

Chapter 1

Kate Groves kept a tight grip on her dad’s hand and tried to keep her emotions in check. No easy task. She’d been an emotional basket case ever since she’d entered the Arcadia Valley city limits two weeks ago.

And who could blame her? Her track record in this town wasn’t exactly stellar.

Now, surrounded by the beeping and blinking machines that served as her dad’s lifelines, she willed herself to stay calm. Although if she were being honest with herself, she hadn’t been calm since she’d received the phone call telling her that her dad had been admitted to the Arcadia Valley Community Hospital.

“It’s okay, Katie Scarlett,” Dad murmured. “You don’t have to be tough on my account. I know what’s happening.”

Katie Scarlett. There was a blast from the past. Scarlett wasn’t even her middle name. He’d taken to calling her that one summer when she was in elementary school. They’d gone to visit her mother’s relatives in Atlanta and had toured a *Gone with the Wind* exhibit. She’d been ‘Katie Scarlett’ ever since, most of the time in his fake southern accent. She used to tease him that it was the worst fake accent she’d ever heard. “It’s going to be fine, Dad. They just gave you some more pain meds. You should be feeling better soon. We’ll have you home

in no time," she said in a voice that was far too chipper for the sterile hospital room, even to her own ears.

He shook his head. "I appreciate your attempt, but you never did have much of a poker face." He took a ragged breath. "Times like this I wish your mother and I had decided to go ahead and have a second child. You've certainly dealt with your fair share of hard things alone."

She managed a small smile. "And miss out on being the spoiled only child of the bunch? Never." Her mom's brother had three girls all near Kate's age and through the years they'd often tried to label her as spoiled due to her status as an only, but it had mostly been in jest.

Dad patted her hand. "I need you to do some things." He pulled her closer. "Important things." His voice was weaker than it had been yesterday. After a lifetime of being larger than life, he suddenly seemed so very human and much smaller than she remembered.

"Anything."

"Look in the bottom drawer of my desk when you go home. There's a lock box there. Eugene Boyd will come for it. He has the key." Mr. Boyd had been his lawyer for as long as Kate could remember. "There are some things in there you're going to need."

She frowned. "I really think this is unnecessary—"

Dad shook his head. "Stop." He took another breath and the machine he was hooked to let out a stream of beeps. "The house." He struggled to sit up. "The office at the farmers market."

She cast a worried gaze at the blinking machine. "I think you should stop talking. Why don't I call the nurse?"

He gripped her hand. “I’ve made arrangements for the house to be renovated. My office at the farmers market, too.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but he raised a hand to stop her. Even on his deathbed, Henry Groves was clearly still in charge. “You will be overseeing those renovations.”

Kate widened her eyes. “Me? I don’t know anything about renovations. I live in a tiny studio apartment two thousand miles from here. How am I possibly going to oversee anything?” Since she arrived in Arcadia Valley, she hadn’t even been to her childhood home. She’d come straight to the hospital and had been camped out here ever since. The thought of being in the empty house had been too much to take, and she’d preferred sleeping on the pull-out couch in her dad’s room.

He lifted his chin. Most men couldn’t pull off dignified when facing end stage liver failure and wearing a hospital gown, but her dad somehow managed to do so. “I’ve not asked much of you over the years. I’ve sent money when you required it and excused you from nearly all the family obligations that have come about. I’m asking you to live in the house and oversee the renovations. It may take a year. Your job is the kind that should let you freelance from here, am I right?”

If not for the circumstances, she would’ve been furious. As it was, she was only a bit miffed. It was so like him. “I’m not sure I can do that.” She’d thought about taking her skills as a web designer and trying to make it on her own, but she hadn’t planned on doing it now. It was one of those ‘someday’ plans that she’d never taken the time to think through.

He shut his eyes. “Katie, please. Do this one thing. For me?” He sighed. “I know I haven’t always been the best father. I know that you and I have had some tough years. But I’m

hopeful that you’ve moved past all of that stuff and can focus on things here in Arcadia Valley for a little while. Your cousins are here. Your grandmother. Your roots are here.” He reached up and stroked her cheek. “Live in the house. Renovate it to your liking. You can sell it when it’s completed if you wish. That’s fine. But live in it.” His eyes filled with tears. “It will do my heart good to think of you back there again in your childhood home. Your room is as you left it.” His voice broke. “Your mother’s things are still in our closet.”

At this admission, Kate felt the hot tears well up in her own eyes. She’d left town in such a hurry all those years ago, blinded by her own pain and anger, she had never stopped to consider that her dad may have had pain of his own. “I might be able to work out turning my position into a freelance kind of thing for a while, but I don’t know if I’d have enough work, especially until I am established.” She couldn’t believe she was even considering it.

“Run the farmers market.” He nodded. “When you oversee the renovation of my office there, have it redone to your liking. It’s just now March. Our busiest time is around the corner. You know you always loved it when you were younger. Riley and Brooke both have booths there. They can help show you the ropes.”

At the mention of her cousins, she nodded. They’d had some great times together growing up. But run the market herself? “I don’t know. I wouldn’t even know where to start.” The Arcadia Valley Farmers Market had been started by her grandfather, and her dad had continued to manage it even though he had plenty of other business opportunities around town. He’d always believed having a marketplace for small farmers was vital to their community. “Don’t you already have

a manager in place?” She’d assumed her dad had all his business ventures covered. He’d always been such a workaholic.

“I worked as much as I could up until last week, but I never could make myself hire anyone for the farmers market. It hit me that you were the obvious choice.”

“But Dad, I haven’t even been to the market since I was in high school. And in case you don’t realize it, more than a decade has passed since then. Besides, I need a job that pays.” There. That was an excuse he could understand, she was sure of it.

“Over the past weeks, I’ve made certain that Brooke knows where everything is that pertains to the business side of the market. I’ve given her some info to pass on to you. If you could step in and manage it at least for this season, it would be a real load off my mind.” He patted her hand. “Don’t worry about money. You’ll get paid for your time. The market is profitable. And maybe spruce up our webpage if you have the chance.” He gave her a knowing look.

He’d asked her before to help out with the site and she’d always had a million reasons why she didn’t have time. “I may be able to handle the website, but I certainly don’t know anything about managing a farmers market.”

“You’ll do fine.” He gripped her hand again. “And Katie Scarlett?”

She leaned down. “Yes, Daddy?”

“Please try to forgive me.” His voice was barely a whisper.

The machines began to beep again, and this time Katie found herself swept out of the room by a nurse.



Drew Harrison had never believed in déjà vu.

But today, sitting on the back row at the Arcadia Valley Funeral Home, he couldn’t help but feel as if he’d been here before.

Eleven years ago, just a few days after high school graduation, he’d sat in this exact spot. Hidden from view and certainly not wanted there by the Groves family.

And here he was again.

He wondered for what seemed like the millionth time today why he’d even bothered to show up. Henry Groves had certainly been no fan of his, and for much of his life the feeling had been mutual.

But as soon as he’d learned of Henry’s passing, he’d dropped his good suit off at the cleaners. And now, watching the family stream in, he paid close attention to the lone figure at the front of the line.

Katie.

After all these years.

For a second, he wished she’d turn around and see him. Except that he feared what he might see reflected in her eyes. Would it still be the fiery hate that had been there the last time they’d spoken? Or had eleven years turned that animosity into something else? Something worse even.

Maybe she didn’t remember him at all. Maybe she’d not given him another thought in all the years she’d been away.

The minister greeted the crowd and began to eulogize Mr. Groves. As he began to outline all of the man’s success in life, Drew let his mind wander.

The hallway at his new elementary school seemed so much longer than the one he’d left on the other side of town. Why in the world couldn’t his stupid dad keep a steady job? He missed

his old school already. No one wanted to start over and have to make new friends as a sixth grader.

"Are you new here?"

Drew glanced around and stopped in his tracks.

The redhead smiled. "I'm Katherine Groves. My friends call me Katie."

Drew stammered an introduction, surprised at his reaction toward her. He'd heard about puberty and his mom had mentioned that the day would come when he'd start seeing girls as more than just softball teammates.

It seemed that day was here, because she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen that wasn't on television or in one of the posters Landon Jenkins' older brother had on his bedroom wall.

"Do you have Mrs. Holder for homeroom?" she asked.

He nodded. "I, uh, think so, yeah."

She giggled. "Me, too. Come on. Don't be nervous. You'll love it here." She motioned down the hall. "I've already checked out the room. I'll show you where it is."

A tap on his shoulder brought him back to reality. A tall, lanky man with wire-rimmed glasses stood at the end of the aisle. "Can you scoot down?" he whispered.

Drew slid across the pew to make room. He'd never seen this dude before. Maybe a distant relative? He thought he'd met all of Katie's family at one point or another, but maybe there were still a few he didn't know.

He turned his attention back to the preacher, who was beginning to list Mr. Groves' surviving family members.

Twenty minutes later, the service was over. The guy next to him leaned over. "Can you tell me how far the cemetery is from here?"

Drew gave him directions. "Are you a friend of the family?" he asked.

"I'm Kate's friend," he said. "From Atlanta."

Friend? Drew gave the guy another once over. "It was nice of you to come all this way for a friend."

The guy adjusted his glasses. "Well, I suppose that was a misleading word. We're a little more than friends." He chuckled. "We've been dating for the past two years."

"I see." Drew stood up. He'd already decided not to go to the cemetery. He wasn't ready to see Katie yet. He needed to really think about what to say. "So did you ever meet her dad?" He was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"No. I guess there was a little friction there. She's spent the last few holidays with my family, but lately she'd started to talk more about Arcadia Valley. She'd planned to bring me here for Christmas this year." He stuck his hand out. "I'm Aiden, by the way."

"Nice to meet you." Drew shook his hand but didn't offer his own name. The last thing he wanted was for this guy to tell Katie he'd met him. "I'd better get going. I have a meeting soon."

The guy stepped out of the row to let Drew pass.

"Enjoy your time here," Drew said. "But sorry for the circumstances." He left the building as quickly as he could. Should he feel happy that Katie had a significant other? It had been so many years since they'd seen each other, but that didn't mean he'd stopped caring about her happiness.

But for some reason, meeting her boyfriend didn't make him feel any better about the past.

Not at all.

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