

Chapter 1

Kenia Akers shifted from one foot to the other at the back of the huge Bigby barn. She shouldn't have come to the benefit concert, but it had seemed even more lame to stay home on Valentine's Day when she'd been planning to attend for weeks. She'd dumped Jonah yesterday, but that was no reason to let her ticket go to waste. Maybe he'd use his for a bookmark... if he even had time to read since he was obviously pursuing Gloria Sinclair again. Jerk.

Wasn't it just Kenia's luck? Meet an adorable guy like Jonah Baxter on Christmas Eve, be wooed with whirlwind dates, only to discover he was still in love with someone else on February thirteenth?

She should've waited until after the concert to send him packing. At least she would have had one perfect Valentine's Day to remember. She'd have been here on the arm of one of the cutest, sweetest

men she'd ever met instead of solo with half the town wondering about the demise of her short romance.

Kenia choked back a snort and tipped her chin up. Right. A perfect Valentine's Day, knowing he loved someone else?

On stage, Cole Anderson stood alone in the spotlight with his guitar as the elderly granny who'd sung the last song with him made her way down the steps and into the hushed audience. The spotlight divided, part of it coming to rest on Allie Bigby, the beneficiary of tonight's concert and silent auction. It sure stunk that Allie's lavender barn had burned down early Christmas morning. Then there'd been some glitch with her insurance. Arcadia Valley had pulled together to help raise the funds for rebuilding.

The mood shifted in the barn in that one long moment as Cole gazed down at Allie and Allie gazed back, her lips slightly parted and her eyes shining.

No way. There was only one thing that could be coming next, and it wasn't something Kenia wanted to witness. She pivoted for the door, only to discover she was blocked in by a wall of bodies. "Excuse me, please," she whispered once, twice, ten times as she edged toward the cold wintry night.

Cole's voice pushed into Kenia's consciousness. "Allie told me she loved me today, and I think you all know I love her, too."

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Freedom beckoned from two people away. Kenia ducked between them, but one shifted and she connected with a hard elbow to her shoulder, spinning her sideways.

A warm hand caught her arm, steadying her, as startled eyes swung to meet hers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

Kenia stared into the gorgeous eyes of the man a few inches from her and tried to remember her words. His brown hair in need of a cut and his scruffy chin in need of a shave gave him a bad-boy image, unlike Jonah, Mr. Perfect.

On stage, Cole began singing a love song.

Immeasurably better than a proposal, but no doubt one was coming. This song was only a reprieve but, knowing Cole and Allie’s history, he’d had years — decades — of unrequited love to pen at least twenty-five stanzas.

That didn’t mean she should stand here like she’d been struck by lightning staring at a total stranger until Cole’s final strum.

“Excuse me, please.” Too bad she couldn’t muster anything other than a breathless whisper.

A grin crinkled his face and warmed those eyes just as the heat of his hand left her arm.

Kenia yanked her gaze away and pushed open the barn door. Outside, icy air chilled her heated cheeks as she dashed across the crowded parking area to her

car. A motion sensor blinked a light into action, cutting the view of the smattering of stars that bravely attempted illumination of the dark night.

With shaking hands, Kenia stuffed the key in her ignition, started her Ford Fiesta, and drove away from Bigby Farm. Whew. At least she'd missed the proposal. Sure, she was happy for Allie. She'd known the woman since high school. If anyone deserved to find true love and happiness, it was Allie.

Only... why not Kenia? Why had she wasted six weeks dating a man who couldn't stop dreaming about another woman? There'd been niggles of doubt, but she'd ignored them. She'd known Jonah'd had a thing for Gloria Sinclair for several years, but it had never gone anywhere. Kenia hadn't thrown herself at him. He'd been the one to invite her to his brother's wedding. He'd been the one to hold her close while they danced, who'd kissed her, albeit briefly, at the stroke of midnight on New Year's. He'd been the one who'd invited her to his family dinners, cooked her amazing meals, and snuggled her while they watched movies.

She hadn't dreamed all that. He'd been the one pursuing her. Hadn't he?

Okay, maybe his kisses had lacked passion, but that had been welcome after Damian who'd groped her on their first and only date. Passion would build as their relationship developed and, one day, he'd ask

her to marry him. She'd become Kenia Baxter. There'd be total fireworks by then.

Or not. She should've seen it coming. Should have, but hadn't. Not until yesterday when Gloria entered A Slice of Heaven, the bakery run by the Baxter family, and caught Kenia kissing Jonah. He'd been distracted. He'd made donuts for Gloria — expected her — and Kenia could tell he hoped she hadn't figured that out. He'd called Gloria when his sister had been rushed to the hospital to save the life of her unborn baby. Not Kenia. No, she found out accidentally, after the fact.

Having those blinders ripped off had been painful, but she had to hold her head up high in the community. Arcadia Valley was small, and everyone knew everyone else's business. Kenia managed Page Turners, her aunt's bookstore, so escaping town wasn't an option. The only salve she'd been able to muster had been breaking up with Jonah before he broke up with her.

She'd brought the basket of books and the Page Turners gift certificate out to the benefit concert as promised, ready to tell anyone who noticed she was alone that she'd called it off with Jonah. She hadn't expected to be required to witness Cole Anderson proposing to Allie Bigby.

That guy in the back of the barn. Who was he? Not a reader, or she'd have seen him in the book-

store... unless he was one of those who preferred e-books or bought his paperbacks online. She shuddered. Maybe he was a friend of Cole's from out of town, just visiting for the concert. Probably that was it. A better thought than him not being a reader or not supporting the local bookstore.

Kenia pulled into the parking spot in front of her small cottage. She'd never see him again. That was fine. She needed time for her broken heart to mend.



The guy on the stage crooned on and on, obviously besotted with the young woman in the other spotlight. She was kind of pretty, with her tousled brown hair falling to her shoulders, but not as pretty as the woman he'd elbowed as she dodged past.

Zane Russell glanced at his friend Quinn standing beside him. "Who was that?"

"The girl who left in such a hurry? Kenia Akers. Wonder what her problem was." Quinn shrugged. "She runs the bookstore downtown."

Bookstore. Zane should forget about her right this minute. Forget about her short but fiery orange hair, forget about the sadness in her eyes... had they been blue? Hard to tell in the dim light. "Married?" Man, had that really come out?

Quinn's eyebrows pulled together as he gave Zane his full attention for a minute. "Who are you talking about? Kenia? No, she's not married. I think she's dating someone, though. Last I heard, not that I keep track."

"It's Valentine's Day. If she were dating, she wouldn't have been sad and alone."

"So maybe they broke up." Quinn shrugged and faced the front, where the final guitar strums finally faded.

There was a silent auction spread out on tables across the back of the barn. Surely a local bookstore would have donated something to such a worthy cause. Zane wended his way through the standing guests, vaguely aware of the musician asking the woman to marry him. By the cheering of the crowd, she said yes.

Ah, there was a stack of books wrapped together with a band of brown paper on the back table. He didn't bother scanning the titles, just glanced at the bid sheet. Someone had bid \$100. They were hardcovers. Probably worth that much or more on eBay. He scrawled \$125 below it. Beside it was a listing for a \$75 gift certificate with the same emblem as the paper by the books. The last bid was \$80. He scribbled \$100 on that one. Hopefully the engagement would keep people from coming to the back table to check their bids.

Wait, this was a stupid idea. He didn't need to spend money to find her store and introduce himself. Almost all the businesses in town were along Main Street or in that mini-mall where the bakery was. He could just stroll down the sidewalk and find the bookstore easily enough.

Russell, you're an idiot. You don't even read.

Yeah, well. Maybe he'd start.

The voice in his head burst out laughing. Okay, fine. It was unlikely. Anyway, Kenia Akers probably had other hobbies. She was around books all day at work, so she likely did other things in the evenings. Hiking, maybe. Biking. Kayaking. Of course, it was well below zero outside in mid-February, so he'd need other ideas to tide him through until warmer weather. He'd think of something.

A guy about Zane's age moved to the table closest to the door and tapped a wireless microphone. "Can I get everyone's attention, please? I'm Andrew Bigby, and I'd like to thank everyone for coming tonight and helping my sister's lavender business get back off the ground. Your generosity means a lot to our whole family. The silent auction has wrapped up, so let me just announce the lucky winners. If your name is called, please make your way to the item you bid on, and my wife, Layla, will accept your payment. Okay? Let's get going then."

Panic seized Zane's throat. Had he really bid on both the bookstore packages? And no one else was hurrying over to up the bid? *Come on, somebody.* His eyes scanned the crowd, but they all seemed content with whatever the outcome would be.

"The final bid on a bouquet from Blossoms by the Akers is one hundred eighty dollars. The bidder is Emerson Hadley. Thank you, Emerson and Blossoms by the Akers."

Andrew shifted to the next item. "The final bid on a three-day rafting trip is nine hundred fifty dollars. Thank you, Felipe Espinoza, for that great bid on a package by Snake River Tours."

A Latino man jogged to the back, pumping his fists, as a few people cheered.

"Well, that ought to be interesting," murmured Quinn from beside Zane. "He's a cop with five kids, all girls."

Zane tried for a chuckle, but it was hard.

Andrew picked up the next sheet. "The final bid on a seventy-five dollar gift certificate to Page Turners is one hundred dollars." He squinted at the paper. "Thank you, Zane Russell and to Page Turners for your donation. Wait, the next one is also from Page Turners for a set of six romance novels. Zane Russell, you're also the high bidder on this package with a bid of one hundred twenty-five dollars. Thank you."

An elbow caught the middle of Zane's back. "You bought a set of trashy romance novels?" Quinn chortled. "What were you thinking, man?"

Heat crept up Zane's cheeks. He should've taken a closer look. The bid sheet had been on top, but he hadn't even looked at the covers. He'd only been thinking about a chance to meet Kenia Akers. Well, he'd get that chance, times two. Although the books were right here, and once he'd paid for them, he'd take them home. No trip to a bookstore would be necessary. What an idiot.

With wooden legs he moved over to where Layla was accepting a check from the police officer. Hopefully she had a method of accepting charge cards, too. He hadn't exactly intended to spend anything tonight.

She shifted her attention to him with a bright smile. "Your name?"

"Uh. Zane. Zane Russell."

Layla grinned. "That will be two hundred twenty five dollars, Mr. Russell. You must be an avid reader."

Best not to answer that part. He pulled out his wallet. "Can you take Visa?"

"Sure." She pulled out a cell phone and attached a small device. "I can just slide the card right through here."

“Great.” He waited for the transaction to be complete then tucked the gift certificate into his wallet along with the card. Hopefully the bookstore also stocked gift items. Didn’t most of them?

Then he reached for the stack of books. Man, he couldn’t believe he’d let temporary insanity rule.

“Oh, wow, I was counting on winning that bid.” A young woman dragging a small child by the hand glanced at the books and shook her head with a smile. “The one on top just came in this week, hot off the press, but I hadn’t made it down to Page Turners to buy a copy yet. I’ve been waiting to get into this series until all the books were out.”

Zane thrust the pile toward her. “Here you go.”

“What?” Her startled eyes met his. “No. You bought them.”

“That’s okay. Really. You can have them. Happy Valentine’s Day or something.” Romance novels for Valentine’s. Sounded like a match made in heaven.

Her gaze lingered on the books then shifted back to him. “Are you sure? I’m happy to pay you for them.”

“Absolutely certain. Enjoy.”

“But your wife... or girlfriend...”

“I think she’s probably read them, after all.” It was only a little white lie. If he had a girlfriend like Kenia — crazy thought that had possessed him — she would have read them by now, right?

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Zane pushed the pile at the woman until her hands came up to accept the books. Then he nodded abruptly and edged his way out of the hot, crowded barn into the chilly parking area.

He should've come out here first, before doing something so stupid as bidding on a stack of books. If he'd thought at all, which he hadn't, he'd have assumed they were mysteries or maybe science fiction. Thrillers, maybe. But romance novels?

If he were a reader, he would've kept them. Maybe found some ideas on how to win a woman over. But, yeah, he wasn't a reader.

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