

Pegboards, Parrots & Pickup Lines



A Novella
by
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CHAPTER ONE



“*H*ooks. Hooks. Where are the—shouldn’t a hardware store have a better organizational system?” Charlotte Herring’s frustrated huff lifted auburn strands from her forehead.

She brushed her wayward bangs back into place with her fingers. Not that it would help. The tweed newsboy cap she’d taken off upon entering the store had seen to that. Cute caps looked great and might even cut the effects of a chilly January breeze, but they did nothing for hairstyles.

Enough with her hair. Time was a precious commodity. Finding the hooks she needed for her shop’s pegboard walls was a necessity. Finding them quickly was imperative. There was too much to do to waste minutes fussing with her unruly locks.

“Can I help you find something?”

Critical words poised on her tongue for entry into the conversation. Poor, unfortunate soul probably wouldn’t know what to do with her. Fiery redhead wasn’t just another stereotype. God needed to sand down that rough spot, but today was not the day.

She whipped around. Her sharp words tumbled from her

tongue back down her throat in surprise as she gazed into the palest blue eyes she'd ever seen. Any woman would kill for the thick, dark lashes framing the man's eyes. They would turn any amateur painter's work into a masterpiece worthy of the Louvre.

His patient smile drew Charlotte's attention from the magnetic pull of his gaze, breaking the spell. Her mind churned in an effort to return to a functional state.

"Pegs." She shook her head. "Hooks. I mean, I have pegboards. I need hooks and shelves." Wow. The intelligence rolled right off her. Where was a hole when you needed to crawl in and hide?

The man's grin widened. Light scruff highlighted and increased its appeal. It was unnecessary help. Boyish charm radiated off him.

"You're two aisles too far." The man led her back the direction she'd come. "Here you go. Let me or Ellie, up front, know if we can help with anything else."

"Thank you." Charlotte remembered her manners as her guide walked away. Giving her attention to the items she sought, Charlotte perused shelf after shelf of perfectly displayed pegboards, shelves, baskets, and hooks.

Never had she been so thankful to lose complete control of her mind and mouth. How embarrassing it would have been to chastise the man on the store's lack of organization only to find it was her own frenzied pace keeping her from what she needed. Being tongue-tied was bad enough, but at least her silence could be taken as social awkwardness and not full-blown rudeness.

Charlotte loaded her basket with all the accessories she needed and made her way to the cash register. Relief warred with something akin to disappointment when a petite blonde teenager, if looks weren't deceiving, waited to check her out.

Not disappointment. Couldn't be. Charlotte didn't even know the man. The girl—was it Ellie?—totaled her purchase. Charlotte

bumped her card against the reader, snagged the bag from the salesperson, and nodded goodbye on her way out.

She mulled over her to-do list as she tossed her bags in the back seat of her Niro. A quick press of the start button, and the hybrid engine quietly whirred to life, lighting the clock on the radio panel. Charlotte pulled from the curb, releasing an exasperated sigh. She should've gone to the post office first, then the hardware store, two doors from her own shop, on her return.

If push came to shove, her pegboard accessories could've waited. Her mailing could not. After wasting so much time searching for what was right in front of her, what if her vendor arrived at the antique shop before she did?

She pressed the pedal a little closer to the floorboard. Being new in town was difficult enough. Being labeled incompetent and unprofessional wouldn't help. Brookview was her chance to leave behind the demons of her past, even if they tried to sneak a ride in her moving boxes.

"No." She spoke aloud to the empty car. "Eric, get outta my head."

This store wasn't going to fail, no matter what he'd said. He'd convinced her to scrap her dreams. They wouldn't be enough to live on, and she didn't need them since she had him. If she'd adopt his dreams as her own, they'd succeed. And they had, at least in business. But the cost had been exorbitant.

Never again. It was time to be true to the dreams God placed in her heart. Charlotte had to stay rooted in the here and now if Living in the Past Antiques and Vintage Collectibles was going to prove him wrong. Great-auntie Annie had given her the opportunity. Charlotte wasn't going to squander it.



Tyson Abbott scanned the aisle of peg boards and accessories as he strode past. The flustered woman with the red hair and hazel eyes was gone. Not a surprise. She'd seemed in a rush. Probably why she'd already passed the aisle she needed when he found her.

"Did the red-headed woman find everything she needed?" Tyson joined Ellie behind the long counter.

"Yep." The girl finished a text and dropped her phone into her pocket.

"You didn't recognize her, did you?"

Ellie's ponytail swung back and forth with her headshake. "Nope."

Hmm. A tourist? Historic Brookview enjoyed their share of tourists. They rarely frequented the hardware shop and didn't buy pegboard accessories when they did. The quaint little boutiques and gift shops were more their speed.

No. Locals made up his customer base, usually when something broke in their own shops. Whether they wanted to DIY their project or hire him, Ty's Hardware was their answer.

"Must be new in town."

Ellie's shoulder dropped as quickly as it raised. "Sure."

Their customer apparently didn't make as much an impression on his employee as she had on him. She was out of sight, out of mind. If only he could push aside thoughts of long red hair and worried green eyes as effortlessly.