

CHAPTER 2



*P*hoebe left a message for her grandfather and turned the Crockpot to warm. Wedding soup would keep for thirty minutes. The rebuffering in the hardware store called for some licking-her-wounds time.

Hopping on the old Ford tractor, she headed out to the pond. She didn't have to drive the tractor. Walking or driving the golf cart would have been fine, but she liked the sway of the old seat and the smell of diesel fuel. Chugging past a fallow field, she envisioned rows of zinnias and dahlias, cosmos and asters blooming in glorious color later in the spring and summer.

She eased up to a rise overlooking the pond at the edge of her grandfather's woods. Her great-grandfather had dug out a shallow spot on the back of the property for a pond. He wanted to be able to fish whenever the idea struck, and according to family stories, the idea struck a lot. During dry seasons, the pond offered easily accessible irrigation. Another plus.

Cutting the engine, she settled into the duct-taped cushion, propping her legs on the steering wheel. A bobwhite called from her nest in a nearby tree, and a bullfrog answered from the tall grass.

Taking in a long breath of the pungent air, Phoebe waited for the peace that always visited her when she spent even a few minutes in this beautiful spot, but her insides still jumbled from the encounter with the surly Heath Daniels. A frustrated sound mingled with the crickets singing their evening song, and the testy scene from the wedding played out in detail.

“Knock, knock. Ready or not, I’m coming in.” Phoebe threw open the door to the groomsmen’s quarters in the old church. “Mrs. Daniels wants a picture of Josie with all her brothers. She can’t come down here, so you three,” she pointed at Ben, Heath, and Sam, “need to follow me. Laci here will fasten the boutonnières on the rest of you.”

Phoebe nodded to the brothers. “I have yours down the hall with Josie. Come on.” She jerked her head filled with last-minute items to be accomplished then checked off her manual-sized to-do list. She sucked in a slow breath to calm her jitters. The first wedding for her cut-flower business. In March, of all months. Everything had to be perfect.

Please, God, let this day be perfect.

Stopping outside the Bride’s room door, she hesitated and caused a pileup of brothers against her back. The youngest brother, Sam, rammed into her followed by Heath. Ben, the oldest, pulled up in time to miss the crush.

“Hey, why’d you stop mid-stream? Get off me, Heath.” Sam elbowed his brother.

Facing them, Phoebe raised a finger. “Listen up, gentlemen. Josie is as calm as a cucumber, I don’t want you three ruining that. Do you hear me? Everything’s fine. Let’s keep it that way. We’re going inside for a few pictures, then you’re back to the groom’s side. Got it?”

Heath scowled at her.

Hope your face doesn’t freeze that way.

Josie squealed when they entered. “Mom, look how hand-

some they are! Wow, you boys clean up nice.” She hugged each one of them. “Today is the best day ever. Seriously.”

Chuckles went up in the room. Heath bent his head and whispered something to her. A sweet memory? An encouragement from an older brother to his younger sister, perhaps?

Not a chance. Not with the frown gathering Josie’s eyebrows together.

Phoebe stepped closer to her bride.

“I can call Cody at Bob and Shelly’s right now. He could bring over some potted plants and—”

“Josie,” Phoebe touched her arm. “Is everything okay?”

The bride, who only moments ago thrummed with excitement and love, lifted watery eyes to her. “Heath was just offering—”

The interfering brother pushed out a breath through his nose and firmed his jaw. “We’re fine.”

“Did you say potted plants? Not to be nosy, but flowers are ... is there a problem?” Phoebe turned to her bride. “Josie, what do you need me to do?”

“The sanctuary is beautiful, Phoebe. It looks exactly like what I wanted.” Josie glanced at her older brother. “Heath was offering to bring more flowers from his work if I wanted him to.”

Hot flames licked upward from her stomach and burned in her chest. She willed her eyes to telegraph: This is my job, hotshot. Get out of my lane.

She managed to keep from flinging the words at him. Instead, fisted her hands till she felt her fingernails imprinting her palms.

Breathe, just breathe.

Focusing on Josie, she forced a smile. “Today is your day. I’m here for you. Tell me what you want, okay?”

“I want pictures with my brothers. Come on, boys. Let’s get it done. I’m getting married today!”

Josie had rallied, and the wedding had been a huge success

according to everyone except Heath, who never spoke to Phoebe again.

She forced her eyes shut, closing out thoughts of Heath, but his rippling biceps as he grabbed the forty-pound bag of lime played across the backs of her eyelids. Eyes flying open, she growled again.

That man. Why did he have to be so unsocial? He avoided her like she was a bill collector for the two days surrounding the wedding. Why was he so unfriendly? The rest of his family couldn't be nicer.

I'd love to be as close to Reid as all the Daniels siblings seem to be.

"Hey, Heath Daniels." She let the echo ring back across the pond. "I'm not interested in you. If that's your problem, don't worry. I'm staying clear of you."

The rumble of the electric golf cart approached. She turned and sighed. Clark. *I'm not that into you, either.*

Clark Agnew cut the motor. "Hey, Phoebe. Catching some quiet time?"

"Exactly."

"Nice. Your granddad sent me to get you. He says he's getting hungry."

She'd ask why he didn't just text, but she knew. Matchmaker.

"Yeah. I'm heading home now. Thanks for being the messenger."

"Ah, he asked me to stay for supper." Clark raised his eyes to meet hers, a light shining in the smoky depths.

That hopeful glint guilted her heart. Clark was cute and smart and hardworking and helpful and ... stuck clearly in the friend zone with her. He hadn't asked her out yet, but she'd caught him staring on several occasions. Grandpa Dempsey added to the fire with little suggestive comments and nudging them together.

Like this go-fetch-Phoebe play. And the invitation to supper.

She suppressed an unladylike noise. A date now and then

would be nice, but she didn't have the luxury of being focused on anything beyond making this flower farm work. The fledging farm worked because her grandpa let her work her acres rent-free. He hadn't given her a timeline for making a profit, but ... please let the farm break even this year, at least.

Clark turned the vehicle around, bringing her back from her musings.

"Well, sure, but it's only Italian Wedding Soup. Nothing fancy."

"Yeah, but Mr. Dempsey said his sourdough loaf is ready to cut."

Phoebe chuckled. "You gotta stay then. Nobody wants to miss his sourdough." Dropping her feet to the clutch and gas pedals, she turned the key, powering up her ride home. "Come on. Let's not keep the hungry man waiting."



HEATH LEANED against the kitchen counter with his glass of water, struggling to resist thoughts of other liquids to replace it. He replayed the incident with Phoebe Sinclair in his mind. She looked different from when she attended the wedding. Her silky green dress had hinted at interesting curves, swished around her thighs.

To keep from staring at her, he'd talked to everyone at the wedding, including Sam's brand-new heartthrob, Merritt Hastings. Thankfully, he'd managed to avoid Phoebe during the reception, except for when she came to say good night to his parents, excusing himself for another piece of wedding cake.

At the hardware store today, Phoebe's baggy flannel shirt made her look soft and vulnerable, but he'd seen the all-business side of her when she called out orders to the helpers charged with making the wedding venue look like Josie's fairy tale come true. She had an eye for detail—Josie loved every arrangement—

and treated everyone with kindness. Except whenever he had a suggestion, Phoebe acted as if he was undermining her whole business.

Sam entered the kitchen, stuffing his shirttail into his jeans. “Hey, hey, big bro’. What’s happenin’?”

“You’re in a lively mood. What gives?”

“Heading to see Merritt. We’re going out to dinner tonight.” He ran his hand through his still-damp hair.

“I should have known. I can smell your aftershave from here.” Heath set the water glass on the counter, his fingers shaky. “You’ve seen her—what—twice this week?”

“Is that a problem? I remember you talking to her at Josie’s wedding. Sorry I didn’t give you a chance to dance with her—not!” Wiggling his eyebrows, Sam grinned an irritating grin.

“We were having an innocent conversation. I’m no threat to your dating prospects.” Heath folded his arms in front of his chest, hiding his hands.

“I remember you’re on a dating hiatus, but I didn’t want you to suddenly come out of your retirement, so to speak, with my girl.”

Heath tapped his side with his fingertips. “No chance of that.”

“No chance with Merritt, right, but you never know when—” Sam folded his sleeves to his elbows.

“I know, and it’s not happening.”

“Yeah, but—”

Heath glanced at the kitchen clock on the bookshelf. “You better get going. Don’t want to be late.”

Frowning, Sam grabbed his car keys from the counter. “Look, man. I’m sorry—”

“Have fun.” Heath opened his laptop, looking for the screen to appear.

Sam sighed. “See ya later.”

Heath pushed out a breath. Two trying people in one day.

Sam's engine sounded from the driveway, and Heath loosened his shoulders. He grabbed his phone and jabbed a familiar, however unused lately, contact. She answered on the second ring.

"Hello, Heath. Everything okay? I haven't heard from you in a while."

"Colleen, thanks for taking my call."

"Of course. What's going on?"

"*Umm*. I think, I, *ah* ... I think I need to sign up again for some volunteer work."

"Do you need someone to come by your place tonight? Have you called your AA sponsor? Are you in danger?"

Brody at AA. Yeah. A solid idea, too, but Heath needed action, not words, now.

"No, no. I'm not ... I don't have anything in the house. I just know myself. I need to ... I just need to work ... I just need a little help to get through this time."

"Right. Let me look at my database." Computer keys clicked in the background.

"Wait. I need something here, not Raleigh. Near Charlotte, if you have anything. I've got a job here."

"Okay. Well, that may take a few minutes. Let me call a friend in Mecklenburg County. I'll get back to you within the hour. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Heath, you're doing the right thing. We'll get you in somewhere down there. Will you be fine for an hour?"

"Yeah. I'm going for a run. Got to get rid of this extra energy."

"Enjoy that run. I'll call you back soon."

Thank You, God.

He sucked in a breath. For the last few years, praying had been a deliberate act, when Josie called on him to say grace at family dinners, when he prayed for safe travel for his parents, or

for a sick friend. In the praying-for-himself department, *rusty* described his communication attempts. *On the back burner* described his relationship with the One Who answered those prayers.

His subconscious understood how shaky his foundation was right now, if it led him to pray.

Waking up his phone screen again, he punched in Brody's number.