

No Butts About It



A Novella
by
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*To my husband.
Words can't express how grateful I am
that God gave us to each other.*

CHAPTER ONE



“No worries, Phil. I’ve got this.” Charles Franklin Sterling III tucked his phone under his chin, twisted his key in the lock, and hip-bumped the door to his midtown Little Rock loft. “I’ll find you the best property available.”

A diminutive middle-aged woman met him at the door and made a slicing gesture across her throat. Her eyes cut toward the oversized, numberless wall clock, then shifted back and bore into his.

“Uh, I gotta go. I’ll keep you posted.” He set his phone and briefcase on the brushed metal entryway table and placed his hands on the woman’s shoulders. “Hello, Rosa. Something smells delicious. What is it?”

She shrugged out of his touch. “It’s cold, that’s what it is. And it’s seven-thirty. I’m supposed to get off at six.”

Charles felt his face crumple like a scolded child. “I’ll compensate you for the extra time.” He reached to retrieve his money clip, but Rosa swatted away his hand.

“It’s not about *compensation*.” She practically spit out the word. “You’re a parent now. You have responsibilities.” His

housekeeper's accent thickened with each word, indicating the growing level of her irritation.

He sucked in a deep breath and whooshed it out. Two long strides brought him to the fireplace. Charles picked up a framed photograph from the mantle and glared at a young man's smiling face—a face identical to his, were it not for his brother's perpetual grin. He returned the photo with more force than necessary. "I didn't sign on for this!"

"Neither did *she*." Rosa nodded toward the guest bedroom. "Besides, she's been waiting to ask you something."

As if on cue, the door opened. A young girl emerged, clutching a book to her chest. Her tear-glazed brown eyes gazed up at Charles. "Unc—I mean, Papa Charles, would you please read my book to me?" She unwound one of her hands from the book and swiped the moisture from her eyes.

The child held out a bright yellow volume. Its cover bore an illustration of a dancing baby goat. In bright red script, the word "*Cabrito*" arced above the goat.

Charles spun to face Rosa, who was gathering her jacket and purse. "But I thought *cabrigo* meant—"

The warning shot from Rosa's eyes cut him off. "Although some are only aware of its culinary connotation, the word technically translates as 'goatling' or kid."

"Where'd she get it?"

Rosa shrugged. "I bought it for her."

He traced his finger over the author's name. "B. L. Barlow. Never heard of him."

"The series is quite popular—fun stories about the antics of farm animals." Slipping her purse strap over her shoulder, Rosa bent down and placed a kiss on the little girl's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, *mijita*. Be good for your new papa." Turning toward Charles, she punched a finger into his chest. "And *you* be good to her." With that, she headed out the door, leaving him alone with his niece-turned-daughter.

He flipped to the back of the book and read the short nondescript author bio and a list of additional titles in the series: *Andie the Wonder Dog*, *Thomas the Tame Turkey*, *Rocky the Raucous Rooster*, and, coming soon, *The Day of the Duck*. Seemed harmless enough. Charles hadn't considered this aspect of parenting—screening literature for age-appropriateness for his soon-to-be-five-year-old niece. Er ... daughter. *Daughter*. Even though it had barely been a month, he doubted he'd ever get used to that word.

“All right, Hannah.” He moved to the sofa and patted the place next to him. “I’ll read to you. Then we can warm up whatever deliciousness Rosa cooked for us.”

She clambered onto the overstuffed cushion. Charles gazed into her hesitant eyes and bit back a lecture on ladylike movements. Should he send her to boarding school? He could wield multi-million-dollar deals in a single bound, but parenting? And a girl, no less? For the first time in his life, inadequacy overwhelmed him. He squirmed in his seat.

His ponderings were interrupted when Hannah unceremoniously plopped onto his lap. “Oof!”

Yep. Definitely boarding school.

A smile beamed across her face as she flung open the book. “Papa Charles?” Her voice was tentative, eyes wistful. Then, she suddenly blurted, “I want a goat.”



Blossom Clarke pressed her back against a large oak tree. Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades. She forced herself not to wriggle. How could January temps be seventeen degrees one day and nearly seventy just a few days later? Arkansas weather. Gotta love it. She snuck a glance over her right shoulder, hoping

her stalker wouldn't see her. Did keen bird vision apply to roosters?

Probably.

She focused on her goal—the barnyard gate. Movement from the left caught her attention. She leaned back until the furrowed bark scratched her arms. Glancing down, she noticed a patch of poison ivy that survived the recent cold snap coiling around her ankles. That was the least of her concerns. She sucked in a deep breath and took off.

A rustling of brush sounded behind her. By the time she reached the gate, she was at a dead sprint. She grasped the fork latch and flung it upward just as a flash of gray and white fluttered past, wings flapping like a flag in high winds. How could something so awkward-looking run so fast?

Before Blossom could swing open the gate, talons sank into her left calf. She shrieked. Her poor leg had barely healed from the last attack. She jerked her foot in a futile attempt to dislodge the beast and lost her balance. Flailing her arms to steady herself, she grasped at the nearest object—the gate.

The ruckus caught the attention of most of the barnyard residents, and an assortment of animals rushed toward her, probably hoping for a handout. Penelope, one of the Pygmy does, pushed past the crowd and bumped the gate, knocking it just beyond the reach of Blossom's outstretched hand. The momentum swung her into an over-the-goat cartwheel. She flopped into the midst of a mudpuddle. Swiping a glob of mud from her mouth, she muttered, "That's it. We're having rooster and dumplings for supper."

A fuzzy white face filled her vision as Blossom propped up on an elbow and eased onto her knees. Andromeda. "Thanks for coming to my rescue, girl." She tousled the fur of her Great Pyrenees.

Blossom looped her right-hand fingers through the chain-link

fence and pulled herself up. Thankfully, the rooster had fled the scene.

The big dog bumped her head against Blossom's hand.

"Oh, you need petting?" Blossom laughed, knelt, and gave her farm's guardian a good ear scratching. "Let's get you some breakfast, shall we?"

She wove her way through the crowd of beggars, grabbed a red plastic bucket from a shelf, and filled it with a large scoop of kibble. Andromeda gripped the container in her teeth and marched off. Blossom laughed as she watched the dog plod away, the faded coffee label fluttering with each step.

Penelope nibbled on the cuff of Blossom's overall shorts, demanding attention.

"You think you're next, huh?" She rubbed the white star between the goat's horns. "Well then, let's get everyone fed."