little gray.

“Me? What did I do?” She poked a finger into his chest. The firm muscles didn’t give. “When did you throw your last load of laundry into the washer?”

Black eyebrows shadowed his chocolate eyes. “I ...” His eyes flared wide open. “A while ago.”

“I think there was some sort of meat in there.” She shivered. “I’ve never seen anything so gross.”

She took a deep breath through her nose. Her eyes watered. She went back to breathing through her mouth.

“I ... I ... I didn’t look very hard for the source of the smell.” He leaned out the door, his head hovering above hers. He inhaled and then hurried back into the kitchen.

Metal screeched as Adamski opened windows. She turned as he pushed open the laundry room. He staggered as the stench washed over them.

“Do you have candles, spray, anything?” she begged.

“Living room. On the mantle.”

She ran, any excuse to escape the cloying smell. In the living room she gathered matches and large candles. The candles looked like something a decorator had placed and admonished him not to light. Too bad. Sucked to be him.

Stripping off the gloves, she set the candles on the counter and struck a match. Would the whole house blow?

Adamski returned from the basement with a fan. He plugged it in and aimed it at the open laundry door.

“You don’t happen to have a gas mask?” she asked, only partly kidding.

“Don’t I wish.” He coughed a little.

She wanted to ask what he’d been thinking. She wanted to shake him. The man needed a keeper.

With the breeze from the fan, the candles and some spray he’d squirted into the laundry, Kate could finally breathe without her eyes watering.

“Mr. Adamski,” she started.

“Alex. My name is Alex.”

The strong, masculine name suited him. “What in God’s name was in that washing machine?”

He ran fingers through his hair, making the thick curls stand up. His face turned red. “I think I might have dropped lunch meat in while I read the manual.”

“Read the manual?” Didn’t he know how to run a washing machine?

He rubbed a hand on his chin. His beard rasped against his palm. “Martha did my laundry. Up until she left me.”

Kate threw her hands up. “She retired.”

“Well, she’s been working for me since ...” Alex paused. “Ever since I moved here. I never bothered with the laundry, or the dishwasher.”

Kate had grown up in a privileged environment, but this man took the prize. How could he have survived without learning basic skills for metropolitan survival?

“I’ll be updating your education. But first we have to fumigate the washing machine.” And she meant *we*. He needed to be held accountable.

After mixing a batch of bleach, water and soap, she found a set of large gloves under the kitchen sink and handed them to Alex with a sponge and the bucket. “Wipe out the insides of the machine with this.”

“Me?” Fear filled his dark brown eyes.

“You.” She pointed at him. “I pulled everything out of the machine. Your turn.”

He sighed. The gloves almost ripped as he tugged them onto his hands. With a sigh, he trudged into the laundry room. “God.”

He wiped out the machine while she sipped another cup of coffee.

“Done,” he called, stepping out with the bucket. Tears ran down his cheeks.

“Come on.” She motioned him back to the small room.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath before entering. Once she showed him how to set the machine for a large load, she threw in the rags, added detergent and slammed the lid shut before running back into the kitchen.

“I couldn’t figure out where the smell was from.” He shifted on his size twenty shoes. “I thought it was the fridge.”

She collapsed onto a barstool. Her hands could barely hold up her head. What waited for her in the fridge?

Her phone alarm rang. Four hours had passed already? She couldn’t go to the office like this. She’d have to head home and shower. She’d planned to grab a bite to eat, but after that mess, she didn’t want to touch food for a month.

Kate shut off the alarm. “I have to leave. Don’t open the fridge. I can’t take anymore today.”

She hadn’t made it through half a page of Martha’s task list.

He fidgeted. Those big hands barely fit into the back pockets of his jeans. Jeans that stretched against a bulge she

couldn't help but notice. Was it hands or feet or a nose that was an indicator of how well-endowed a man was?

“You'll be back tomorrow? You won't bail on me like the others?”

Her mouth dropped open. “How many people have bailed?”

“Four.” His deep voice was a mere whisper.

Kate's mouth dropped open. Her mother had set her up.

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THROUGH A MAGNOLIA FILTER

THE OTHER TWIN

UNDERCOVER WITH THE HEIRESS

TO CATCH A THIEF

A SAVANNAH CHRISTMAS WEDDING

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Best-selling author of the DESIGNER CHILDREN, THE MACBAINS, BIG SKY DREAMERS and FITZGERALD HOUSE series, Nan Dixon spent her formative years as an actress, singer, dancer and competitive golfer, but the need to eat had her studying accounting in college. Unfortunately, being a successful financial executive didn't feed her passion to perform. When the pharmaceutical company she worked for was purchased, Nan got the chance of a lifetime—the opportunity to pursue a writing career. She's a five-time Golden Heart^(R) finalist and lives in the Midwest. She has five fabulous children, three wonderful son-in-laws, three granddaughters, two grandsons, one more grandchild on the way and one neurotic cat.

Nan loves to hear from her readers so contact her through the following social media.

