

Chapter Three



Jeff

Jeff Matthews had a problem. He stood in the aisle of the hardware store, unable to remember which paint color his clients had picked for their living room. Was it Woodrow Wilson White or White House White?

While he scrolled through his phone in search of the answer, he walked the aisles, tossing supplies into his basket. He rounded a corner to see his friend Carol at the check stand. Several cans of paint, new paintbrushes, drywall mud, and tape were piled on the counter where she stood, credit card in hand.

Uh-oh. This could only mean one thing. Carol was starting a new project at the cabin. And she needed that like she needed another hole in the head.

“Good morning, Carol.” He grinned at her. “Starting a new project or finishing an old one?”

Her eyes lit up. “Jeffrey, thank goodness you’re here. You can help an old lady carry these paint cans to the truck. I think they’ve become heavier in the last year.”

“I’d be happy to.” He hoisted two cans of paint and followed Carol out to the old Chevy pickup. She’d driven the brown beast for as long as he’d known her. He set the paint on the passenger-side floor, pinning

it so the cans wouldn't tip, using the old toolbox Carol kept in the truck. He noticed a bag full of light switches and outlets on the seat. This wasn't good.

"What are you working on now?" He pinned her with his gaze.

Carol beamed at him. "Oh, I'm just going to update the outlets. I have to finish that bathroom one of these days."

"And what's the paint for?" Jeff didn't like where this was going. He worried Carol's expanding list of unfinished projects was a sign she was growing forgetful.

Carol waved a hand. "Oh, that. I looked around my living room this morning and decided it needed a fresh coat of paint. You know, my niece Mylze might come to visit this summer. I need to get the house ready for company."

Biting back a groan, he dusted his hands on his cargo pants. Carol had said that Mylze—the mysterious niece—might visit for the past five summers at least. He was beginning to think she would never show up, but of course, he couldn't tell Carol that. Her nieces seemed to have abandoned her.

"You aren't planning to do this all yourself, are you? You know I'm happy to help. Wait until the weekend, and I'll come by. You shouldn't be on a ladder by yourself. And you've got to be careful with those outlets."

Carol was fiercely independent. But she was getting older, and he worried about her. Images of what could happen to the older woman if she fell flashed through his mind.

"Pish tosh. I've been doing my own work for years. I can still mow my lawn and can certainly add a little paint to my living room. I don't see any reason to stop now." Carol batted her eyes, then settled herself behind the steering wheel. She pulled the door shut and slung her arm out the open window. "Don't you worry about me. Ben showed me how to wire outlets when we built the place. Besides, you're a busy guy. I don't want to take advantage. But when my niece visits, you'll have to make some time, Jeffrey. I want you to meet her. I think you'd be just perfect for each other."

Jeff ran his hand through his hair. This wasn't the first time Carol had mentioned setting him up with Mylze. *Mylze*. What kind of name was that? He couldn't imagine getting involved with someone who

abandoned her family. If—and it was a big if—the mysterious niece ever showed up, he'd nip Carol's matchmaking in the bud. After all, he'd been down that road before. No, it was better to avoid that subject altogether.

"Oh, I don't doubt that you're capable." A small white lie. "How about if I swing by the cabin later today, and you can show me the progress you've made?"

Carol's eyes lit up. "That's a good idea. I'll whip up a chicken salad, and you come by later for dinner. I'll show you all the projects I've got going." She squeezed his arm. "You're working too hard, Jeffrey. You need a good woman to cook for you and put some meat on those bones." She waved at him as she drove the brown beast out of the parking lot.

Jeff finally released the groan he'd been holding in. Carol was in over her head. He knew of at least three projects she'd started the previous winter and never finished. Now she was starting more?

His mind was on Carol all the way to his job site. He'd have to figure out how to help her. He couldn't take the chance she might get hurt. If she wouldn't accept help from him as a friend, then he would have to call in reinforcements.

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The barking started as soon as he opened the truck door.

"Tucker. Hey, buddy."

The golden retriever jumped up, his front paws on Jeff's chest, before Jeff could even get out of his truck. Turning his head every which way to avoid the dog's generous kisses, he glimpsed Carol gingerly navigating the steps of the front porch. Had she fallen? Was she hurt? All his worries suddenly seemed justified.

"Jeffrey, you're here." Carol waved at him. "Come in, come in. Dinner is almost ready."

Jeff noted the peeling paint and neglected flower beds as he made his way to the cabin. At least he knew the roof was in good shape. He'd done the work himself last summer. There was no possibility of it leaking any time soon.

"Careful on the steps here." Carol edged around some rotting

wood. So this was why she'd been so careful when she came out to greet him. The porch was practically falling off the house. Another item to add to his mental list. He'd get this fixed for her, whether she liked it or not. He wouldn't have a seventy-year-old woman falling through her front porch on his conscience.

Carol held open the screen door for him, brushing a few paint flecks off her hands as they entered the living room. Jeff looked around. She had pushed the furniture to the walls, the paint cans stacked in the center of the space. *This isn't so bad.*

"Come through, come through." Carol waved him into the kitchen, where bare subfloor, demolished drywall, and the telltale yellow of electrical wire greeted him. Cupboards and cabinets were still intact, thankfully, but the rest was in a state of extreme demolition.

Carol, apparently oblivious to Jeff's shock, continued waving him through to the back porch. "I thought we'd eat with a view of the lake." She turned back to Jeff, who still stood in the doorway. "What is it, Jeffrey dear?"

He cleared his throat. He knew she'd been working on the flooring. But he never expected to find a demolition zone.

"Uh, Carol? When did you decide to remodel?"

Carol looked around as if seeing through his eyes. She laughed and waved a hand to dismiss his worries. "Oh, this? This is nothing I can't handle. I was only going to replace the floor, but after I got the old linoleum out, I thought, 'Why not add a pass-through?' I always wanted a pass-through, but Ben deemed it unnecessary. I had a mess going on anyway, so I decided to go ahead with it." She turned in a slow circle. A small laugh escaped her lips as she shrugged. "I could have sworn I told you about all this." She brightened and waved her hand again, impatient with the explanations. "Come on, young man. I'm hungry."

Jeff followed, his mind whirling. He couldn't believe Carol was attempting to remodel the cabin—on her own—at her age. He knew she'd been strong and capable when she was younger. After all, she'd lived here for twenty-five years since Ben's passing. But a remodel of this magnitude? He needed to convince her to accept his help. But could he do that without stepping on her toes?

Carol handed him a plate piled with a chicken salad sandwich and

potato chips, and they settled into the two Adirondack chairs that overlooked the lake. She sighed as she gazed across the water.

“You know, Jeffrey, I never imagined I’d live here by myself for this long. When we bought this place, Ben named it after me—Caroling Creek—because he said the creek at the edge of the property sang to him. After he died, I couldn’t bear to leave. So I sold our house in the city and moved in here full-time. My sister told me I was crazy to live up here in the winters, but I did it anyway. She used to send her daughters up here to spend the summers with me. I never minded. Those girls were good company, and Stacie had her job to consider.” Carol’s eyes took on a faraway sheen. “Our mom and dad had given up when Stacie came along. What a surprise she was. I was sixteen when she was born. I was more second mom to her than big sister.”

Carol lapsed into silence, seemingly lost in her memories.

I should check in on her more often. A wave of guilt hit him. An older woman alone at the cabin with only memories for company. It was no wonder she kept starting projects.

Jeff exhaled in relief. His friend was fine. She was lonely, that was all.

“Those were the best summers, you know. Those two girls loved it here. And I loved them like they were my own.”

They sat in quietness for a few moments, enjoying the sounds of the water lapping at the lake shore. A warm spring breeze ruffled the pines overhead until Carol’s voice interrupted Jeff’s train of thought. “You know, my niece Mylze is coming up in a few weeks. I want you to meet her. I think you’d be just perfect for each other.”

Then again, maybe his gut instinct had been right. He nodded along as Carol recounted memories of her nieces playing at the lake. He’d heard these stories before, but he had chalked them up to an old woman reminiscing about her family, a family that seemed to have all but forgotten her. Now, though, he wondered if her retelling the same stories over and over might be a sign of something else. Was Carol in the early stages of dementia? That would explain why she kept starting projects at the house and never finishing them.

“Jeffrey?” Carol turned her watery eyes to him. “Did I tell you that my niece Mylze is coming to visit this summer? You simply have to meet her. I think you’d be perfect for each other.”

Jeff sighed. Yes, there was definitely something else going on, and it was more than he could handle. He could repair the front porch and figure out a way to offer help for the rest of it without hurting Carol's feelings. But if she had dementia? That was a family matter, which meant Jeff was going to have to call one of the sisters. Apparently, he was going to talk to Mylze, whether he wanted to or not.