
Chapter 2



“Penny for your thoughts?”

Crud. She’d forgotten for a moment she wasn’t alone. Her college crush was right there, by her side, standing in front of his house. She closed her eyes for a fraction of a second to get her thoughts back in order. He looked the same as he had the last time she saw him, but a little older, a little sadder. And wearing a wedding ring.

“Exterior. What would you like done here?”

“What would you suggest?”

She twisted her lips to one side. He might not want to hear what she would suggest.

“What’s the budget?”

He narrowed his eyes. “How big does it need to be?”

“Depends. If you want a restoration, it’ll be one number, a renovation, another number. Not necessarily more or less.”

He stared at the house. She figured he was mentally tallying up the difference in his head.

“Tell you what. Before I give you a number, let’s go through the house and write down all that needs to be done. We can

figure out the budget and prioritize from there. How does that sound?”

Smart, that’s how it sounds.

She nodded. “Let’s start with the exterior.”

“Alright.” He looked at her closely. “Vinyl still looks pretty good.”

She closed her eyes. Ugh. No. Not the vinyl. Surely not ... Save the argument for the plaster v. drywall scene. She opened them when he started chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your face. You looked like you could pass out when I said the vinyl looked good.” He recovered. “Sorry. I know the vinyl needs to go. No amount of chemicals would whiten the stuff. I want to see what’s under there. If it’s rotten, we’ll put in Hardy siding.”

“Bless you, Nick.” She could feel her heart start beating again. “I thought I was going to have to fire you from your own house.”

“Now that would be awkward, wouldn’t it?”

Not as awkward as working side-by-side with a guy who never knew I had a major crush on him in college and who never, ever, thought of me that way ...

“It would. I’d say the crew could start ripping it off pretty soon. And the porch, too. I hope some of the joists are worth salvaging.” She bounced a little on the spongy part of the porch.

When the floorboard broke under her minuscule weight, she went straight down, leaving her standing on the dirt below. She was waist-deep in porch.

“Why am I the one who always finds the rotted floorboards?” Muttering under her breath, she gritted her teeth, heat creeping up her face. Of all times to have this happen.

Nick sprang into action. “Are you okay?” He reached down to help her up.

“Thanks.” She brushed off the debris and stepped away from the new hole in the porch, trying her best to tamp down her temper.

He arched one eyebrow. “Does this happen often?”

“More often than I would prefer. I’m glad I had jeans on this time, instead of shorts. Ouch.” She lifted her boot-cut pants leg to reveal a nasty bruise and scrape. “Oh well, another one to add to the list.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “I’m fine. All in a day’s work for a klutz.” She walked ahead of him into the house, face burning, rubbing her leg as she went.

Great. Score one for the clumsy kid dressing up as a contractor. “Hopefully the smell will go away when we get the trash out of here.”



SHE CERTAINLY DIDN’T LOOK like a klutz. Not to him, anyway. One thing he remembered about Lisa from college was her walk. She had a graceful way about her, similar to a dancer, walking on her tip-toes most of the time. He didn’t know how she did it while carrying a thirty-pound backpack full of textbooks.

But she had changed. Her tentative step had been replaced with confidence, for the most part. She seemed skittish but handled herself well. She was a professional now, not a self-conscious college student.

“You weren’t kidding about the smell.” He looked around the front room at the piles of garbage. “Wow.” It wasn’t eye-watering, but he didn’t want to wait too long to get to the

bottom of it. Maybe a dead raccoon or rat somewhere in the debris?

“When did you decide to go into business with Del?” According to her brother, they had made a decent go of working together.

“I started working for Dad after my internship.”

He appraised the young woman in front of him. “Yeah, Del said something about you being on a TV show.”

She chuckled. “I wasn’t exactly on it, but it gave me a better look into what this business looks like when it’s not your family.” She sighed. “I learned the hard way how to be camera-ready in case you get caught in the background.”

“Got caught unprepared?”

“Once. After seeing myself on television I made friends with the hair and makeup folks, learned a few tips -- and got contacts.” She shook her head. “I’ll put it this way. This wasn’t my first trip through a floor.”

He threw back his head and laughed. It felt good. Not many reasons to laugh lately. He sensed a little tension but felt relaxed at the same time. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. So you came back home after that?”

She paused. “Yeah. Mom was sick. They offered me a job to stay, but I wanted to get home. Then when she died, I decided to stick around to help out, and here I am.” She grinned. “I guess for an introvert, it wasn’t a bad way to get started in the business. I didn’t even have to put together a resume.” She shrugged and smiled. “After a while, he made me talk to the contractors working under him when I wanted something done. I discovered that when I was calling the shots, I wasn’t as painfully shy as I thought.”

“I get it. I started working with a local contractor, building new homes. I discovered I was pretty good at it, and finally branched out on my own.”

They continued walking through the house, taking notes as they went.

She glanced over at him, cheeks pinker than before. “I’ve heard good things about your company.”

Nick raised his eyebrows, lips tilted in a smile as he gestured for her to go ahead of him through the kitchen door. “Thanks. I hear you guys are good, too.”

She turned, nodding. “Thanks. Del does a good job. We love the old stuff.” She turned toward the kitchen. “And this is definitely old stuff. Especially the odor. Sometimes old houses come with surprises.” She waved her hand in front of her nose and then stopped to spread her arms, taking in the bank of windows. “I have a couple of ideas for the kitchen.”

“Buy stock in air freshener? Move it to a different location? Add on?”

“Maybe yes on the air freshener, but moving it? Good grief no. I love it where it is. It catches the sun on two sides. If we take out this wall and put in an island it will get sun from three sides, the dining room will get sun from the kitchen, and you’ll have more of an open-concept.” She grinned. “It would be a win-win. But you’re the boss.”

He pondered the wall situation for a minute. “That could work. It would cost more – I’ll have to see if we’d need a structural beam there, and then whether it came down or was up in the ceiling would make a difference, but it’s a definite possibility.”

She nodded. “Otherwise, you’re stuck with a tiny kitchen. Nobody wants that, these days.”

“Tell me about it. Kitchens and bathrooms. It’s what the people want.” He arched an eyebrow. “Speaking of which, what are the bathrooms like? I have a vague recollection of a tiny one on the first floor and a bigger one on the second.”

Lisa grimaced. “You recollect correctly.” She led him down

a small hallway at the back of the house. “This is the downstairs bath.” She pointed to the small office next to it. “The bathroom and this little room were once a porch. By the looks of the sink and tub, I’d say they converted it into a bathroom in the ’40s or ’50s. I doubt that it was constructed to have a shower.”

“I remember the plastic tile.” He chuckled when one popped off, landing with a plastic “clack” on a pile of previously-fallen squares. “There used to be a tube of marine epoxy in the medicine cabinet to keep them glued on.”

“I guess the people who owned it last decided not to bother.” She pointed to the scattering of the gray plastic squares in the tub and in various places on the floor. “I suggest a gut job, maybe a walk-in shower instead of a tub-shower unit.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

He followed her back through the house and up the stairs, mind racing back in time to himself as a little boy running up and down the stairs. He had good times here. It had upset him when they sold it, but at the time, he was in college and in no position to hang on to it. They looked into the bedrooms and closets. So far, his list was mostly cosmetic work: refinish the floors, repair plaster, and paint. There were lots of windows to replace, but the amount of natural light made it worthwhile.

“Here’s the second bathroom. Big, but no counter space.” She looked up at him.

“One sink in here is not acceptable. We’ll gut this one, too. How much do you think?” He trusted her judgment even more than he thought he would. He still couldn’t get over little Lisa Reno being this confident, well-spoken designer. There was the porch incident, but everybody has a little klutz in them.

“Depends on how deep a gut. Del says there’s a chimney going through the house from the basement up. If we take it

out, we could expand this room, or even get a second bath up here if we stole square footage from the hall closet.” Her eyes were shining at the thought.

“I’ll keep it in mind. Sounds a little scary.” It sounded more than a little scary. It sounded like an impossible task, expensive, but she seemed to think it would be doable. He’d talk to Del about it. They took a turn through the upstairs bedrooms and closets and then descended the squeaking staircase.

“Speaking of scary . . .”

He turned a quizzical face toward her. “Scary?”

“Yes, scary. We haven’t seen the basement yet.”

“Oh, I’ve seen it, but it’s been years. I seem to recall it being the kind of basement that shows up in a horror movie.”

She twisted her lips nervously. “Let’s get it over with. You know, in a movie, when the main character is creeping down the squeaky steps, I’m the one yelling at them not to go into the basement.” She paused in thought. “Or the attic. I’ve had nightmares about attics.”

He laughed as she shivered at the basement doorway. “I’ll protect you. Ready?”

She sighed. “Ready. I haven’t been down here. Del came and looked it over.”

When Nick opened the door, the smell made him pause, almost knocking him to his knees. “Whatever it is, it’s down there.”

“Great.” She looked up at him, scrunching up her nose. “I wish I had a particulate mask with me.”

He pulled a bandana out of his pocket. “This is clean. You want it?”

“Thanks. I don’t know if it will help, but we need to get whatever is stinking out of there before we can work on the house.”

“Watch the first step.” He spoke as she went down further on the top step than she anticipated.

She frowned up at him. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Sorry. It’s worse than when I was here last.”



“OH, MY GOODNESS.” This was ridiculously funky. And not in a decorative way.

“Yeah.” He held his nose and looked around.

It wasn’t that there was so much stuff in the basement, but the type of stuff. “Is it just me, or are there a lot of old appliances down here?” Lisa looked around in confusion.

“Three washers, two dryers, and an electric range.” Nick put his hand on the brick chimney in the middle of the basement, looking at it, shaking his head. “That’s gonna be a bear to take down.”

“Yeah. It goes through the kitchen, too, but it would be part of opening it up to get the open-concept floor plan.” She grinned. She so wanted to get her way on this one.

“I don’t know.” Nick walked around the basement, studying the brick foundation covered in concrete. “I’ll bet it leaks like a sieve.”

“Probably. All this is good for is storage, but it’s good space.”

“Do you see anything to account for the smell down here?” He was looking at all the nooks and crannies, as was she. Nothing.

She followed him to the back corner, where he had stopped on his inspection. “What are you looking at?”

He pointed at a section of the wall with new concrete covering the wall. “This is odd. When I was a kid, there was always a big cabinet here.”

“Maybe the foundation wall failed?” She pondered as he felt along the edges of the gray concrete. It was a stark contrast to the white paint on the rest of the basement walls.

“I don’t think so. The cabinet was still here when Del and I came down here a few months ago when I first bought the place.” He shook his head, glancing at her with a frown. “And it didn’t smell like this then, either. There has to be something ...” He looked around, noticing an old screwdriver lying on the floor with some other discarded tools. He started scraping in one spot at the edge, finally revealing wood, not brick.

“What is it?” Her eyes widened as she looked at him.

He looked at her and continued scraping. “Get another tool and start on the other side. I have an idea.”

She looked around, but all she saw was a hammer. “Wait a minute; I have a five-in-one tool in the truck. Be right back.”

“You just want to get outside where you can breathe.”

“You’re not wrong.” She ran up the stairs to the back door, returning with her toolbox in record time.

“I admire a girl who’s prepared.”

“Always. Girl Scout motto.” She handed him a mask she retrieved from the truck. It didn’t help much, but it was better than nothing, and it left their hands free.

“I thought that was Boy Scouts?”

She bit her bottom lip and started digging into the concrete on the other side. She found it came off easier if she found the spot right where the old concrete and bricks met the new concrete. She laughed, concentrating on her task. “Both.”

“Ah. I’ll have to watch my step around you.”

“Why’s that?”

He chuckled. “I think you’re smarter than I am.”

She glanced over at him, feeling the heat rise to her face as she saw his eyes crinkle, his grin hidden by the mask. “I think you’ll be okay.”

“Look at this.”

She stopped to look at the area he had cleared. He brushed off the extra debris and stood back.

Her eyes widened once more. The hair rose on the back of her neck as she looked into his deep brown eyes. “Is that a door?”