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Building a Perfect Match

Arlene James

CHATAM HOUSE

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Building a Perfect Match

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THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB?In charge of a hotel renovation, Petra Chatam's got everything under control—except Dale Bowen. The too-handsome contractor has his own ideas about the project. And they don't match up with ambitious Petra's, who hopes to become hotel manager.But the more time they spend together, the more Petra realizes they both agree on what really matters: love, faith and family. And they soon learn that building a future together is more work than building a hotel! It'll take a little bit of patience—and a lot of help from three love-minded aunts. Chatam House: Where three matchmaking aunts bring faith and love to life.

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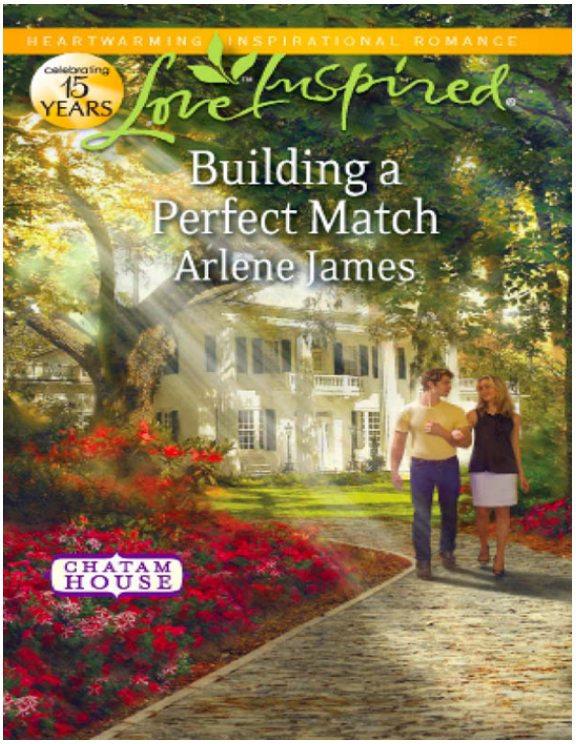

The right man for the job?

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"You!" they both said. "What are you doing here at Chatam House?"

Dale grinned. "I work here."

At the same time, Petra said, "I live here. My aunts invited me to stay until the hotel is finished."

"You're a Chatam!" Dale declared.

"Petra Chatam," she confirmed, comprehension dawning in her warm amber eyes.

"I should've known." He reached out to tap the delicate cleft in her dainty chin, but at the last moment, stopped himself. "That and the eyes. Though, yours are darker, which is odd because your hair is so…" Beautiful, he thought.

"It's good of you to inspect the job that your crew is doing on the new suite."

"Uh, I am the crew," he informed her.

She blinked at that, and he could almost see himself coming down in her estimation, from partner and project manager to lowly carpenter. Uncharacteristically, his temper spiked. He was proud of what he did.

But he didn't kid himself that he lived on the same plain as Garth Anderton. Or the Chatams.

But he was shocked to find that it suddenly mattered....

ARLENE JAMES

says, "Camp meetings, mission work and church attendance permeate my Oklahoma childhood mem-ories. It was a golden time, which sustains me yet. However, only as a young widowed mother did I truly begin growing in my personal relationship with the Lord. Through adversity He has blessed me in countless ways, one of which is a second marriage so loving and romantic it still feels like courtship!"

After thirty-three years in Texas, Arlene James now resides in Bella Vista, Arkansas, with her beloved husband. Even after seventy-five novels, her need to write is greater than ever, a fact that frankly amazes her, as she's been at it since the eighth grade. She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached via her website, www.arlenejames.com.

Building a Perfect Match
Arlene James

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;

but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and

let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

— Proverbs 31:30–31

Some daughters-in-law are sweet and thoughtful. Some are brilliant and talented. Some are beautiful and fun. Some are industrious and hardworking. Some are good wives, and some are good moms. Some are dedicated Christian women.

I hit the jackpot and got all of the above!

This one's for you, Monica.

MomR

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Chapter One

"Well, sis," Asher Chatam said, smiling across his desk at Petra, "you're bringing the old Vail Hotel back to life. How does it feel?"

"The Anderton Vail," Garth Anderton, CEO of Anderton Hotels, corrected, passing a stack of papers to the man on his right.

Petra flashed a careful smile at her older brother, who, as the attorney for Bowen & Bowen Construction, had drawn up the contracts now being signed for the renovation of the historic hotel. Knowing well her reputation among the members of her own family, she silently prayed for success.

Lord, this is my chance to achieve something, to finally find my place in the world. Please help me pull this off.

At twenty-eight, Petra had flitted from one "career" to another, never quite finding her calling, her passion, while her siblings, high achievers all, had long ago settled into their chosen fields. Now, as Special Assistant to the CEO of Anderton Hotels, she finally had an opportunity to do something meaningful—right here in Buffalo Creek, Texas, the hometown of her parents, both physicians who resided in Waco, where she had grown up.

She had brought the Vail to the attention of Garth Anderton soon after going to work for his company. Garth, who had built the Anderton chain by renovating small, historic hotels in good locations into unique and profitable properties, had been skeptical at first, as Buffalo Creek lay nearly forty miles to the south of the downtown centers of both Dallas and Fort Worth. The value of the property, however, along with the cost-plus contract that Petra had negotiated with Bowen & Bowen, had convinced Anderton of the viability of the project.

Now, if Petra could just bring this off on budget and schedule, she stood to be named manager of the hotel. Then, Garth had promised, after a few months he would bring her on to the acquisitions team. She would be perfectly placed, and on a career trajectory at last, when he took the company international.

Yet so much could go wrong. Her business degree hadn't exactly prepared her for overseeing the renovations of a historic hotel, let alone managing it. Plus, Garth himself presented something of a problem. Twice divorced, he had a reputation for dating and marrying his employees. Though he constantly cast out lures, Petra was determined not to bite. It meant walking a tightrope on the job, never taking up Garth on his more personal suggestions and constantly doing her best work.

Walton Bowen, the senior partner at the construction company, finished signing the papers and laid aside his ink pen. A big man with graying brown hair and smiling hazel eyes, he rose to his feet and shook hands all around before leaving the office. Petra and Garth followed a few moments later, strolling along the square to the southeast corner in the ninety-plus-degree heat. They crossed the street to the Vail and pushed through the bronze-and-glass doors.

Petra did not recall a time when the hotel had been operational. During her many visits to see her aunties in Buffalo Creek, the old hotel had stood silent and empty, the peach-colored marble columns and grand staircase rising in ghostly splendor behind the thick glass of its murky windows. As a child, Petra had often stood with her nose pressed to the glass, imagining those who had climbed the steps and moved through the lobby.

Though the major contracts had just been signed, work had already begun on the first phase of the project, which involved Garth's personal quarters. The new construction had left the soaring lobby looking more like a war zone than a luxury hotel in the making, however. Dust coated everything in sight, from the dull but intricately carved registration desk to the gapped crystal chandeliers overhead.

Suddenly dismayed, Petra scrunched her toes inside her shoes. It didn't help that her spectator pumps, which perfectly complemented her paper-white linen suit and black, sleeveless turtleneck, had turned out to be nothing more than attractive vises to torture her feet. Picking her way through the debris littering the marble floor, she wished mightily that she'd worn sensible flats.

"We've got quite a job cut out for us," Garth Anderton decreed, nodding his frosty head.

"Still," she said determinedly, "the beauty is here. Just look at that." She pointed toward the scrolls beneath the pediment of the nearest column.

"Of course, it's not real gold leaf," Garth pronounced, tilting back to eye the rich metallic glow far overhead.

"Oh, but it is," said a new voice. Firm and masculine, that voice carried the weight of knowledge.

Petra turned her dark amber gaze toward the sound, her blond ponytail swishing between her shoulder blades. The speaker stood in the doorway of one of the inner offices. Easily one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen, present company included, he stood at least an inch or two over six feet. Like Garth, he seemed exceptionally fit, but the tool belt slung about his slim hips proved that the muscles bulging in his upper chest and forearms came as the result of hard labor, while Garth's slender physique was owed entirely to the workout routine designed by his personal trainer. Other differences stood out starkly.

Casually dressed in jeans, boots and a yellow T-shirt that brought out the vibrant green of his eyes, the stranger obviously depended less on packaging than Garth, who prided himself on his grooming and wardrobe. At thirty-nine, Garth appeared several years the elder, but his frosty blond hair had been cut and styled to reflect the latest trend, while the longer, gold-streaked bronze locks of the interloper appeared somewhat unkempt. Yet not even the shadow of a morning beard dimmed the impact of that wryly smiling face, with its deeply set eyes, and lean cheeks grooved with dimples. In short, Petra found this unfamiliar man disturbingly attractive—and to her horror, everyone seemed to know it!

Garth's dark eyes narrowed behind the rectangular frames of glasses the exact shade of silvery gray as his summer-weight Italian suit. "I beg your pardon?" he intoned, his voice cold enough to leave icicles on the newcomer's perfect nose.

"The gold leaf on the capitals," said the other man easily, his vibrant green gaze on Petra as he walked across the floor to place a hand on one of the smooth columns. He smiled and nodded before addressing Garth again. "It's real. Which is why it was scraped off the bases."

Garth folded his arms, a sure sign of irritation, but then he quickly stepped forward to offer a perfectly manicured hand. "Garth Anderton, and you are?"

"Dale Bowen."

So this was the other half of Bowen & Bowen Construction, Walton Bowen's son. Petra silently thanked God that she hadn't had to deal with him during the contract negotiations; her discussions with his father had been tense enough, and he did not set her on edge the way the younger Bowen did. Torn between fleeing for cover and basking in that openly interested green gaze, she just stood there staring mutely. When he clapped palms with Garth and switched his attention there, she felt a spurt of relief.

The two men measured each other with blunt, level looks. Finally, Garth put on his easy, gleaming white smile, the one meant to disarm.

He knew as well as she did that Dale Bowen was a partner in the construction firm to which they were now legally bound, but he had to try to take the guy down a peg by saying, "You must be the project manager."

"I am," Bowen said, sounding amused.

Petra cleared her throat in warning to Garth. Clearly, here was one "construction type," as Garth would say, who wouldn't be easily intimidated. Garth took the throat clearing as a bid for introduction and waved her forward with a frown.

"My Special Assistant, Petra."

"Pleased to meet you," Bowen said, and once again she felt the full impact of that green gaze. He shook her hand, his own much larger one emanating bone-melting heat. The man was human lava. Garth, by comparison, always managed to be as cool as a cucumber. Petra suddenly wanted to cuddle up to Bowen. Instead, she yanked her hand back.

"Well, Dale," Garth said, purposefully using the other man's given name, "I'm sure you agree that we should consider a less costly alternative to real gold leaf." He looked up at the gold gleaming

far overhead, and so missed the shake of Dale Bowen's head. "How difficult will it be to match the color?"

"Not very," Bowen answered, "but it doesn't matter. Use anything other than original materials anytime they're available and the BCHS will be all over you."

Garth settled a frown on the other man. "BCHS?"

"That would be the Buffalo Creek Historical Society," Petra volunteered.

"It would," Bowen confirmed, smiling at her before switching his gaze back to her boss. "I've worked hand-in-hand with them for years, and I'm warning you now. Use the wrong materials or methods such as pre-hung doors, and they'll go to the state to shut you down."

"But the security of our guests—"

"Won't be compromised in the least if we reuse the original doors," Bowen interrupted.

"What about cost?" Garth demanded.

"Probably about the same. The real issue is the time it'll take to strip and refinish."

"Time, as I'm sure you know," Garth growled, "is money."

Bowen looked him in the eye, his sculpted mouth curving in a tight smile. Petra noticed that the square tip of his chin flattened when he smiled. Her own somewhat pointed chin had a tiny cleft in it, a Chatam family trait, and it tended to disappear when she smiled.

"Trust me," he said, "reusing the original hardwood doors will take less time and money than fighting the BCHS."

"We'll see about that," Garth muttered. Turning to Petra, he ordered, "Do a cost analysis."

"Yes, sir." She nodded, carefully avoiding Bowen's gaze.

"I want to see my private apartment now," he barked at Bowen. With that, he headed for the staircase. Petra trailed after him on her aching feet.

Behind them, Bowen asked dryly, "Wouldn't you prefer to use the elevator?"

Garth stopped so suddenly that Petra bumped into him from behind. Turning on his heel, he glared at the construction manager over the top of her head. "Fine."

Petra closed her eyes in relief. The thought of climbing five flights of stairs to the roof in these shoes made her want to weep. Garth didn't seem as pleased. Grasping her by the elbow, he grimly marched her toward the elevator tucked into a corner at the end of the reception area. Dale Bowen fell in beside her as they drew up in front of the outer doors of the elevator. Constructed of glass inlaid with bronze, the doors showed the polished wood interior of the waiting elevator car. Bowen pushed a button and the glass doors slid open. The trio walked into the elevator and turned to face the front. Dale took a key from his pocket and inserted it into a lock in the control panel. When he turned it, the doors slid closed.

"You can take them off now," he said as the elevator slowly lifted away from the ground floor.

"What?" Garth snapped.

Bowen ignored him, dropping his leaf-green gaze on Petra instead. "You can take off your shoes now," he said gently. "The floors in the penthouse are clean."

"Oh." Surprised, she looked down at her feet. "How did you…" She broke off, wincing with embarrassment. And she'd thought no one had noticed. Garth certainly hadn't!

"My mom and sister like pretty shoes, too," Bowen told her with a knowing smile. "They call them 'cruel shoes' because they can't resist buying them even though they hurt when they wear them."

Garth finally realized what Dale Bowen had obviously surmised with a glance. Not to be outdone, he slipped an arm about Petra's shoulders. "By all means," he cooed solicitously, "take off your shoes if they're uncomfortable."

The intimacy of his tone and gesture heightened Petra's embarrassment. Quickly stepping out of the shoes, she stooped to pick them up by the heels. Thankfully, the elevator came to a stop just then, and the door slid open.

"Well, well," Garth said, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"This way," Bowen directed, lifting a hand and sliding past Petra to push open the tall, carved doors that stood across a narrow length of gleaming wood floor.

Petra gasped as she stepped into the private apartment. Twelve-foot-high ceilings radiated with hidden lights, augmenting the sunshine that spilled through the broad windows set deeply into the paneled walls. French doors in one end of the living area overlooked an enclosed patio. Black granite and steel appliances accented the small, well-appointed kitchen, separated by a bar from the greater room. The two bedrooms, each with a private bath, opened off a short hallway.

As was his practice with every hotel added to the Anderton chain, Garth had contracted the apartment separately and given his personal decorator, Dexter, control of this portion of the overall project. Dexter had done well.

"Excellent," Garth said, brushing back the sides of his suit coat with both hands. "At least the historical society didn't hold up things on this end."

"This falls under the heading of new construction," Bowen pointed out.

"Excellent," Garth said again, looking around. "Quality work."

"And on budget," Bowen added. The sound of a revving engine had him reaching for his pocket, from which he pulled a cell phone. "Excuse me." Crossing the room, he tapped the tiny screen and lifted the phone to his ear. "This is Dale."

Petra turned away, affording him as much privacy as possible, and found Garth watching her. He stepped close enough to lightly brush a hand down her arm.

"Pretty nice, huh?"

"Lovely," she agreed, shifting away.

"And roomy," he went on, adding softly. "You know, staying here would be much more convenient for you than that old family mausoleum across town."

Petra kept a smile firmly in place as she whispered, "Chatam House is blocks, not miles, away and my aunts would be offended if I didn't stay with them." Triplets in their seventies, the sisters held some old-fashioned but laudable ideas about hospitality and family.

"Just tell them you need to be on-site," Garth pressed.

"If I stay anywhere else," Petra insisted quietly, "their feelings will be hurt. Besides, Chatam House isn't a mausoleum. It's quite grand, actually."

Garth narrowed his eyes. "I'd like to see that for myself."

"I'll have my aunts issue an invitation when it's convenient," she returned lightly. "You understand, of course, that it's a busy time for them just now."

Her Aunt Odelia was getting married after more than seventy years of maidenhood—to the same man she'd jilted fifty years earlier! Petra's brother, Asher, had also married last month, and two family weddings in so short a space of time had had the house in an uproar for weeks. The former gardener, Garrett Willows, had recently married, too, so of course the aunties had insisted on hosting a small reception for him and his bride. No, this was not an optimal time to introduce a new face into the mix, and Petra could only be glad of that. She was having enough difficulty keeping this relationship on a business footing as it was.

Bowen returned. "Sorry. I've been trying to track down—" He broke off. "Never mind. Another job. Now then, if you've finished here, we need to stop on the third floor to take a look at a problem with the railings there."

"What problem?" Garth asked, frowning.

"They're gone," Bowen reported. "Whole sections of them. And none of my suppliers can find anything like them. We're probably looking at having them replicated."

Garth threw up his hands and charged for the door. "I don't suppose we could just replace them with something similar?"

"We're not going to find anything similar," Bowen called out to him, following. He stopped and held the door open for Petra, who hurried through on her bare feet. He winked, as if to say that the boss was having a bad day.

Petra had the sinking feeling that it was only going to get worse, and she proved entirely correct.

The two men disagreed on everything from the depth of the carpet pile to the placement of light switches. Petra thought Garth would pop a blood vessel when it came to the issue of closets, of all things. The Vail didn't have any, and Dale doubted that the historical society would approve of having them built.

Garth finally turned on his heel and stormed off. Petra shot Dale Bowen an apologetic glance before hurrying after Garth in her killer shoes. This project was becoming more complicated by the moment, and she couldn't help worrying.

Please, Lord, she prayed, please help me work it all out. For once, Lord, help me get it right!

* * *

Bam! The pickup truck rocked as Dale slammed the door. He took a firm grip on the steering wheel with both hands and closed his eyes, calming himself.

Okay, Lord, he thought, it's obvious this job isn't going to be easy.

"Man," he added aloud, "that guy rubs me the wrong way!"

Sucking air in through his nose, Dale blew it out again through his mouth. An image of Special Assistant Petra popped up in his mind. Average height with a truly lovely face, she had captured his interest instantly. Unfortunately, she was obviously very "special" to Garth Anderton, even though he had to be forty if he was a day, and she couldn't be older than her mid-twenties.

Not that it's any of my business, Dale admitted silently, frowning.

Business. He'd somehow forgotten the importance of this job as soon as he'd laid eyes on the woman, which wasn't like him at all, especially considering that business had been slow these past couple of years and the doctor had told his dad to take it easy. Sitting back in his seat, Dale closed his eyes again and began to pray.

Lord, You know that we need this job. This one job could let Dad step back, maybe even retire, so please give me what it takes to see it through. Amen.

Feeling better, Dale started up his white, double-cab truck and eased it out of the alley and onto the street flanking the downtown square with its turn-of-the-century, pink granite courthouse and circa 1930s storefronts. A few blocks later, he turned right onto Chatam Avenue then made a sharp left.

He'd been guiding his truck through the black wrought iron gate and up the easy slope in the circular drive to the big antebellum mansion—built in 1860—on the hill for weeks now. Soon after Odelia Chatam and Kent Monroe, both in their seventies, had gotten engaged, the Chatam sisters had hired him to reconfigure several rooms into a suite for the newlyweds. Dale had been pleased to take on the job, but with the three sisters' insistence that he not work before nine in the morning or after five in the afternoon, the project had been slow going.

Still, the Chatam sisters were generous Christian women. His buddy Garrett Willows had worked as their gardener after he'd gotten out of prison, and the sisters had allowed Dale to take time away from the Chatam House renovation in order to help Garrett and his new wife open a florist shop and plant nursery in Kent Monroe's old Victorian house. Then they'd helped Garrett get a much-deserved pardon.

Pulling the truck through the porte cochere at the west side of the mansion, Dale parked it out of sight, then gathered his tools and let himself into the back hall through the yellow door. As was his custom, he stopped by the kitchen to elbow open the swinging door and let the cook know he was on the premises.

"Hilda, I'm here."

"Well, that makes two of us, sugar," she quipped, turning from the sink. As wide as she was tall, with lank, straight hair cropped just below her chin, she winked at him. "I'll let the misses know."

"Thanks."

Backing out of the doorway, he continued down the hall to the end, only to turn right into another that flanked the massive marble-and-mahogany staircase, which anchored the foyer at the front of the house. Dale always looked up when he started the climb. He dearly loved the painted ceiling with its ruffled clouds and white feathers against a sunny blue backdrop. No one could tell him who the artist had been, but he'd certainly been a genius.

The grand staircase, with its yellow marble steps and ornately carved mahogany banister, was an architectural wonder that few could appreciate more than the skilled carpenter who crossed the landing and went to work opening a new doorway into the unfinished suite.

Dale managed the chore with a minimum of noise and mess, while wolfing down his lunch, answering numerous phone calls from other jobs and, if he were to be honest, thinking about the blonde whom he'd left back at the hotel. He couldn't help wondering about her. She hadn't worn a ring, so he assumed she was single, but that didn't mean she was unattached. Anderton had made his interest in her clear enough.

That didn't mean they were involved, though.

Neither did it mean that Dale ought to get involved with her himself. He wanted an old-fashioned Christian girl, like his mom, a homemaker who valued family above all else. All he knew about Petra was that he was attracted to her. Maybe he'd get a chance to know her better, and maybe he wouldn't. That was up to God.

Dale nailed the header in place with just enough time remaining in the workday to clean up the site before heading home. He pulled out his phone to call home and let everyone know that he was on his way. With his attention on his phone, he wandered out onto the broad landing toward the stairwell, only to bump into someone coming from the other direction.

"Sorry!"

Looking up, Dale meant to reply to the surprised female voice with an apology for not watching where he was going—and nearly dropped his phone, along with his jaw.

Petra stood on the top step in her bare feet, one slender hand on the curled end of the banister, the other holding her black-and-white shoes by the heels. Her sleek ponytail lay across one shoulder.

For a moment, Dale thought he'd conjured her up from his imagination, but then he backed up a step and watched recognition overtake her. Shock swiftly followed.

He knew just how she felt, especially when she smiled.

Chapter Two

"You!" they both said. "What are you doing here?"

Dale grinned. "I work here," he supplied.

At the same time, she said, "I live here."

They both laughed, and Dale spread his arms, trying to take in the situation. That simple act seemed to kick his brain into gear.

"Did you say that you live here?"

"That's right," she answered, nodding. "My aunts invited me to move in until the hotel is finished. Once I'm manager, I'll find my own place."

"You're a Chatam!" Dale declared, smacking himself in the forehead—with his phone, as it turned out.

"Petra Chatam," she confirmed, comprehension dawning in her warm amber eyes. "Ah. Garth didn't say, did he?"

"No. No, he didn't," Dale agreed, feeling ridiculously pleased. "But I should've known."

She raised her slender eyebrows at that. "How on earth could you?"

He reached out to tap the delicate cleft in her dainty chin, but at the last moment thought better of the gesture and reached back to tap his own chin instead. “That and the eyes. Though yours are darker, which is odd because your hair is so…” Beautiful, he thought inanely. He managed, belatedly, to say, “Light.”

She tilted her head. “You work here?”

He pointed behind him. “On the new suite.”

“I see. I didn’t realize. Well, it’s good of you to inspect the job that your crew is doing.”

“Uh, I am the crew on this particular job,” he informed her.

She blinked at that, and he could almost see himself coming down in her estimation, from partner and project manager to lowly carpenter. Uncharacteristically, his temper spiked. He was proud of what he did, proud of his skills and knowledge, proud to work with his father in a family-owned business, proud to be his own boss and provide jobs for others, proud of the quality of the work provided by Bowen & Bowen Construction. But he didn’t kid himself that he lived on the same plain as Garth Anderton. Or the Chatams for that matter.

Shocked to find that it suddenly did matter, he frowned and heard himself say, “Your boss is in for a tough time with the Historical Society.”

She parked her hands at her waist, the shoes sticking out in sharp-toed splendor from the fist that gripped them. “Maybe they’re in for a tough time with him. It’s not like he doesn’t have a great deal of experience, you know. He has done this before.”

“He hasn’t done it in Buffalo Creek.”

“True. But I’m sure his experience elsewhere will prompt him to—”

“Make enemies of the Society, most likely,” Dale put in testily.

“You don’t know that!” she shot back.

“I know his type,” Dale snapped. “Used to throwing his weight around and getting what he wants when he wants it.”

She bowed her head in an obvious attempt to curb her own tongue. Dale knew that he’d do well to follow her example, but something about Garth Anderton provoked him even when the guy was not around.

“Look,” he said in a softer tone, “I just want to avoid trouble. I know every member of the Society, and they’re not going to take kindly to any attempt at cutting corners.”

“Anderton doesn’t cut corners,” she insisted. “It’s just that time is of the essence.”

“Uh-huh,” Dale retorted gracelessly. “I don’t think the Society’s idea of the importance of time and his are the same thing. They honor times past and seek to preserve for the future what it leaves behind. Anderton’s after a quick buck.”

“He’s a businessman,” she argued. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Not a thing,” he conceded. “I’m a businessman myself, but I know something about historical sites, restoration and those who care about them. Believe me, the only way to save time here is to get it right from the first.”

She bit her lip, eyelashes batting. Clearly, she didn’t agree but wouldn’t argue the point further. Dale wished that he’d bitten his tongue, but the best thing he could do now was beat a hasty retreat before he upset her further.

“I, uh, I have to go. It, um, was nice to meet you. Again.”

Wincing inwardly, he twisted past her and pounded down the stairs, mentally kicking himself. Really, could he have been any more confrontational? Any less suave? He pictured Garth Anderton’s urbane face and the way he’d so possessively slipped his arm about Petra Chatam’s shoulders in the elevator earlier. Suddenly, Dale wanted to pound something else, if only to punish his own fists.

* * *

Moving toward her joint bedroom and sitting room with labored steps, Petra winced. That had gone about as well as her choice of footwear. The man had usurped her day from beginning to

end. He "irritated" Garth, who had already given her orders to have him removed as the construction supervisor on the project. She'd already made an appointment to speak with Walton Bowen about the matter the next morning. As much as she dreaded the prospect, bumping into Dale right here at Chatam House somehow made it worse. Nevertheless, orders were orders.

Now, if only she could figure out how to go about the thing without offending everyone she knew and loved. Her brother, Asher, had sung the praises of Mr. Bowen the elder and his company. Now it turned out that her aunties had hired Mr. Bowen the younger to make the necessary changes in their beloved mansion. Great. Just great.

What was she supposed to say to the Bowens tomorrow, anyway? That the boss just didn't like Dale? Or maybe that the younger man displayed entirely too much knowledge and confidence in his opinions? She certainly wasn't going to admit that she would be as relieved as Garth to have Dale Bowen out of the way—but for other reasons entirely.

While changing into loose slacks, a knit top and her most comfortable flats, she decided that she would speak to her aunts about the matter. They seemed to know the Bowens. They might be able to advise her how best to approach the situation. Resolved, Petra padded into the well-appointed bedroom to comb her thick, straight hair before appearing downstairs.

As expected, she found her aunties and Kent Monroe in the front parlor, awaiting the dinner hour. Magnolia smiled at her from the armchair placed at a right angle to the settee, where Odelia and Kent cuddled, and the high-backed wingchair that Hypatia habitually claimed. Hypatia looked around as the others smiled in Petra's direction. Her mood lightening already, Petra smiled back, if only because Odelia sat swathed in layers of peach chiffon, from the big fluffy bow in her white hair to the ruffled toes of what looked suspiciously like bedroom slippers, not that Odelia gave a fig. She wore what she wanted and let the world gawk—and Kent moon. He did so adore her, and that was another reason to smile. The fact that he habitually hauled his great belly onto his feet in gesture of old-world gentility whenever a woman entered the room was yet another.

"Oh, Pet," Odelia trilled, using the nickname that Petra's late grandfather had coined. Odelia waved a lace hanky, jiggling the enormous square rhinestones clipped to her earlobes. They resembled framed, faceted mirrors. "Come and join us."

Magnolia gestured toward another armchair at the end of the rectangular piecrust tea table, sadly lacking a tea tray at the moment. Petra rarely drank the stuff, especially in the summer, but tea was somehow necessary at Chatam House, as much a part of the gracious atmosphere as the antiques and old-world manners. And after the day she'd had, Petra could have used a cup.

"It's so nice to have a young person in the house again," Hypatia decreed, though in truth Garrett, Jessa and their young son Hunter had vacated the premises only a few weeks ago, along with Ellie Monroe, Kent's granddaughter and Petra's new sister-in-law. Dressed for dinner in her customary silk and pearls, her silver hair twisted into its customary chignon, Hypatia inclined her neat head as if she were a queen acknowledging a subject, but the elegant old dear was nothing if not loving and kind.

"How are things going at the hotel?" Magnolia asked. Ever the practical one, she wore her shirtwaist dresses until they were threadbare, augmenting them with odd pieces of her late father's attire and on occasion trading her penny loafers for galoshes. Her steel-gray hair lay upon her slender shoulder in its usual simple braid.

Looking at the three of them, Petra felt her heart swell. She'd always found acceptance and unconditional love here. Not that her own parents, brothers and sisters didn't love her, of course. It was just that she'd somehow never quite measured up to the rest of them.

But she had a chance to do something now, a shot at a real career. So long as she didn't blow it.

"I was wondering," she said, taking her seat, "what you could tell me about Dale Bowen."

The sisters traded looks as Kent gingerly lowered himself onto the settee once more.

"He's really very nice," Odelia volunteered, "and so very handsome, don't you think?" She giggled at Kent, who teasingly shook a finger in silent warning.

"He's very competent," Magnolia put in, "very skilled."

"I find him respectful, mannerly and considerate," Hypatia said. "We know his family, of course, from church. Very solid people. What in particular did you wish to know, dear?"

Petra shifted uncomfortably. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all. "I—I'm not sure really. It's just that we could be working together on the hotel renovation, and I like to know all I can about the people I work with."

Hypatia nodded her understanding. "Well, he's a dutiful son, a regular at church, steady, dependable. What the man does not know about construction has not been imagined yet, and he treats historical treasures with the reverence that they deserve. I might wish that he were a little less fond of electric saws, but I cannot fault his work ethic, his manners, his attitude—"

"Or his looks," Odelia interjected with another giggle. Kent made a growling sound, purely for show, but Odelia leaned over, placed her hand on his forearm and cooed, "I'm in love, dearest, but I'm not blind."

Chuckling, Kent folded her doughy hand in his and raised it to his lips. "Neither am I, my darling, but I have eyes only for you."

Odelia dissolved in breathless twitters, prompting Magnolia to roll her eyes and rise to her feet.

"I believe I'll see what is holding up dinner," she announced, turning for the door.

"Perhaps we'll just wait in the dining room," Kent said suggestively, hauling himself up again and pulling Odelia with him.

Hypatia watched them leave, arm in arm, before turning to Petra with a weary sigh. "They say the enchantment will wear off eventually, but with those two I'm not so sure."

Petra bit back a smile. "It's the romance of the wedding, I'm sure."

"One can hope," Hypatia muttered. "Now, dear, what were we discussing?"

"Well," Petra hedged, "I was just wondering if Dale Bowen is the right man for the hotel job."

"Undoubtedly," Hypatia decreed.

Deflated, Petra glanced at her lap. "Ah. It's just that he seems spread pretty thin, what with this job and helping out his friends and…everyone has a private life." Everyone but her.

"Oh, I don't think he's seeing anyone just now," Hypatia said off-handedly. "If he were, I'm sure his mother would have told me."

That news sent a little shiver of something through Petra. She ruthlessly suppressed it. So what if he was single and unattached? It made no difference to her.

"I'm just concerned that he won't be able to give us his undivided attention," she went on carefully. "At the hotel, that is. We're on a tight schedule, and any delays could mean…" My job. "Added difficulty."

"You needn't worry, my dear," Hypatia assured her. "You're in good hands with Dale Bowen."

Smiling wanly, Petra silently conceded defeat. "Nice to know."

"Speaking of getting to know those with whom you work, dear," Hypatia said, "I was wondering about Mr. Anderton."

Petra's gaze sharpened. "Really? Why? What have you heard?" Her aunties were not the sort to read the scandal sheets or indulge in gossip, but something in Hypatia's tone had sent up warning flares.

"Only that he is a very presentable, successful gentleman and unattached, I believe. Your sister mentioned him."

Petra wondered what else Dallas had told them about Garth and why she had bothered. Dallas was known to meddle and blithely took credit for getting Odelia and Kent back together after a half-century-long separation. She fancied herself something of a matchmaker, but she knew that Petra was focused on establishing herself in her career and uninterested in romance. Still, the fact that

Dallas had bothered to even check out Garth annoyed Petra almost as much as Garth's agitating for an introduction to her family. She suspected that he meant to charm them out of any objections they might have to his pursuit of her, and that made the fine hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

She shook away the sensation and found Hypatia studying her with gentle concern.

"Is something wrong, dear?"

"No, no."

Odelia rushed back into the room just then, Kent lumbering in her wake. "Sister!" she cried. "The violinist we hired for the reception has broken his arm! Whatever will we do?"

Hypatia twisted in her chair. "Oh, dear. Well, perhaps the twins—"

"They're playing for the ceremony!" Odelia exclaimed. "Not the reception!"

"We'll think of something," Hypatia said, pinching the bridge of her nose. Petra took that as her cue to leave.

"If you'll excuse me, I'd like to wash my hands before dinner."

"Of course," Hypatia said absently.

Petra all but ran. The last thing she wanted was to get caught up in the wedding fever. She was happy for Aunt Odelia and Kent, but she couldn't let anything sidetrack her just now, especially not a man.

* * *

Pausing at the head of the stairs, Hypatia caught the faint sounds of a television program. She looked to her left, noting the narrow band of light that shined beneath the door to the combination bedroom and sitting room that Petra had taken for her own. She'd said she'd be looking for her own space once the renovations on the hotel were completed. All three of the sisters had hurried to assure her that she was welcome to stay at Chatam House as long as she liked, even permanently, but Hypatia suspected that Petra wasn't really thinking that far ahead.

Concerned for some time now about her sweet niece, Hypatia started toward Petra's door, but then she paused, wondering if an old woman's company was what Petra needed. Sadly, Hypatia was not really sure what her niece needed. Petra had always seemed a little lost somehow. The girl was perfectly capable, of course. She'd held a number of interesting jobs since graduating from college, but she'd never seemed to settle into anything, and so far as Hypatia knew, she hadn't dated much, either.

Hypatia could identify. She hadn't been much interested in dating herself, not in her youth and certainly not now. So much of the world seemed intent on pairing off, but she had never seen the point of it all. Then again, she'd always had her sisters. Triplets shared an incredible bond. It seemed almost unthinkable that one of them should marry, especially at this stage of life! Hypatia had always assumed that one must be called to marriage as one was called to ministry. Yet here was Odelia about to marry at the very end of her life—or nearly so.

Odelia Monroe. The notion still boggled the mind.

Hypatia considered another niece, Petra's younger sister, Dallas. While Petra seemed to avoid more than the most casual of relationships with men, Dallas dated frequently, throwing over one fellow after another in her search for Mr. Perfect, having declared early on that Mr. Right simply wasn't good enough!

Neither girl seemed to have a clue about true romance or God's calling in her life.

And yet, Petra had asked about Dale Bowen. Hypatia sensed that something more than professional concern lay beneath those seemingly casual queries. Could it be romantic interest?

Sighing, she had to admit that Chatam House had somehow become Romance Central. It had all started with their nephew, Reeves, and the granddaughter, Anna, of their good friend, Tansy Burdett. Then their niece Kaylie had met her husband, Stephen, when he'd come to Chatam House to recover from an accident. After that, it had been Kaylie's brother Chandler and Bethany, the sister of their former gardener, Garrett Willows, who, as it happened, had met and married his wife, Jessa,

at Chatam House just last month. Oh, and one mustn't forget Asher, Petra's brother and another nephew, and Ellie, Kent's granddaughter. Their romance had paralleled Kent and Odelia's.

Chatam House hadn't seen so many happy couples since…well, ever! Perhaps it had to do with the upcoming wedding. Once that was behind them, surely things would get back to normal.

Hypatia laughed at herself. As if anything would ever be "normal" again after Odelia married. Well, they'd just have to find a new normal. God would show them the way. It wasn't as if Odelia was leaving them, after all. They were gaining a brother, not losing a sister. They had all discussed it, she and her sisters.

Who discussed such things with Petra? Hypatia wondered. She and Dallas loved each other, but they didn't seem that close, and their mother, Maryanne, had always been so busy with her practice. Troubled, Hypatia moved to the door of Petra's room and lightly knocked.

Petra called for her to enter, and she did so, slipping quietly into the comfortable room. "I just thought I'd check on you, dear," she explained. "You seemed…preoccupied at dinner."

Pointing the remote at the flat-screen TV mounted above the fireplace, Petra shut it off. She motioned for Hypatia to join her on the couch. Upholstered in pale lilac, it made a pretty contrast in the mint-green and creamy-white room.

"I have something difficult to do tomorrow," Petra explained haltingly as Hypatia sank down on the edge of the sofa cushion. "I have to remove…someone from the project."

"Ah. That can't be pleasant."

Petra shook her head. "No. In fact, it's more awful than I thought it would be. Because he doesn't deserve it."

"Oh, dear."

"It's just one of those unhappy things," Petra said, shaking her head again, "but it's probably for the best."

"I can tell you're distressed by it, though."

"Yes, well, it comes with the job," Petra informed her.

"And this job is very important to you, isn't it, dear?" Hypatia asked, trying to understand.

"More important than you know!" Petra exclaimed. "Oh, Aunt Hypatia, this is my chance, my one real chance, to make something of myself!"

Shocked, Hypatia drew her spine straight. "Why, Petra Gayle Chatam," she scolded, "you are precious just as you are! How can you doubt it?"

"But I'm not like the rest of them!" Petra cried plaintively. "You know how dedicated my parents are."

"Yes, of course."

"And Asher is a wonderful lawyer."

"Without question."

Petra shot to her feet and began to pace. "And Phillip! He leads the life of an adventurer, climbing mountains and traveling all over the world."

"I pray for his safety all the time," Hypatia admitted with a nod.

"Even Dallas has always known where her place is in this world," Petra went on agitatedly. "She wasn't nine years old when she announced that she was going to be a schoolteacher."

"And so she is," Hypatia observed, still confused.

"But I," Petra declared, pausing to thump herself in the chest, "I've never had the slightest idea what I'm supposed to do."

"Is that all?" Hypatia blurted, oddly relieved.

"All?" Petra echoed. Shaking her head dejectedly, she dropped down beside Hypatia once more. "In my family, that's everything."

"Now, now," Hypatia soothed, taking her hand. "I know that's how it must seem, dear, but you're leaving out one very important ingredient."

"What's that?"

"God's guidance."

"But I've begged for God's guidance," Petra told her.

"Then you have to trust that He's leading you where He would have you go."

"I do," Petra assured her, squeezing her hand. "That's why this job is so important to me. I believe, I know, that He's led me to this point."

"Well, as long as you're following Him, you have nothing to fear," Hypatia said. "He'll give you everything you need."

Petra nodded. "You're right. I know it. I don't doubt Him. I doubt myself."

"You just stop that," Hypatia ordered, as if Petra was six again and would obey unhesitatingly.

Petra laughed. "I'll try."

"If it helps, dear," Hypatia told her, "I have every confidence in you."

Smiling, Petra hugged her, whispering, "Thank you."

Hypatia cleared her throat of the lump that had risen there, patted her niece, and rose smoothly to her feet. "I'll bid you good-night now." Bending, she kissed Petra on the forehead as she used to do when she and her sisters had tucked in the visiting children at night. "Sleep well."

"You, too."

Hypatia went to the door, but there she paused. "I'll pray for you tomorrow. And for whoever you must remove, poor man."

Petra bowed her head. "Thank you."

Nodding, Hypatia went out, determined to share her concerns with her sisters. They would pray, as always, and God would direct Petra's steps. As for that unfortunate man who did not deserve to lose his job, she would ask God to bless him in ways that he couldn't even imagine. Whoever he was, she hoped that he would feel the hand of God in his life and trust Him to provide his heart's desire.

Chapter Three

"It's not about his skills, Mr. Bowen," Petra said for perhaps the third time. "It's just a difference in management styles."

That excuse for removing Dale from the construction manager's position didn't sound any better now than the first time she'd used it, but she had little else to offer the man sitting across the battered desk from her. Walton Bowen was the rarest of persons, a truly nice individual. Nevertheless, he showed some irritation now, bracing his heavy hands on the arms of a chair that had seen better days.

"I've never met anyone who couldn't get along with my son," he insisted.

"It's not a matter of getting along, sir," she assured him. "As I said, it's just a—"

"Difference in management styles," said a wry, familiar voice from the doorway of the cluttered, dusty office.

She hadn't expected Dale to attend this meeting, but she wasn't surprised that he had. He was the construction manager on the project, after all. For the moment. She braced herself, tugging on the hem of her navy blue skirt, which she wore with a matching jacket and sensible flats. Dale's boots clumped across the wood floor, as the hydraulic arm on the heavy office door wheezed closed.

"If Anderton thinks he can work around the BCHS by getting me out of the way, he's wrong," Dale said to Petra, parking one hip on the corner of his father's desk and crossing his long legs at the ankles.

She couldn't deny either Dale's implication or his conclusion, but neither could she refuse a direct order. "He, we, feel that the work will go more smoothly with someone else as construction manager."

Dale folded his arms, looking down on her from his perch. "And I'm telling you that no one in this company knows the BCHS better or works closer with them than I do. No one in this town, for that matter."

"I'm sure you're right," she admitted. "Nevertheless…"

She didn't have to say more. Anger flashed across Dale's handsome face. Behind him, his father's chair creaked.

"I have a policy when it comes to disagreements, Ms. Chatam," he informed her. "Whenever we come to loggerheads in this office, we seek guidance in prayer."

Shocked, Petra tugged at her skirt again. She believed in prayer, of course, and frequently resorted to it. In private. But this was business. Still, she'd prayed about this very matter before she'd entered the large, metal building that housed Bowen & Bowen's offices and equipment.

Walt Bowen clasped his hands together atop the blotter on his desk and bowed his head, apparently waiting. After a moment, Dale shifted onto his feet. Turning, he joined Petra on the lumpy sofa. She bowed her head almost in self-defense, painfully aware of Dale as he leaned forward, braced his elbows upon his knees and knit his fingers together.

"Heavenly Father," Walt began, "it's not Your intention for Your children to be at odds, and as we sincerely seek Your will in all things, we come to You now for enlightenment and direction."

As he continued to speak, Petra felt her tension drain away and a hopeful optimism begin to grow. Surely, this would all work out somehow. She tried to think what she might do to soften Garth's dislike of the man next to her, but God appeared to be way ahead of her.

No sooner were the "Amens" spoken than Dale Bowen sighed, swept his finger down his nose and said, "All right. You want me out of the way, I'll step aside. What we have to discuss now is who replaces me."

Petra slumped with relief and reached out to lay a hand on his strong arm before she could think better of the gesture. The man radiated heat like a log fire. She snatched her hand back. "Thank you."

He shrugged. "I still think it's a mistake."

"You may be right," she conceded. That changed nothing, however, and he obviously knew it.

"As far as your replacement," Walt said, spreading his big hands across the ink blotter, "that'll have to be me."

"No way," Dale objected, sitting back to cross one leg over the other. "You have enough on your plate. Jackie Hernandez can handle things."

"You sound like your mother," Walt grumbled.

"In other words, she'd agree with me," Dale retorted before glancing at Petra. "I'll explain things to Jackie myself."

"Isn't Mr. Hernandez the supervisor on-site?" Petra asked, wondering about that exchange between father and son.

"He is," Dale confirmed. "He's young, but don't be fooled by that. Jack knows what he's doing."

"My only concern is that he can handle the job," Petra replied earnestly.

"No worries there," Dale stated.

"Jack's a good man," Walt concurred.

"Then we're agreed," Petra said, getting to her feet. "Thank you, gentlemen."

Both men rose. Walton Bowen reached across his desk to shake her hand, while Dale moved to hold open the door. Petra shot him a look of gratitude as she swiftly exited the room. She wasn't surprised when he followed her, but she couldn't help being a bit uncomfortable, even as he fell in beside her, strolling along as she walked through the cavernous building. Finally, she felt compelled to speak.

"I—I meant what I said before. It isn't personal." He snorted, so she added, "Not on my part." A slow smile spread across his face. Fascinated by the way the tip of his chin flattened and the green of his eyes intensified, she couldn't make herself look away.

"Good to know," he said softly.

She stumbled, suddenly feeling as if the ground shifted under her feet. His hand shot out, fastening around her upper arm.

"Careful," he said, drawing her to a halt.

The heat from his hand radiated up her arm and throughout her chest, stealing her breath. He released her the next instant, and she searched for something intelligent and safe to say. The only thing she could come up with was, “I like your dad.”

He grinned. “Yeah. The worst anyone can say about my father is that he works too much.”

She relaxed somewhat, saying lightly, “Wish I could adopt his prayer policy the next time Garth goes on a tear.”

She smiled to herself, imagining the look on Garth’s face if she suggested that they stop and pray together in the midst of one of his rants. But then the smile died as she realized that she had never before wondered about the state of Garth Anderton’s soul. She would be very surprised if Walt Bowen was not intimately acquainted with the spiritual condition of each and every one of his employees. He probably prayed for them all daily and gently witnessed to every non-Christian among them. That’s what her aunts would do. But all she’d thought about was what good Garth could do her career. Petra felt very small in that moment, very small, indeed.

“Does he do that often?” Dale asked.

She blinked up at him. “I’m sorry. I was thinking of something else. What do you want to know?”

“Does Anderton routinely go on a tear?” Dale clarified, frowning.

“Oh.” She shrugged. “Not really. It’s just that he’s very…strong-willed.”

“Used to getting his way, you mean.”

“Well, he is the boss,” she pointed out.

“I noticed. Have you been with him long?”

She shook her head. “Not him personally. I’ve been with the company about six months, but this is my first project working with Garth as his—”

“Special Assistant,” Dale supplied.

Surprised at the bite in his tone, Petra frowned. “One of several,” she clarified.

“Oh?” He sounded interested, so she went on.

“It’s a temporary position, if you must know, a chance to prove yourself and move on to bigger things.”

Dale folded his arms and cocked his head. “Such as?”

“Management. And then,” she added enthusiastically, “acquisitions, I hope. He’s taking the company international, eventually, and someone has to find properties in those exotic locales.”

“And you want to be part of that?”

Surprised that he had to ask, she gave her head a wobbly shake. “Wouldn’t you?”

“No. Especially not if it means living overseas.”

Shocked, she backed up a step. “Why not?”

He dropped his hands to his waist and glanced around the building. “To put it simply, I’m a family man.”

“But you’re not even married!” she blurted.

He brought his gaze back to hers. “Not yet. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have family. I’m in business with my father here. I have an apartment in my folks’ house. I eat dinner nearly every night with them, my sister and her family. I wouldn’t trade that for anything in the world—except…” Glancing down at his toes, he rocked back on his heels, then suddenly he looked her squarely in the eye again and said, “Except for a wife, home and family of my own.” He smiled. “But that would just be adding to the family, wouldn’t it?”

He seemed so sure of his place in the world, so confident that his life was on the right track; it left Petra feeling bereft and uncertain when she could least afford to be. Managing a smile, she reminded herself that she was finally getting it together, finally on her way to…what exactly? Financial success? A brilliant career? Happiness?

Gulping away her sudden doubts, she said what seemed most obvious. “The Bowens sound like a close family.”

Dale nodded, clearly pleased. “We are. I always thought the Chatams were big on family, too. I mean, your aunts are so devoted to one another.”

Petra smiled with genuine brightness. “Yes. They are.” She felt her smile dim as she added, “Ours is just such a large family, though, that we all sort of go our own way.”

“Maybe that’s what it is then,” he told her lightly. “Both of my parents are only children. Other than my grandparents, it’s just us.”

“Are your grandparents here, too?” she asked conversationally, turning for the door once more.

He kept pace with her. “Grandma and Grandpa Bowen are. They live out at The Haven,” he told her, naming a private retirement complex. “Grandpa doesn’t get out much anymore, and Grandma won’t go anywhere without him. I try to visit them once or twice a week. Mom and sis are there nearly every day. Mom’s parents, Grandma and Grandpa Enderly, divide their time between here and Minnesota. They’re here in the winter, there in the summer.”

“Can’t take the heat,” Petra surmised distractedly, thinking about what her aunt had said about him being a “dutiful son.” Apparently, he was just as devoted a grandson. A family man, who wouldn’t want any job that took him away from those he loved.

As she knew too well, he didn’t have to travel the world for a job like that. Her parents had worked long, grueling hours; as children, she and her brothers and sister had often gone days without seeing one or the other of them. Oh, there had been many exciting vacations to some of those exotic places she’d mentioned earlier. Too often, however, they as children had been admonished, usually by one of their many nannies, not to bother their busy parents with the small, everyday things that meant so much to kids.

Petra remembered one occasion especially, her first dance recital at the age of six. She’d been so nervous that her stomach had reacted poorly to her dinner, but the nanny had refused to call her mom, a pediatrician, saying that she would be in the audience when Petra performed, just in case Petra became ill. But “Dr. Maryanne” had spent only moments there that night. She’d been called to an emergency, unaware that her own child was embarrassing herself on stage by vomiting all over her patent-leather tap shoes.

That and other events had led Maryanne Chatam to eventually adopt a personal mantra that she repeated often to her daughters. “We’ve come a long way, but no woman can have it all, at least not all of the time.”

“Or the cold,” Dale said, and for the second time Petra had to shake her head apologetically.

“I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

“Grandma and Grandpa Enderly,” Dale informed her in an amused voice. “They don’t like extreme temperatures.”

“Right. Sorry,” Petra apologized again. “Guess I’m just a little distracted this morning.”

“Dumping project managers has that effect on some people,” he quipped.

She had to laugh. “Apparently so.”

They had reached the outside door at some point. A large, garage-type door on rollers, it stood open. She put out her hand. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

He wrapped his big, warm hand around hers. “I’ll be around when you need me.” Not if but when.

She said nothing to that, just nodded, flashed a smile and walked out into the blazing June sun, pulling her hand from his. As she drove toward the hotel in her little silver coupe, she mused that, all in all, this onerous chore had gone far easier than she’d expected. She could thank the Bowens for that.

When she arrived at the hotel a few minutes later, Jackie Hernandez was waiting for her, but they barely got to speak before she had to take delivery of an office-full of electronic equipment and rented furniture. She spent the remainder of the morning setting up her office. Thankfully, Garth had

returned to the home office in Austin for the day, so Petra didn't have to put up with him gloating about getting rid of Dale.

Maybe she was being unfair, though. Garth was a competitive sort, yes, but his business decisions were all about business. Usually. Nevertheless, Petra was glad that she didn't have to deal with him in person that day.

Jackie Hernandez came in about midafternoon again to let her know that he wasn't thrilled about his promotion.

"You're making a mistake to cut out Dale," he told her. "He is Bowen and Bowen now, and nobody knows these old buildings or BCHS like he does."

"I'm sure we'll manage," Petra told Hernandez. "Just let me know immediately of any problems. Before you take them to Mr. Anderton."

Hernandez glumly nodded his understanding. "Yes, ma'am."

The problems began not half an hour later when the wrong supplies were delivered. Jackie pulled out the plans and argued with the deliveryman for ten minutes before the guy called Dale, only to concede afterward that Jackie was right.

"It'll go smoother next time," Petra told the new construction manager, praying that it would be so before hurrying off to begin setting up appointments to interview restaurant personnel.

Garth wanted the chef brought in on the ground floor, knowing that any chef worth his or her salt would insist that the kitchen be remodeled to personal specifications. They'd employed an agency to help them find likely candidates, and part of Petra's job was to weed through them so Garth could make the final choice. It turned out to be no small task.

Owing to her delayed start on the day, she got home too late for dinner that evening—but just in time to join the aunties at midweek prayer service. Tired to the bone, Petra would have loved to beg off, but one look at Aunt Hypatia's expectant face had her putting on a smile and trooping out the door again. She was glad that she went. Prayer, as the pastor reminded the congregation, is for the benefit of God's children rather than God Himself.

"Your Heavenly Father already knows your needs and desires, after all," he told them, "but by lifting them up to God, we gain strength in communion with Him, wisdom in His answers and much-needed perspective."

Petra wondered how God could know her needs and desires when she felt so unsure of them herself, but listening to all the requests for healing and rescue certainly put her personal troubles into perspective. As she bowed her head, she couldn't help thinking of Walt Bowen insisting that they pray together about Dale's position that morning, or of Dale sitting beside her on that couch with his head bowed unashamedly as Walt had sought guidance.

"Very solid people," Aunt Hypatia had called them, and she had been right.

Petra liked them. She wasn't entirely sure that she understood them, but she did like Walt and Dale Bowen. She wondered what Dale's mother and sister were like, then lost the thought in concentrated prayer. Afterward, she felt uplifted—but starved!

Hilda, bless her, had left a plate for Petra. She enjoyed the food in her room then left the remains in the old-fashioned dumbwaiter down the hall before climbing into the tall, four-poster bed. As she slipped off to sleep, she wondered if Dale had worked at Chatam House today. Very likely, he had. That meant he'd been right around the corner from this room. That seemed strange to her—and oddly significant.

His words drifted through her mind one last time.

"I'll be around when you need me."

She slept like the proverbial rock.

* * *

Petra arrived at the hotel early the next morning to find Garth already there. He asked right away how it went with Bowen. She replied simply that Jack Hernandez was the new construction manager.

"Excellent. Excellent," Garth said, rubbing his hands together. "In that case, I have a little bonus in the works for you." He rocked back on the heels of his Italian leather shoes and smiled. "It'll be ready later this afternoon, so I'll bring it by Chatam House this evening."

Deciding that she couldn't put him off any longer, Petra gave in graciously. "If you can be there by six, I'll let my aunts know that we'll be having company for dinner."

His smile widened. "Six, it is."

Petra turned the conversation to the pending chef interviews. By a quarter to five, exhausted from trying to stay a step ahead of Garth, she gratefully headed home to prepare for the evening ahead. She barely set foot on the landing upstairs when Dale appeared.

"I have something for you."

"Oh?" What was this, she wondered, gift Petra night?

He waved her over to look at a picture on his phone. "A contact of mine found these fixtures in a Chicago retrofit. He even found extra shades in the original boxes. What do you think?"

Petra looked at the wall-mounted brass-and-glass light fixtures and lifted an eyebrow. "They're lovely, but what are they for?"

He shot her a surprised look. "The missing hotel wall lamps. I counted fourteen."

Petra blinked. "Where are fourteen lamps missing?"

He jammed the phone into his hip pocket. "Hang on. I've got a copy of the hotel plans in the truck. Won't take a minute for me to show you exactly where the lamps go." He paused. "Unless you'd rather talk to Jackie about it. I can fill him in, and he can—"

She shook her head. That was just silly. Why insist on secondhand information? "Go on." She hurried toward her room, adding, "I'll just change and meet you back here."

"Okay." Dale smiled and shot down the stairs.

Petra ran to change. If they needed wall lamps, they needed wall lamps, for pity's sake. Hernandez would be handling the installation. What did it matter who told her about them?

She couldn't deny, though, that she'd much rather discuss the matter with Dale than the new project manager. Jackie was nice enough, but he seemed to blame her for Dale's removal and she couldn't very well tell him that Garth had insisted. Besides, something about Dale Bowen made her trust him. So what if he made her heart race just a little faster than normal? This was business. Just business.

* * *

Dale stood at the top of the stairs, a roll of blueprints in hand, when Petra reemerged from her room. She'd managed an amazing transformation in a short time, trading her severely tailored business suit for jeweled sandals, leggings and a shiny knit tunic in a shade of dark orange that made her eyes glow. She'd pulled the clasp from her hair and let it hang sleekly down her back.

"You look great," Dale heard himself blurt.

She stiffened slightly then smiled. "Thank you."

He had to force his mind back to the job at hand. "I've, uh, got a makeshift table in here." He carried the plans toward the unfinished suite. Petra followed. Unrolling the blueprints on a sheet of plywood balanced atop two sawhorses, he anchored one end with a hammer from his tool belt. "Okay, from the bottom floor up…"

Looking over his shoulder, she watched as he pointed out, numbered and marked with a pencil the placement of every fixture.

"I'll need those plans," she said when he finished. "Can you text me that photo so I can run it by Dexter?"

He took his phone out again. "Sure. What's your number?"

She told him, and he sent the photo. Hypatia showed up while Petra was saving the photo in her own cell phone.

"Petra, dear, your sister and a guest are downstairs."

"Already?" Petra yelped, glancing at the time. "I'm on my way. Thanks, Dale. I'll get back to you on this."

"Don't wait too long," he warned, rolling up the plans and handing them to her. "I've got these things on forty-eight-hour hold. After that, they go on the open market."

"You'll hear from me tomorrow," she promised, heading out the door.

Hypatia smiled at him but did not immediately turn to follow her niece. Instead, to his surprise, she glanced around the room. "You've worked this space around the fireplace very well. Do you mind if I take a little tour?"

"Of course not. It's your house."

She smiled at that and asked a question, which he gladly answered despite the feeling that this was leading up to something else entirely. He didn't have to wait long to find out what it was.

"Mr. Bowen, might I ask a favor of you?"

He smiled. "Anything at all, ma'am. It's Dale, by the way. If you call me Mr. Bowen, I'll be looking around for my father."

"Dale, then." She folded her hands and squared her silk-clad shoulders before saying, "Would you mind very much staying for dinner tonight?"

Taken aback, Dale felt his jaw drop. "Ma'am?"

"We have so missed Jessa and Hunter," she said, "not to mention dear Garrett, and our Petra tires of being the only young person in attendance, I'm sure. But most of all, frankly, we could use a man to balance the table. We would be most grateful."

"I—I see."

He knew that the Chatam triplets were "old-world," as Garrett put it, but Dale had never known anyone who worried about one gender or another being outnumbered at the dinner table. Still, he was tempted, if only because of Hilda's cooking. But of course, it wasn't only that. He thought of how pretty Petra had looked just now and felt his smile intensify, but then he frowned again, gesturing at his clothes. They were clean, thanks to the coveralls that he usually wore, but they weren't exactly up to Chatam standards.

"I'd have to run home and change."

"Oh, no, you're fine," Hypatia assured him. "Garrett came to the table in jeans all the time."

Knowing his friend Garrett Willows, Dale could certainly believe that. "Well, if you're sure, then I'd be very pleased to stay. Just let me spruce up a bit and make a couple of quick calls."

Hypatia literally beamed. "Wonderful. We'll await you downstairs."

"Yes, ma'am, and thank you."

"Oh, no, thank you, Dale."

She went out, leaving Dale to mentally scratch his head. Well, that beat all. He pulled his phone from his pocket once more. Petra tired of being the only young person at the table, did she? They had to "balance the table"? He shook his head as he called his mother to let her know he wouldn't be home for dinner that evening. Then he quickly dialed up his good buddy Garrett to see if he could offer any enlightenment about what might really be behind this unexpected dinner invitation.

Chapter Four

After stowing the plans in her room, Petra all but flew down the stairs, hitting the foyer in a near-run. She drew up only as she reached the door to the parlor and calmed herself, trying not to imagine what her sister might be saying to her boss. Why did Dallas have to choose tonight of all nights to drop by for dinner? Her baby sister was prone to outlandish behavior and odd ideas. Their brothers often remarked that she wasn't Odelia's namesake for nothing.

Petra quickly found that Garth, as usual, had taken the entire gathering in hand. He sat in a gold-and-yellow-striped armchair, leaning forward slightly as he winked at Odelia, who was already twittering like a tree full of robins.

"A very fetching bride," he was saying. "Blast my luck for coming along too late."

Even Magnolia chuckled at that, or it may have been the quivering of the green ostrich feather boa twined about Odelia's head that tickled the usually taciturn sister. Surprisingly, Odelia appeared to be wearing a ring of grass in her hair, which was surely meant to somehow complement the pebble print of her caftan. The significance of the huge twiggy things poking out from her earlobes confused Petra until she realized that they were made of wood. This, then, was Odelia's homage to nature. Or ground cover. She couldn't be sure which, but then she was more interested in the redhead parked in the side chair next to Garth. Dallas looked as pleased as a cat in cream.

"It was too late fifty years ago," she said in reply to Garth's quip. She tossed her blazing-red head in the direction of the settee, where Kent sat with one beefy arm draped about Odelia's plump shoulders. "I think Kent beat you to the mark before you were even born."

"Missed it by more than a decade," Garth replied smoothly. Dallas arched a slender, carroty brow speculatively and parked her hands at the impossibly narrow waist of the simple, lime-green sundress that she wore. Her amber gaze lit on Petra then, and she smiled wide enough to break a tooth.

"Hey, sis! Guess who's staying for dinner?"

"That would be me," Garth quipped, turning his head to greet Petra. He rose as she moved forward.

"And me!" Dallas crowed.

"You look very nice," he said to Petra. "Take my seat."

"No, no, I'll share with my sister," Petra told him, sliding past him to perch on the narrow wood arm of Dallas's chair. She was down before poor Kent managed to make it fully upright. His behind hadn't touched the sofa cushion again before Dallas addressed Garth.

"Is it true that you have private apartments in every one of your hotels?"

"And at my corporate headquarters," he confirmed.

"But you don't have a house?" she pressed.

His smiled tightened. "Not any longer."

What he meant was not since the last divorce. Petra smoothly changed the subject.

"I believe you said you had something for me."

His smile relaxed again, and he reached into the pocket of his suit jacket. "Ah, yes. Had it inscribed just today." He pulled a long, flat box from his coat and opened it. Inside lay a very expensive watch with a capital A superimposed over a capital V on the gold face. He turned it over so she could see the inscription.

"'To Petra,'" Dallas read aloud, "'for a job well done. Garth.'"

"It's very nice," Petra said as Garth took her wrist and fastened the watch around it.

"What does the A and V mean?" Odelia asked, leaning forward to get a better look.

"Anderton Vail," Garth answered. "It's the logo for the hotel."

Petra shook her hand so the thick chain slid around and the face, which was circled in tiny diamonds, became visible.

"Thank you," she said, feeling more than the simple weight of the gold. The watch seemed to be an entirely appropriate business gift, but she'd have preferred a mundane raise in pay or even a sincere "Atta' girl." Or, better yet, nothing at all. It felt wrong to accept a gift for firing a man, though she hadn't really done any such thing and this, she feared, had less to do with business than it should.

When Hypatia appeared a few minutes later, Petra felt obligated to show off the watch again and even more conflicted about it. She welcomed the interruption when Chester, the houseman, came to announce that dinner could be served at any time.

"We'll need a few more minutes, Chester," Hypatia replied calmly.

She went on admiring Petra's watch and asking questions about the logos of the other Anderton hotels. Garth was in the midst of listing the hotels and explaining their individual logos when Dale Bowen walked into the room. His unruly hair appeared freshly combed, and he'd somehow managed

to shave. Petra supposed that, like many men, he carried a battery-operated razor. She also supposed that he'd been invited to dinner!

Her assumption proved entirely correct when Hypatia smiled and said, "We can go in now, as we're all acquainted."

"I'm not acquainted!" Dallas exclaimed, leaping to her feet with a frown.

"That's right. You weren't at Garrett's wedding dinner," Hypatia said, going on to make the introduction without apology. "Mr. Dale Anthony Bowen, please meet my niece, Miss Dallas Odelia Chatam. Dallas is Petra's younger sister. Now we may go in."

With that, she turned and took Dale's arm, lest anyone be in doubt that he was her personal guest and should be treated accordingly. Garth cast Dale a stormy glance as the latter escorted Hypatia from the room. Petra realized suddenly that she should have told Garth that Dale worked on the premises, but it hadn't even occurred to her to do so. She'd assumed that the less said about Dale Bowen the better. Wrong.

Recovering quickly, Garth hurried to offer one arm to Petra and the other to Magnolia, leaving Kent with both Odelia and Dallas, who tossed her short, bright curls as she took the older man's arm. Petra sensed her little sister's dismay, but she couldn't imagine why Dallas should be discomfited. Garth's reaction she could understand. He'd had no idea that Bowen worked here, let alone that he was on the premises, but Dallas presented a puzzle. Who could tell, though, what went on in her little sister's head?

Besides, the bigger question was, why had Hypatia invited Dale to dinner? Garth asked the same question obliquely as they followed Hypatia and Dale down the west hall toward the dining room.

"I must say I'm surprised to find Bowen on the guest list."

"Oh, Dale works here," Magnolia supplied. "He's creating a new suite upstairs for Odelia and Kent."

"I see."

Garth turned a cold glare on Petra, who sighed inwardly. Obviously, she'd made a big mistake. She wondered if he'd take back his watch and almost hoped that he would. Except that she needed this job, she reminded herself. She had plans, big plans, and the promised promotion was crucial to them.

"It's the first time he's ever been to dinner, though," Magnolia went on blithely. "Well, except for Garrett's wedding dinner. You haven't met dear Garrett, have you, Mr. Anderton?"

"I have not, ma'am."

"We'll have to arrange that."

"Garrett Willows will be supplying flowers and plants for the hotel," Petra put in. "I'm sure you'll meet at some point."

Magnolia exclaimed happily about that, describing Willow Tree Place to Garth as everyone got seated around the dining table. As soon as they had all found chairs, Hypatia smiled from her customary spot at the head of the table and looked to Dale, who had taken a place across from Dallas between Magnolia and Odelia. Petra, meanwhile, sat flanked by her sister on one side and Garth on the other.

"Dale," Hypatia asked smoothly, "would you honor us by saying the blessing?"

"Happy to," he replied, bowing his head.

If he was surprised, he certainly didn't show it, but Petra saw Kent glance at Odelia, who shrugged slightly before dropping her chin. When Petra herself glanced at Garth, she saw he'd been caught off guard and was watching everyone else for a clue as to what to do. She quickly folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head as Dale began to speak.

"Father God, we come in humble gratitude for the food we are about to receive from Your great bounty, and we ask Your blessing on those who have prepared and provided it for our enjoyment. May Your Spirit nourish our souls as this meal nourishes our bodies. These things we pray in the name of Your Holy Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen."

As a chorus of “Amens” echoed around the table, Chester and the housemaid, Carol, came in bearing trays of food, which they placed, dish by dish, on the table. Plates of cheese and crisp cucumbers served with spicy mustard came first, followed by platters of pan-grilled chicken breasts and baked sweet potatoes. A bowl of corn and an asparagus casserole came next, with hot sesame bread last.

Garth took one bite of his chicken and went into raptures. “What is this? It’s delicious!”

“I think Hilda, our cook, finishes it off with apple cider vinegar,” Magnolia told him.

“We should steal her for the hotel restaurant,” he said to Petra. Everyone laughed, but Petra knew that he was half-serious. She knew, as well, that he’d have better luck stealing the gold out of Fort Knox.

Garth promptly set out to charm everyone at the table, talking about the various chefs at his hotels and their peculiar personalities. Completely monopolizing the conversation, he had everyone chuckling at his witticisms and stories. Petra noticed that Dale did manage to get in a few pithy rejoinders, however.

Once, Garth told a long, involved story about a certain head chef who had blown off successful careers in finance, engineering and real estate only to wind up a top cook. “So I ask him,” Garth finished, “why cooking? He sighs and says, ‘I was looking for something I could fail at.’”

“Should’ve tried construction,” Dale quipped dryly as the laughter waned. “It’s easy to fail at that.”

“Not that you have ever done so, I’m sure,” Hypatia decreed from the head of the table. “Nor are you likely to.”

“From your lips to God’s ears, ma’am,” he returned softly.

Garth cleared his throat and launched into another tale, one that had them all hanging on his every word, about a woman who swore she’d learned to cook so she could poison her abusive husband, but then she fell in love with cooking. Her husband was so impressed that he stopped beating her and gained three hundred pounds.

“Died of a heart attack at forty-four,” Garth said. “His family still believes she got away with murder.”

Dallas leapt into the conversational fray by addressing Dale directly. “I think he did it to himself, don’t you? Unless she was shoving food down his throat.”

“Makes you think, though,” Dale said with a straight face. “I figured Hilda was always trying to feed me because she likes me, but maybe I’m on her hit list.”

The aunties and Kent all laughed and chorused, “Me, too!”

Garth showed his teeth in what was surely meant to be a smile, and began regaling his captive audience with descriptions of dishes he’d enjoyed in faraway places. Finally, Chester served dessert. After wolfing his down, Dale rose, thanked his hostesses and took his leave, but not before he sent Petra a crooked smile. She wanted to follow him and apologize for… Well, she didn’t know what she wanted to apologize for; she did know that the evening had been excruciating. Of course, she stayed in her seat and continued to smile lamely when a response seemed necessary, privately writhing all the while.

After what seemed like hours, Garth finally took his leave, too. First, though, he kissed the hands of all the aunties, clapped Kent on the shoulder with manly bonhomie and bowed to Dallas before appropriating Petra and leading her to the front door.

“Lovely evening,” he said conversationally. “Delicious meal. Delightful company.” He leaned forward then and whispered in her ear, “How did I do?”

She just barely tamed an eye-roll that would have done Magnolia proud. “You don’t need me to tell you that you charmed them.”

He beamed then muttered, “Bowen was a surprise.”

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