

Chapter One

Brooke Lockwood was on her third cup of coffee—mocha actually, with double whip—when she realized she'd made a terrible mistake. She looked around the Beanery, her favorite coffee shop in all of Arcadia Valley, Idaho, and then glanced at her watch. Her date would be here in ten minutes.

What had she been thinking?

A date.

There was no way she was ready for that. Wasn't it still too soon?

Since her husband's death three years earlier, she'd been focused only on raising their son, River. Certainly not on having a social life. But here she was, wearing skinny jeans and a cute flowy top that she'd borrowed from her cousin, Kate. Because her own wardrobe was either church clothes, farm clothes, or yoga pants, and she wanted to look special tonight.

Her phone buzzed against the table, startling her.

It was her sister, Olivia.

For a moment, she considered ignoring the call, but thought better of it. Olivia was hard to ignore. The phrase 'like a dog with a bone' came to mind.

“Hi.” Brooke took a breath and steeled herself against the inevitable pep talk she was about to receive.

“Don’t even think about leaving. Just sit there and have another mocha and try to relax.”

She frowned and looked over her shoulder. Was Olivia spying on her? “What are you talking about?”

Olivia chuckled. “Don’t try and play innocent. Riley and I are sitting here in her kitchen watching the clock. She seemed to think you’d be considering bailing about now, but I said you’d never stand someone up.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. They knew her well. Too well. “I’ll call you after Davis and I are finished.”

“Let’s just hope Dr. Davis is as dreamy as he seems,” Olivia said.

Here’s hoping. Brooke disconnected the call and checked again that her phone was on silent. She didn’t want her sisters interrupting.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the door open. Her heart pounded. This was it. No backing out now.

Davis Collins had become a regular at her stand at the Arcadia Valley Farmers Market. In fact, over the past month, he’d stopped by weekly to pick up a dozen of her farm fresh eggs. Their conversation had grown deeper each week, so when he asked her if she wanted to get together for a cup of coffee, she couldn’t think of a reason to turn him down.

“Brooke,” Davis grinned as he approached her table. “Already had a cup?”

Or three. She smiled back. “My parents picked River up early, so I figured I’d come get us a table.” She held up her coffee mug. “And I couldn’t resist.”

“Would you like another cup?” he asked.

“I’m good for now,” she said. She watched as he placed his order with the barista. She’d seen Grant

Ward, the Beanery's owner, earlier but hadn't gotten the chance to speak to him. They'd known each other in high school, and it had been a pleasant surprise when he'd moved back to Arcadia Valley a few years ago and opened the coffee shop. He kept to himself most of the time, but always seemed to be glad to see Brooke and her sisters. Of course, his gladness likely stemmed from the fact that Brooke and her family were some of his best customers.

"I've never been here before," Davis said as he took the seat across from her. "I've driven past but haven't had the chance to stop."

"The coffee is really good. They roast their own beans here, too. Although you may have sampled the coffee at the farmers market. The Beanery has a booth there on weekends where the owner showcases new flavors."

Davis shook his head. "I don't guess I've seen it." His green eyes twinkled. "I've been too distracted by the beautiful woman selling fresh eggs to notice what else is there."

She blushed. "Not that I don't appreciate your business or your compliments, but there really are other vendors at the market that are worth checking out."

He shrugged. "Guess that gives me a reason to come back this way. You do realize that I'm not really driving all the way from Twin Falls just for fresh eggs, right?"

She laughed. "I mean, my chickens lay good eggs. So I wouldn't blame you."

"That first Saturday when I met you was really a fluke. I set out to visit some antique stores and ended up seeing a sign for the market. Kudos to whoever does the marketing, or else I may never have met you,"

“My cousin, Kate, runs the market. Her grandfather started it many years ago. She took it over from her dad a few years ago. I’ll be sure and let her know that her signage worked, because she’s always looking for ways to bring in out of towners to the market.”

“Tell me more about you,” Davis said. “I feel like I’ve only learned bits and pieces.”

She’d told him on their second meeting that she was a widow. River had been with her at the market that day, and she’d picked up on his curiosity about her situation. “What you see is what you get, I guess. I have a farm. I raise goats and chickens. I sell both, plus cheese and eggs. In my spare time, I’m chasing after River. He turned three on his birthday, so he keeps me busy.” She shrugged. “That’s pretty much it.”

He cocked his head and smiled. “Somehow I doubt it. Don’t you have family here, too?”

She nodded. “My sisters live nearby. Riley is the youngest. She got married not too long ago and they have a beautiful little girl named Hope. And my middle sister, Olivia, is recently engaged. She moved back to Arcadia Valley last year. She does cooking segments for the local TV station. And Kate may only be my cousin, but we grew up like sisters. She moved back here a couple of years ago to take over the farmers market. It’s really nice that we’re all in the same place again, just like when we were kids.” Hardly a day passed that she didn’t speak to her sisters and cousin, and most days she saw them in person.

“Cool,” Davis said. “It’s nice that you’re close to your family. I’m an only child, and I always thought it would be neat to grow up with siblings.”

Brooke nodded. “They drive me crazy sometimes, even now that we’re grown, but I wouldn’t trade them for the world.”

“I’m glad we did this,” Davis said, motioning at their coffee mugs. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a date.”

Before Brooke could confess that it was her first date since Ed’s death, a woman stopped at their table. Brooke had been so engrossed in their conversation, she hadn’t noticed the woman when she’d walked toward them.

“Hello, Davis.” The redhead slammed her hand onto their table, causing Brooke’s coffee mug to bounce. “Did you forget this?” The woman asked, removing her hand and leaving a gleaming wedding band in its place.

Brooke looked at Davis with wide eyes.

Surely not.

The woman sneered and tossed her hair. “That’s right, sweetheart. Your coffee date with my husband is over.”



“Mr. Ward?” Jamie stuck her head in his office, a sheepish look on her face.

“Yes?” He looked up from the latest letter from his mother. His parents embraced technology and used texts and even FaceTime, but his mother’s favorite form of communication was an old-fashioned letter.

“We have kind of an issue.”

Grant glanced at the wall clock. It was past closing time. “What’s wrong?” Visions of expensive equipment

failures flashed through his mind. He'd just replaced the state-of-the-art coffee dispenser. Surely it wasn't that.

"There's, um, a customer in the women's bathroom still. She's been in there for a while"

He raised his eyebrows. "Is she sick?"

"I don't think so. . ." she trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"Jamie, what's going on?"

"That blond woman who comes in all the time with her little boy and her sisters? She kind of had a bad date."

"Brooke?" She'd had a date? He'd noticed her when she came in, but she was in so frequently he hadn't thought anything about it. Although now that he considered it, she had looked extra nice. Even prettier than normal, if that was possible.

Jamie nodded. "Yeah." She cleared her throat. "Apparently. . . I mean, I guess she was, like, on a date with a married man or something. And the guy's wife came in. It was kinda an ugly scene."

"*Brooke* was on a date with a married man?" Something about this story wasn't ringing true. He sighed. "Go on and go, Jamie. Thanks for letting me know. Will you lock the door and put the CLOSED sign out when you leave?"

"Sure." She smacked her gum. "I feel really sorry for her, you know? Dating is hard enough when you're seventeen like me. I can't imagine having to date when you're, like, *old*."

Grant sighed and shook his head. No point in explaining to a high school student that thirties weren't exactly over the hill. He'd thought the same thing when he'd been her age.

And now that he was firmly in his thirties, he realized just how wrong he'd been. All that time he'd assumed once you were out of college you had life figured out. Now he knew the truth—no one, no matter what age, ever really had life all figured out.

He made sure Jamie had followed his instructions and locked up, then he stopped outside of the women's bathroom. He softly rapped on the door. "Brooke? Are you in there?"

"Yes." Her voice was muffled. "I'll be out in a minute."

"We're closed. There's no one here but me."

A long moment passed, then the door opened.

Brooke had scrubbed the makeup from her face and put her hair in a ponytail, but her red-rimmed, swollen eyes told the tale of her night. "I guess you heard what happened," she said quietly.

He nodded. A woman like Brooke certainly didn't deserve to spend her evening crying in a coffee shop bathroom. "I heard but it didn't make sense." He motioned toward the counter. "Want a cup of coffee and to tell me about it?"

She managed a shaky smile. "Decaf? I think I'm wired enough for the night."

Grant smiled back. "Sure. Have a seat."

He quickly whipped up two decaf mochas and added two scoops of sugar and extra whipped cream to hers. He sat a steaming mug in front of her, then took a seat.

"You know how I like my coffee?" she asked once she'd tasted it.

"Hot mocha with extra whipped cream and two sugars most of the time, except for during the holidays when you like just a splash of peppermint added."

She grinned. "I must come in way too often."

He took a sip of his own coffee. "Just so you don't think I'm some kind of creepy stalker, I know what Riley and Kate usually order, too. Not your tea drinking sister though. She orders something different every time."

Brooke laughed. "Olivia is finally starting to come to her senses. When she first moved back, she brought her own tea bags with her when we'd come here and she'd ask for hot water."

Grant nodded. "I know. I actually considered adding tea to the menu, but she's the only person who has ever asked for it here. Our name alone pretty much explains that coffee is our specialty."

Brooke took a sip from her mug, She put it down and cupped it with her hands.

"So, bad date?" Grant asked.

"Understatement." She sighed. "He seemed like such a nice guy. He's a doctor of family medicine from Twin Falls. I met him when he stopped in at the market a few weeks ago. He came back every Saturday and bought eggs from me." She shook her head. "What an idiot I am."

"He isn't a nice guy, huh?"

"Not nice and also not single. When his *wife* stormed in and threw his wedding ring on the table, I wanted the floor to swallow me whole. Can you imagine how this kind of news is going to spread through town? It's bad enough to feel like the token town widow, but now I date married men." She put her head in her hands.

"Even if it does spread through town, people know you well enough to know that you didn't do it intentionally. And besides. Maybe there's some kind of

simple explanation.” He couldn’t think of one but felt like he needed to say something helpful.

She frowned. “I’m not interested in his explanation. He didn’t deny it when she walked in. That’s all I needed to know. He sent a text saying we needed to talk, and I blocked his number.”

“I can’t say that I blame you there.” He took another drink of coffee. “So do you date a lot?” Was he being too nosy? He hoped she wouldn’t take offense.

She shook her head. “This was my first one since Ed died. I’m not sure I was really ready for a date, but then again, I may never feel like I’m ready.”

“It’s tough.” He knew all too well.

“When you lose the person you’ve planned a future with, it’s like you don’t even know how to act. How do you know when it’s too soon—or if you want to move on at all?” She shook her head. “Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure I was on this date for all the wrong reasons anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

Brooke took another sip of coffee. “It’s so dumb I hate to even admit it.”

“Try me.”

“This summer is the Jennings Olympics.”

He grinned. “Okay, I admit it. Of all the things I thought you might say, that wasn’t even in the running.”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you it was dumb.”

“No, no. Come on. Tell me what exactly the Jennings Olympics entail.”

“My dad’s family has always been super competitive. Like you don’t want to be around them for a card game or a board game, and you sure don’t want to try and play any kind of sports with them.”

He chuckled.

“Seriously. When I was younger, and my dad’s relatives would come in from out of town, the grownups would argue more than the kids over whatever game they were playing. One year my grandmother finally removed the cards and the dominoes from her house and declared that she was tired of listening to them argue. She instituted what she called a “more civilized” competition, and that year the Jennings Olympics were born. There were categories for the grown, married couples, and also a division for us kids. The winner of each division got bragging rights for the year and a hideous trophy.”

Grant grinned. “That’s awesome.”

She sighed. The last Olympics I took part in was the year before Ed passed away. He and I actually won the couples division that year. I’ve missed the family reunion since then because of River—we rotate locations for our family reunion now and the last couple of years I just couldn’t travel with him. But this year it’s in Arcadia Valley . . .” she trailed off.

He was pretty sure he knew where she was going but wanted to be sure. “And so this year you don’t have an excuse?”

She nodded. “Yep. As Olivia said, I can’t hide forever.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

She gave him a tiny smile. “That competitive gene was passed to me, too, I guess. And without a spouse or significant other. . .”

“You’re out of the family Olympics.”

“Yep. Kate and Drew, Riley and Blake, Olivia and Wyatt. . .they’re all partnered up.” She ticked them off on her fingers. “My mom told me that I could be partners with Dad. But I don’t want that.” She shook

her head. “I know it’s completely ridiculous. I’ve avoided dating or even the idea of it for so long, and for good reason. But then I just pictured myself standing there, watching them all take part in something that I used to love. I know that on the one hand, I’ll be sad because it will make me miss Ed since he’s been a part of it. I mean, we started dating back in high school, as you know. He and I did a lot of years of family Olympics together.” She sighed. “I guess I thought maybe if I’d hit it off with Davis tonight that maybe by September we’d be close enough that I could ask him to go and be my partner and then I wouldn’t be so alone. And really, the alone part doesn’t bother me all that much because I’m used to it, but I hate the thought of my extended family watching me and feeling sorry for me.” She looked up at him. “See? Dumb.”

Grant regarded her for a moment. “That’s not dumb at all. I get it.” More than she knew. “I’m really sorry about tonight. You deserve way better.”

“Thanks.” She stood up. “I’ll be more careful next time. Or maybe there won’t be a next time. I don’t know.” Brooke opened her purse and fished out some dollar bills. “This should cover my coffee.”

He shook his head. “That cup was on the house.”

She smiled. “Thanks.” With no makeup and her hair in a ponytail, she looked just like she had in high school when he’d first met her.

Grant walked her to the door. “Be careful heading home.”

She nodded. “Sorry for keeping you past closing.” She held up her coffee. “Thanks again for this.”

“Any time.” He watched as she made her way to her car, then locked the door.

What a night.

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