

This time, she did collide with Chase.

Gasping, she jumped back. "We have to stop doing this."

"Sorry. I heard footsteps," he explained, flashlight in hand. "I figured I'd better check it out."

She gazed into his eyes. They had the ability to stop her heart. "I thought you took the day's receipts to the bank and then went home."

"I did to change clothes. I have to finish a repair."

Her gaze traveled over his tight tee shirt. Even through the soft cotton, she could see the shape of his well-defined chest muscles. Tenley focused on a vein trailing its way over his huge biceps and squelched the urge to trace it with her finger. She wondered how those arms would feel around her.

Forget it, she warned herself. He was one big temptation she had to avoid.

"I thought you said the icemaker couldn't be fixed." Catching herself staring, she tore her gaze from him.

"It can't. It's the sink in the utility room this time. After we closed, Melody planned to wash the kitchen floor, but when she turned on the tap, she noticed the pipe wouldn't drain. She called me when I was on the way home from the bank, so I came back to unclog the plumbing."

More repairs, just like always. But Chase looked so tired, Tenley didn't have the heart to say something sarcastic. Furthermore, he was working overtime when he should be asleep at home. The thought of him in bed shifted her imagination into overdrive.

"It can't wait 'til morning?"

"I'd rather get it done now."

He was probably afraid something else would break down, she thought.

"Do you need something?" he asked.

"I wanted a cup of hot chocolate," she answered far too distracted by his full lips. "Care to join me?"

"...I should fix this drain first." He seemed nonplussed.

Tenley couldn't blame him. He'd likely formed a negative first impression of her, so her offer must have come as a surprise. Remorse washed over her. She regretted the brusque way she told him her plans for the inn, but it had been only fair to let him know what would happen.

"Need some help?" she asked, hoping to atone.

"Uh, sure."

This time he looked so stunned she had to smile. "Just tell me what to do."

"For starters, you can hold this." When he placed the flashlight across her palm, he held her gaze, and his warm hand brushed hers.

Tenley sucked in a silent breath as pleasure rippled through her.

Chase dropped into a knee bend and slid the metal washtub under the plumbing.

She sat on the floor beside him. The small space forced them close, and his after-shave wafted around her like a cloud of aphrodisiac. Every cell in her body prickled with awareness of him.

"More light on the u-bend, please." He tapped the spot with his finger.

To comply, Tenley moved closer, and her shoulder pressed his. The contact sent desire sizzling through her, and she had to use both hands to steady the flashlight. This

was insane. She'd met Chase just hours ago. He could be an escaped convict for all she knew, but he had her simmering.

He picked up a wrench and twisted the coupler. His muscles flexed, and Tenley watched, rapt. When he removed the section of plumbing, water gushed into the washtub and something thudded to its bottom. Chase set down the wrench and leaned nearer, bringing his cheek millimeters from hers. A slight movement and they'd touch. The thought made her tingle.

He shifted away, and Tenley noticed the sodden wad of paper and two crayons in the washtub.

"Now we know why the water wouldn't drain." He shook his head.

"How did that stuff get in there?"

He chuckled. "I can think of one likely suspect."

"Who?"

"Grady Brown. He's Lisa Brown's other little boy. She gave him a coloring book and crayons to keep him busy. It worked for a while. Then he slipped away. She asked me to track him down, and I found here a few minutes before you and I met."

"He must be a handful." Tenley switched off the flashlight, laying it in the toolbox.

"He's just a typical kid."

As he reassembled the pipes, Tenley could hardly bear the sweet torture of his nearness. After he maneuvered his disturbing body from under the sink, Chase shut the toolbox and got to his feet. Taking her hand, he helped her up. His heat suffused her with longing, and she felt a tight pull deep in her abdomen.

After they cleared the mess and washed their hands, he asked, "Is the offer of hot chocolate still open?"

"Sure is."

While Chase set the kitchen table, Tenley stirred the cocoa into the milk and stole glances at him, unable to get enough of looking at him. He'd make a great subject for a sketch, she thought, pouring the hot chocolate into the pot.

"Marshmallows or whipped cream?" she inquired, admiring his perfect profile.

"Just plain, thanks."

Tenley carried the pot to the table, filled the mugs, and sat opposite him.

"Good chocolate," he remarked, after a sip.

"Thanks." She smiled and sampled the drink, relishing its warmth and rich flavor.

He swallowed more of his drink and sat back, wrapping his long, tanned fingers around the mug. Tenley wondered how their caress would feel, and the thought caused another spasm above her pelvis. She had to stop thinking in that vein.

"I thought someone had broken in when I heard your footsteps," he remarked. "I was all set to clobber whoever came through that door."

She raised her brows and smiled. "Then I'm glad you looked first. If you'd broken my right arm, I'd miss my deadlines, and my boss would be livid." She sipped the chocolate.

"Compassionate guy." Chase rolled his eyes.

Tenley shrugged. "He's obsessed with the business. Sometimes he calls in the middle of the night."

"A lot of us get sucked into that trap." He bolted back the rest of his drink.

“Sounds like you’ve been there.”

“Maybe.” He looked as if he’d said more than he intended and glanced at his watch. “It’s late. Better get the table cleared.”

She stood, and his big biceps caught her attention again.

When they finished putting the mugs in the dishwasher, he lifted his toolbox. “See you at the meeting in the morning.”

“I’ll be there.”

He walked out, giving her a view his of sensational *derrière*.

But she had to squelch this attraction. She had too many questions about him. What business trap had he gotten sucked into? Why didn’t he want to talk about it? The man got more mysterious each time they met—and more intriguing.

But she had to resist, or he’d break her heart the way Lance did.

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Tenley bolted upright in bed. Gasping, she stared at her image in the mirror on the armoire. She *wasn’t* eight years old, and the birthmark *was* gone. So were her glasses, crooked teeth, and weight problem. Still, the nightmare had never seemed so real, so vivid. But she hadn’t been home in years...where the events that triggered the bad dreams had begun—events she couldn’t forget, though she desperately tried.

The day her father died was seared in her brain, and just the memory caused Tenley to huddle under the covers. Goosebumps erupted over her flesh, and she shivered, remembering her dad’s shouts and her mother’s tears. Then came that terrible late-night knock on the door from the police. She lost both parents that day. From that time on, her mom had no time for her, busy trying to make the business a success—but to little avail.

Tear springing to her eyes Tenley pressed her fist to her mouth. The terrible things she’d heard that day were still locked in her heart, and so was the shame. This was one wound time could never heal, nor could it lessen the guilt—because she’d caused it.

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