

## Chapter 1

“Hi, Mommy!” Elena ran across the schoolyard, her long curls streaming behind her. “I met my twin sister today.”

Kelly Bryant knelt and braced herself for the collision. “Did you now? That’s interesting. I never knew you had a twin.”

Wham. The sturdy little girl hurtled into her arms. “But I do! Miss Jamieson said so. She said, why look at you two. You have the same birthday and the same cute noses. You must be twins.”

Time to explain how it worked... or not? Kelly hugged her daughter. “That’s great. I’d like to meet your twin.”

“Well, good, ’cause she’s right over there. See her, Mommy? She’s waving. And she has a daddy but no mommy. Why don’t I got a daddy?”

“The word is have.” Kelly smoothed Elena’s tangled blond hair, wild from swinging and climbing and sliding, and followed the pointing finger to see a little girl with a brown bob clinging to the hand of a tall man. The pair turned and looked at them, and the girl jumped excitedly, pointing back.

Looked like Kelly was going to be a victim of childhood matchmaking. Temporary victim. “Okay, kiddo, let’s go meet them.”

“Yay!” Elena tugged Kelly to her feet and dragged her forward a few feet before abandoning her to run into the other child’s arms. “Sophie!”

Kelly trailed along. Sure, she wanted to meet a great guy. Most single moms probably would. But the older Elena got, the more demanding she got on the subject. The girl was certain all that mattered

was that she got a daddy. *Hate to break it to you, kiddo, but that means a husband for me, and where's the guy who will love and cherish us both?* Yeah. Not happening.

"I don't got a daddy." Elena planted both hands on her wee hips as she tilted her head up at the tall guy.

"Elena. The word is have." How many times had Kelly tried to break her daughter's habit? And never more embarrassing than the present moment. "You don't *have* a daddy."

The man chuckled. "They say it like they see it, don't they?"

Kelly shook her head and tried to smile. "Apparently. I'm Elena's mom, Kelly Bryant. Your little girl is Sophie?"

He nodded. "I'm Ian Tomlinson. Sophie and I just moved to Riverbend. I'm the new Public Works Manager for the town."

It got better and better. That made him the new boss she'd heard was coming. "Um, welcome. I'm one of your serfs." And not one that would be seen trying to climb the town ladder by schmoozing her boss. Not that she was interested, anyway. He wasn't *that* good looking. Just because he was tall with broad shoulders and brown hair that curled around his ears, brushing his collar. Just because he had an adorable grin that he turned on all three females in his presence. Just because he caught her staring and the grin grew a little wider, crinkling his eyes. No, she'd never be attracted to a guy like that.

Right-o. She pushed out a smile. "Welcome to Riverbend. Maybe we'll see you around. Come on, Elena, time to go home."

Elena's lip protruded. "But I want to play with Sophie. Can she come to our house?"

Ian angled his head to one side. "What do you mean, one of my serfs?"

Kelly shrugged as she reached for Elena's evasive hand. "I work in your department. This time of year I'm in the greenhouse growing the flowers we'll be planting in the parks when the danger of frost is past."

"Cool. Can't wait to see the results. One of the things that attracted me to Riverbend was that whole doing-things-from-scratch attitude, rather than just ordering a truck load of flowers from some big grower."

"Yes, our parks are always pretty. Elena, time to go home."

Two little girls clutched each other's arms and turned pouty faces in Kelly's direction. Since when did Elena blatantly disobey like this?

"Hey, I have an idea," Ian broke in. "Sophie and I were heading down the street for ice cream. Maybe you two would like to come along? My treat." He pointed to the ice cream stand several blocks away toward the river.

"Yay!" shouted Elena.

"Thank you, Daddy!" Sophie blasted into Ian's legs, rocking his balance.

Kelly took a deep breath and let it out slowly before meeting Ian's gaze. She forced a smile. "I guess I'm out-numbered. Thank you."

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