

## CHAPTER ONE

Ice, snow, and a herd of deer, taking a shortcut across the highway, had quickly become Brie Dresser's nemeses. Now, an hour later, the driver for Al's Wrecker Service had given her a ride to her destination and left her, and her luggage, on the sidewalk in front of her grandma's house. Her inconspicuous entrance into Awesome, Missouri had not gone as planned.

She raised her phone and snapped a photo of her car being towed on down the street. Maybe she'd use the picture in one of her podcasts.

Turning to face the house Grandma Rose had left her in the will, she felt as if she were frozen in place. Not by the weather, but by the memories. Technically, the house belonged to her, but she'd always think of it as her grandma's place. She snapped a picture of the two-story cream with white trim Victorian, then tucked her phone in the side pocket of her smallest tote.

A soft glow of light from the streetlight half a block up combined with the colorful Christmas lights trimming the outline of the house across the street. The big red bulbs on the neighbors towering blue spruce added even more light which helped light her way.

Following the smooth flatness of snow covering the sidewalk, she trudged toward the porch steps, pulling the two double-stacked suitcases behind her. As she stepped on to the wraparound porch, a vision of Grandma Rose opening the front door and pulling her into a big hug flashed before her eyes. Instantly, the scent of fresh-baked snickerdoodle cookies tickled her tastebuds. And the smell of cocoa, nice and chocolatey, warmed her insides

But there were no cookies this time. No cocoa. Her bottom lip trembled as she brushed away a rampant tear on her cheek. Not going to happen this time, or ever again, so she might as well get on with it.

Rummaging in her purse, she found the key the attorney, or someone, had sent after the Zoom reading of the will. Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and stepped inside, then flipped the deadbolt in place.

A glow of light greeted her from the kitchen. Aunt Sage must have stayed late to get things ready for her. After toeing off her shoes, she sat them to the side and pushed her luggage to the bottom of the stairs before heading across the living room. Not taking time to turn on the lights, she stubbed her toe on a chair she didn't remember being in that spot. Her grandma must have done some rearranging at some point.

"Surprise! I got here early," she said, stepping into the kitchen.

"What the—" Thud!

"Hello?" She turned in the sound's direction.

A broad shouldered, mid-thirties man, wearing an olive green *Go Army* t-shirt, crawled out from under the sink. Holding his head and clearly in pain, he dropped the wrench he'd been holding then pressed his palm against his forehead. His biceps bulged against the short sleeves.

She quickly glanced upward and grabbed a frying pan from the pot rack—that was new—and, just as quick, back to the man. "Who are you?"

He slowly stood, all six feet something of him, and braced himself against the cabinet. Then grabbed a couple pieces of ice from the refrigerator, wrapped them in a

towel and held it against the knot that had made an ugly appearance on his forehead. Took his time, as if he had every right to be standing in her kitchen.

Exasperated, she popped the skillet against her hand. "Hey. I said who are you."

"Adam Barkley. I own Main Street Hardware and—"

"No. No. No. Old Mr. Lanford owns the local hardware store. Has for the past forty-five years." She pointed the pan at the man's chest. "Trust me, you don't have the body of an eighty-year-old man."

Gingerly shaking his head, he quirked the corner of his mouth, providing her with a look somewhere between a smile and utter frustration. "I bought the shop last February. And just who are you?"

"I'm Brie Dresser. This is my grandma's . . ." She cleared her throat. "This is my house."

Slowly he drew in a long breath. Blew it out in a noisy exhale. "You're not supposed to be here till tomorrow."

"Well, I decided—"

"Of course, you did." He grinned and his blue eyes seemed to brighten.

"What's so funny?"

"Rose said that was one of your favorite sayings." He tossed the ice and towel in the sink, then crawled back under the cabinet. "Give me ten minutes and I'll have this plumbing finished."

Perplexed at why her grandma would have shared that with him, but for some reason okay with a man from the hardware store working her sink, Brie hung the pan back on the hook.

"What are you doing?"

"I had to wait on a replacement part for the new faucet. It finally got here this afternoon." He stood back up. Checked the water flow from the faucet. Checked back under the sink. Then

stood once again. "If you ever have a leak, turn the shut-off valve under the sink and call me. Do you know what a shut-off valve is?"

Condescending? Helpful? She had no idea, but she flashed him her nicest fake smile. "Yes, I know what a shut-off valve is. What it does. And where it's located."

There were five people you never wanted to get on the wrong side of—the baker, the florist, the butcher, the delivery driver and the owner of the only hardware store in town. Besides, as far as eye-candy went, he was a "10".

"Sorry, I asked. But a lot of people don't." He continued to look at her. "I bet *you're* upset I asked."

Now he was getting on her last nerve, but she could be polite for a few more minutes. "Is there anything else you need to do in here tonight?"

"Nope. I finished the rest up about thirty minutes ago. The first-floor remodel is officially complete." Meticulously, he wiped down the plyers, screwdrivers and wrench before placing them in his small toolbox.

For the first time since arriving, she glanced around the kitchen. Her grandma's antique round-and-solid oak table still sat in the bay window, but instead of the rickety chairs there was now banquette seating. Cheerful orange and yellow cushions completed the transformation.

Even the original maple cabinets had been replaced with a pale cream French Country design, surrounded by a coordinating backsplash and countertop. What used to be an open space in the middle of the room had a green kitchen island stretched half the length of the kitchen, with stools along one side. The quartz and butcher-block top were

perfect. So were the three pendant lights hung above. New appliances completed the transformation.

Adam cleared his throat as if to get her attention. As she turned toward him, he raised his eyebrows, and motioned her toward the living room, dining room and first floor bath.

Following his directions, she stepped back through the doorway to the living room and flipped on the light. Instead of her grandma's living room there to welcome her, she was met with a remodeled, repainted, and rearranged version.

Her legs felt weakened by the simple act of standing, so she leaned against the chair she'd stubbed her toe on earlier. Here and there, a few of her grandma's keepsakes remained. Enough to stir memories, but the majority of the room was like a fresh slate waiting for her touch.

The three-generation picture of her, her mother Lily, and Grandma Rose still sat on the small table near the bottom of the stairs. Her hand slightly trembled as she touched the side of the frame. She jerked back, shaking her head.

"No, I can't do this yet. Not now." She quickly walked back into the kitchen and stared into his eyes. "I assume you did this."

"My workmen did some. I did some." Nodding, he never broke their look's connection. "Trust me, everything's been done exactly according to the contract."

This had been one really long day and she was tired. The steam she felt rising inside her, would best be tamped down but . . . "Well, if Aunt Sage approved all of this, then you'll need to get your money from her because—"

"Rose."

"What?"

"Your Grandma Rose made the contract with me." He picked up his coat and tool chest, then headed to the front door. "Why don't you get some rest and take a look around tomorrow. For now, let's just say, your grandma approached me with an idea. Gradually, we agreed on the ins and outs of the work order specifics. And, I plan—no, I promised—to fulfill every detail just like she wanted."

Brie braced her hands on her hips. "I want to see this so-called contract."

"It's a verbal contract. One built on trust by both of us."

"That's convenient."

"The only paperwork is with the bank, who pays me from the remodel receipts I turn in." He sat down his tool chest, with a light thud, and mirrored her hands on hips stance. Even threw in a sigh as he scrunched his forehead into a pinch of tight wrinkles. "So, talk to Sage. Talk to the bank. Talk to anyone you want. But I'm done talking for tonight."

They both let their arms fall to their sides. Both shook their heads.

He picked up his toolbox once again. "Look, I've been up since 4:30 this morning. I can't even remember if I ate or not today. And I need some sleep, because 4:30 is going to come awfully early again tomorrow morning."

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Ten-thirty. She was exhausted, too. And he looked the same. Whatever was happening with the house, could wait till tomorrow.

"Sorry, if I was out of line," she said as she pulled her suitcases over to the bottom of the stairs.

"Me, too. Do you need help with those?"

"No, thanks. I've gotten used to carrying my own bags." Grabbing the handle of the larger one, she started upstairs, plopping one step at a time. She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Thanks for finishing up tonight. Try to get some rest. Just lock up when you leave."

"Will do."

Every time she glanced back, he seemed to be cringing with each plop of her suitcase wheels. Finally, the rollers hung up on a stair. She jerked to get it loose. Stubbed her toe. Bumped her shoulder against the wall and lost her grip on the handle. Bump-ta-bump-ta-bump—

Struggling to stop the inevitable downhill catastrophe, she grabbed for the escaped handle and missed. Her feet slipped off the steps and she pitched forward. Arms flailing out in front of her, she flew face first through the air, headed straight downward toward the landing. Adam vaulted the banister and side rail, dodged the runaway suitcase mid-stairs, and caught her before she face-planted. She held on to him for dear life as he wrapped his arms around her and they landed as one on the steps.

—bump-ta-bump-ta-bump-ta— The crack of splitting wood split the air behind them.

She and Adam turned, as one, toward the landing's side rail he'd just jumped. A large gaping hole, the size of her suitcase, greeted them in return. That could have been her smashing through the wood. She could have been laying hurt on the other side. Her insides quivered. What if he hadn't been there to catch her? She slowed her breathing. Focused.

"You okay?" he asked as he released his hold.

She shook off the ominous feeling and got to her feet. Took a step upward. "I seem to be. How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He motioned her on up the stairs, then retrieved four pieces of luggage and carried them to the second-floor hallway. "Tomorrow, I'll order replacement spindles for the rail."

"Thanks."

"Good night, Brie. See you later." He picked up the toolbox, opened the front door and set the lock.

"Good night, Adam." Her view from the second floor, still said he was definitely a 10. Maybe even a 10-plus. Being a thirty-two-year-old woman meant somethings should be ignored, but her mind seemed to have other thoughts entirely. Not going to happen.

She was here to concentrate on closing out Rose's Gift Shoppe which had also been left to her in the will. And deciding what to do with the house. Although, she had to admit the kitchen had hit all the points on her dream house list. She'd look at the rest of the downstairs tomorrow.

He glanced back around the door. "By the way, your grandma left you a letter. It's on her nightstand."