

Chapter 1

Cole Anderson had been in love with Allie Bigby for just about ever. To some, it might sound like an exaggeration, but from the moment he laid eyes on her in elementary school, he knew that someday he was going to make Allie Bigby his wife. When he told his best friend Peter Houston, Peter had scoffed saying a third-grader would never waste his time on someone in a baby class, because Allie was a first-grader. But even then, Cole held firm to that belief. He'd just kept it to himself for all these years.

Except for a few failed attempts at getting her attention in high school, Cole had never let on how deeply he cared for Allie. He'd always hoped that someday, they'd find a way to be together. Which was hard to do when Allie never seemed to know he existed.

When he saw her working the register at Gas N' Shop, after him having been gone for more than ten years, his heart skipped a beat. No ring on the finger,

and from what his sister-in-law had told him, no guy in the picture at all. He'd just hoped for a little more time before being faced with his childhood crush. Even so, he hadn't expected the memories of Allie to come to mind so readily.

"How can I help you?" Allie said with the dimpled smile he'd never been able to get out of his mind.

"I'm looking for..."

What had he come in there for? Cole looked around frantically. Gum? No. Mints? No. Dried beef sticks? No. Tacky Christmas knickknacks? No. Woman with a crying baby on the other side of the store? That triggered something.

"I need a wife," he blurted.

Allie gaped at him, just as she had in high school when his grand attempt at asking her to Homecoming had crashed and burned. He'd been certain that if she could see just how much he was willing to do for her, she'd realize what a great guy he was.

How was he supposed to know that singing "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" to a girl only resulted in a date in the movie, *Top Gun*? Maybe, if she'd been as airplane crazy as he'd been at the time, she'd have seen the old movie and known what to do. But that was beside the point.

Had he just told Allie Bigby that he was looking for a wife?

"I'm afraid we're fresh out of wives," she said, shaking her head. "Actually, I'm pretty sure we stopped

selling females here about twenty years ago, when they converted the sale barn to the Gas N' Shop. And even then, I don't think they sold humans."

Was she trying to be funny or was she being serious? It was hard to tell with Allie because every time he tried to talk to her, everything he said came out so jumbled that she always walked away shaking her head. Like she was doing now.

"No, wait. I... that's not what I meant. I need something for my wife."

Oh no. He didn't have a wife. What was he saying? Why couldn't he string more than two words together in a sentence when he was around her?

"Sorry. I meant my brother's wife. Jess sent me. The..." He took a deep breath.

What was wrong with him? A simple errand for his sister-in-law and he couldn't remember what it was. Why did Allie Bigby make him so discombobulated? Recognition dawned on Allie's face.

"She was supposed to pick up some things from me earlier, is that what you mean?"

"Yes." Cole let out a long sigh. "I can't believe I forgot what it was. Some kind of salve she needed for the baby's diaper rash."

Diaper rash. One more inappropriate topic to be discussing with the woman of his dreams. But surely Allie knew what he was there for, and that it was meant for diaper rash. After all, Allie was the one who made

the stuff. From what Jessica had told him, she was a real whiz at creating homemade items out of lavender.

"Cole Anderson." She said his name slowly as she shook her head. "I heard you were here for a visit."

"You remember me?"

Allie stared at him. "How could I not? You made high school miserable for me."

Yeah, so on the scale of one to ten of the world's greatest love stories, he was pretty sure this response wouldn't even give it a zero. He tried consoling himself by saying that at least she remembered him, but from the look on her face, he'd rather she didn't.

Could he get a do-over on this whole pursuing Allie thing?

"I'm sorry, I don't really remember that part." It was the best he could come up with on such short notice. Especially because he thought that he'd been the one humiliated, not Allie.

Allie gave him a smile that he didn't think she meant in a nice way.

"Oh, but I do. I know you supposedly had a crush on me back then, but you had some funny ways of showing a girl you liked her. So please, do me a favor. Steer clear of me while you're here." Allie reached under the counter and then handed him a box.

"Here's the salve. Take it and go before something terrible happens."

From the way she talked, Cole supposed he should have been grateful she didn't hand him a restraining

order. It was slightly mortifying that his attempts at getting her to go out with him in high school were such a bad memory for her.

He'd envisioned that his reunion with Allie would be a little more... joyous. Or at least the same kind of reunion he'd had with his old friends when he ran into them since his return to Arcadia Valley. When he stopped by El Corazon, his favorite Mexican restaurant, he was immediately greeted by his old friend Javier, who'd given him dinner on the house because it had been so long since they'd seen each other.

Several of their other old friends had stopped in, and it was almost like a reunion. Allie's brother, Andrew, had also been one of Cole's good friends, and he'd come by. Though maybe Cole should have gotten the hint when he'd asked about Allie, and Andrew had abruptly changed the subject.

As Cole turned to leave, he nearly ran into a short woman with dark hair, who clearly had something on her mind.

"I knew it!"

The woman yanked the box out of Cole's hand, and held it in the air. "You *are* selling your lavender stuff out of here. Just wait until I tell Dan."

As she was speaking, the door had opened and an older, balding man stepped in. "Tell me what?"

"Even though you've asked her not to, Allie has been selling her lavender products here at the Gas N' Shop. I just watched this man get some from her."

Cole glanced over at Allie, who looked even more angry than she had when she'd talked to him.

"I didn't sell anything," Allie said. "No money changed hands. You can check the security camera if you don't believe me."

At least Cole had a chance to help her out of this mess. "It's true. I didn't give her any money. I was just picking this up for my sister-in-law. She already paid for it."

Instead of looking grateful, Allie looked like she wanted to throttle him.

"That's still selling," the woman said, smiling like she'd won a big prize.

"I didn't sell it to her." Allie turned to Dan. "It was just a favor to a friend. A gift. How many times have you left things here for friends to pick up? Just the other day, you had me give those flies you made to Stan Baumgardner. I made the salve for Jess, but I didn't have time to drop it off at her house earlier. I was going to run it to her when I got off," Allie looked over at the clock on the wall. "Which was supposed to be fifteen minutes ago."

Dan nodded slowly. "Who is this guy, then?"

Allie gave him a look, like she wanted him to stay out of it. "Her brother-in-law. I don't know why she sent him, but it doesn't really matter. The point is, it was just something I made for her friend, who sent someone to pick it up rather than wait for me to come by."

“But you’re still wasting company time,” the nasty woman said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ll bet you don’t have those reports done.”

“Actually, I do.” Allie walked back around the counter and pulled out a folder from underneath. “I have all the stocking done for the day, and I went through the order list and updated it, and-”

“Enough,” Dan said. “I get the picture. But you know how I feel about you conducting personal business from the store.”

Shaking her head, Allie let out a long sigh. “I do. Honestly, since the last time you talked to me about this, I haven’t brought my work here. This was just a favor for a friend whose baby has a miserable diaper rash. It was an emergency.”

“Emergency or not, friends are still personal business,” the woman said.

Cole wanted to smack the smirk off her face. Why wasn’t Allie defending herself more strongly? If she wouldn’t, then he would. He turned to her. “I know it’s hard for you to understand what it must be like to have friends, but you should give Allie a break. She’s the nicest person I know, and she doesn’t deserve to be talked to like this.”

“It’s fine, Cole. Just go home, and I’ll sort this out. Nadia just misunderstood what was going on, and that’s that. But as she has rightfully pointed out, this is a place of business, and we all need to get back to work.”

Allie turned to go back to the counter, but Nadia stopped her. “I’m here now, you can just go home. We’ll call you if we decide you can come back to work.”

“What are you saying?” Allie’s voice was quiet, and Cole hated the defeated tone it had taken.

Surely they weren’t going to fire her over something so silly?

Cole took another step forward. “You can’t just leave her hanging like that. You haven’t given her due process, and if you’re going to fire her, then you need to give her her last paycheck.”

Nadia nodded, and for the first time, she looked almost like she was going to be reasonable. “You’re right. Let me go into the back and write her a check. That way she knows for sure she’s fired.”

That wasn’t exactly what he’d been aiming for, especially since Allie looked like she was about to cry. But really, was working for such an awful person the best she could do with her life?

“It’s a terrible job anyway,” Cole said. “Allie doesn’t need this job.”

Allie shot him a glare that made him want to be sick. Apparently, defending her had not been his brightest idea.

“Actually, I do need this job. It’s a great job, and I’m happy to have it. Cole doesn’t speak for me, just as you don’t speak for Dan. He owns the place, not you.”

Turning to Dan, Allie said, “You know I’m a good worker. I come in early, I stay late, I cover whatever

shifts you need. Yes, I made a mistake, and I'm sorry. It didn't cost us any business, since no customers have come in this entire space of time. I can assure you, it won't happen again."

At least Dan looked like he was thinking about her words. He nodded slowly, as if she had made several good points. And Cole would admit that she had. Probably better points than he had. He should have done what Allie asked, and stayed out of it.

"How many times has she said that?" Nadia said, glaring at Dan. "You promoted me to assistant manager to make this store more profitable. She's a distraction from where this business needs to go. This isn't the first time we've had to talk to her about her many failings. If you can't man up and do the right thing, then you're going to need to find another assistant manager."

Was this woman serious?

Apparently, she was. Because Dan looked completely and utterly defeated. "I'm sorry, Allie."

Allie nodded slowly. "I know you are." Then she looked over Nadia and shook her head. "It didn't have to be like this. I really wish we could have worked together in a cooperative manner for the good of our community. I'm sorry you didn't feel the same way."

Her words didn't appear to affect Nadia at all. "I'll just go get your check."

"Thanks." Then Allie turned to Dan. "I hope you know what you're doing, because you and I both know this isn't right."

He didn't respond, and Cole was glad. Mostly because Cole wasn't sure he could continue keeping his mouth shut in light of this injustice.

Still, he had to say something to encourage her. "It'll be all right. You'll find a new job. A better job."

Allie spun and glared at him. "Since apparently, I no longer work here, I also no longer have to be nice to the customers. I know you think you mean well, but you've done enough damage. If you want to help me, do as I asked and go home. And never bother me again."

As reunions went, this definitely was not what Cole had been expecting.

Coming back to Arcadia Valley was only supposed to be a temporary pit stop over the holidays until Cole could figure out what he wanted to do with his life now that the Army had determined he was unfit for service. Thanks to a training jump gone wrong, his back was too messed up for him to pass his physicals.

For a brief moment, he'd actually thought that maybe he could find a way to start over in Arcadia Valley. His brother, his uncle, old friends, and seeing Allie again. He hadn't been able to win her heart in high school, and now, that goal seemed farther away than ever.

Maybe it was a sign that he really and truly did have to move on.

His life was basically ruined. And judging by the way she'd glared at him on his way out, she thought hers

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was too. The difference was, somebody as pretty, healthy, smart, and talented as Allie had a lot of options. No one grew up wanting to work at the Gas N' Shop.

He really had been trying to help. But maybe, this was all a blessing in disguise. He'd help Allie find a better job, and hopefully, in the process, figure out his own life as well.

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