

CHAPTER 3



The smear of peanut butter melted into the slice of sourdough toast. Phoebe dropped a handful of thawed blueberries picked and frozen last summer over the gooey delicacy. Her favorite breakfast, especially when her grandpa played on the family piano.

The scent of coffee signaled his entrance into the kitchen. “Morning, Phoebe. Have a good sleep?”

“*Uh-huh.* Thank you for your morning serenade. Beautiful. You played a lot of my favorite hymns.” Grandpa loved playing the piano first thing in the morning. An inspiring way to greet the day, he’d say. “Would you like some toast?”

“Thank you, ma’am. I love ’em all. So did your grandma. She loved her music.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll get something in a minute. Let me enjoy this java jolt first.”

“Yes, sir. You go ahead and enjoy all you want.”

The old man chuckled over his mug. “Sure. I know it’s safe from you.”

“It smells so delicious but tastes so bad.” Dunking the Earl Gray teabag in her mug, Phoebe pretended to shudder.

“Girl, don’t talk like that.” He blew over the hot liquid and sipped another taste. “That soup the other night was fantastic.”

Uh-oh. He’d complimented the soup on Tuesday night. It passed the bar, but no need to mention it again.

“Thank you.”

“Yep. Our friend, Clark, loved it. I think eating three bowls proves it, don’t you?”

“Or he was just famished from how hard you’d worked him.”

“Oh, *pshaw.* He’s a strapping young man who needs hearty food. Has to feed all those muscles—”

“Grandpa.” Phoebe slid a little warning into that word. She didn’t want to discuss Clark or his muscles with her grandfather.

Not heeding the warning, he continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “I’m sure you’ve noticed his muscles and his dimple beside his smile and—”

“So. You’re thinking of showing him at the fair this year?”

He snorted his coffee and swallowed with difficulty. “You’ve got your dad’s humor, girl.” He wiped his chin with a floral napkin. “I think he’d like to take you out sometime. I think you know it too.”

“Grandpa.”

“Hey. I see things. Like how he looks at you. He’s smitten.”

“Grandpa.”

“You may think I’m too old to talk about such things. Just because your grandma’s gone, God rest her soul.” His voice caught.

Nope. Not going to cry today. Let’s steer this boat toward a different side of the pond. “What does your day look like, Grandpa?”

He pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose. “Okay. I’ll hush. But think about it. You could do worse.”

“That’s not exactly a recommendation.”

“I’m a fan of Clark’s. He’s a good man.” Stuffing his hankie

in his back pocket, Grandpa grinned at her. “I’m a fan of romance too.”

“Grandpa, please. New subject. Tell me about your plans for today.”

“Well.” He jerked his head toward a flash of sunlight from the kitchen window. “Looks like my plans just showed up.” Leaving his mug on the table, he shuffled to the door. “Nice. I like a man who’s early.”

Phoebe returned the peanut butter to the cabinet keeping her eyes away from the kitchen window. Grandpa hadn’t mentioned having something special in the works for this morning, so she wouldn’t spoil a surprise by peeking.



HEATH COASTED to a stop in front of the old farmhouse. He squeezed the steering wheel of his F-150. The last few days had been dicey, but Brody had called to check on him several times. His workouts, including long runs every other day, had helped, and Colleen texted too. Exhaustion kept his mind off temptation and kept him on the bumpy wagon.

Thank You, God.

Another prayer. In less than three days. He shook his head.

Cutting the engine, he surveyed the farmhouse and the adjacent barn. Honeysuckle Farm.

Please let this be my ticket to peace again.

He pulled in a breath and held it. *Nice job, Heath. You realized you needed help, and you sought it.* He pushed out the breath. This will help. He pulled in another breath. You can do this. Let’s go.

Releasing the door handle, he pushed out another breath and headed for the front steps.

The front door swung open as his boot touched the first step.

A booming voice that belied the owner's gray hair greeted him from the screened door. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Stewart? Dempsey Stewart?"

"In the flesh. Are you Heath Daniels?" The older man grinned a warm greeting, raising the corners of his white mustache.

"Yes, sir."

"You're early. Wasn't expecting you till nine."

"Right. I had some time on my hands and hoped I could get started sooner rather than later." He forced his gaze to lock with Dempsey Stewart's. *Please let me stay and work. Give me a shovel, and I'll dig trenches from here to the back forty. Just let me stay and work.*

The older man's eyes narrowed for a split second, then a quick smile chased away any misgivings. "Me? I'd rather work in the morning too." Jerking his head toward the space behind the door, he raised his mug. "Come on and let me finish my coffee while we talk about what we need."

Heath followed him and the smell of coffee inside.

A woman's voice, sharply familiar, nailed him to the kitchen linoleum.

"Grandpa, I'm going to—" The woman stilled as if she'd been caught in a game of freeze tag. Phoebe Sinclair.

"Hey, Phoebe girl. This is the volunteer from Healing Steps I told you about. Heath—"

"Daniels. Yes, we've met."

Great. Great. Great. This is not how I envisioned today going. Heath swallowed a groan.

"You already know each other? *Hmm.* Interesting. I'd call that a plug in the positive direction for today."

Nope. Not interesting, and from the look on her face, she doesn't think it's a positive plug either.

"So, you're here from Healing Steps?" Phoebe folded her

arms in front of her waist. “Didn’t realize the volunteer started today.”

Great. She’s worried she’ll be working with an addict.

He met her gaze.

That’s recovering addict to you.