

## Chapter 1

No, I don't think so.”  
Joanna Kraus pressed both hands on the boardroom table and stared at the infuriating man at the other end. “No? And why not?”

“I don't think that's what my grandfather has in mind.”

Why didn't the elderly Mr. Akers come and speak to the committee himself? He was only old, not dead. He didn't always make sense, they said, but the message had to be clearer than coming through a third party. Warning bells rang. Hadn't Pierce used his dad's name to stall the deal she'd put together for him?

She lifted her chin and met Grady Akers' dazzling blue eyes. “Why don't you explain what your grandfather wants instead of making me guess?” This proposal wasn't going to fall through like this. Not on her watch. Not again.

Early spring sunshine angled in through the tall, narrow windows of the Grace Fellowship board room. Flames flickered in the gas fireplace. The other three committee members' heads swung back and forth as though watching a tennis match.

“Ms. Kraus.” Grady flashed a winsome smile. “As I mentioned in my initial request, he wants the property to be used for something that benefits the church and the community. While bulldozing the structures and building a row of townhomes for low-income housing would definitely assist those who live in them, Granddad would prefer an option that is of lower cost and wider benefit.”

Of course, the Akers family dangled the carrot of additional funding in front of Grace Fellowship. No one could blame Joanna for thinking big. All she needed was one or two solid, completed deals in her CV to set her consulting company on the right track again. This deal for her brother’s church — and hers, since she’d moved — should have been a slam-dunk.

She glanced at the monitor displaying the presentation on housing she’d been arrowing through. “I’m sorry, Mr. Akers. It would be most helpful if you and your grandfather offered concrete parameters before I spend two more weeks of my life honing another proposal for you to shoot down.” Granted, she’d been rather distracted by the move to Arcadia Valley at the same time, but a look at the town demographics had shown her affordable housing was a definite need.

His grin, surrounded by a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, did not waver. Dark wavy hair brushed the collar of his blue-and-white striped shirt, accenting his eyes.

Joanna had once had a weakness for blue eyes. Not anymore. If the man thought she’d succumb just because he smiled, he had another think coming. *Remember Pierce. He had a great smile, too.* She tipped her head and looked at Grady with eyebrows raised.

He rested his elbows on the table. “Maybe we could go for lunch and do some brainstorming.”

Mrs. Poncetta smirked.

Heat crept up Joanna’s cheeks. “Or you could send me an email.”

“Or we could Skype.”

“Mr. Akers—”

“Grady.”

“Mr. Akers, please send me an email with any additional information you may have that might help me reach some actual possibilities.”

His brows rose above those twinkling eyes. “And your email address is...?”

“On the report in front of you.”

He glanced down then nodded. “So I see. You will definitely be hearing from me. Soon.”

Was that a threat or a promise?

The committee chair looked from one to the other. "If I may interject..."

Joanna took a deep breath. "Go ahead. Mr. Wattenberg, isn't it?"

"I've known Clarence my entire life. He served Grace Fellowship well as a board member and Sunday School teacher for decades. He has always been a member in good standing. He may be eighty-nine now, but his mind is still sharp. Is it not, Grady?"

Grady rubbed his temples and looked down. "Most of the time."

Huh. The man had a soft spot?

"Then there's no time to lose." Mr. Wattenberg turned to Joanna. "I see no point in the committee continuing to convene until you have come up with a plan that Clarence approves of. Grady has a good point. Why don't you accept his lunch invitation?"

She would not look at Grady. She would *not*.

"And furthermore, I think the two of you should go visit Clarence together. Let's not play the guessing game of what Clarence will want and what he won't want. Catch him on a good day and ask him. Give him your thoughts. Let him respond." Mr. Wattenberg glanced at his watch. "I have another meeting shortly."

"Could we spend some time in prayer before you leave?" Mr. Marshall asked. "We need God's guidance in this matter."

"Of course." Mr. Wattenberg nodded, sinking back into his chair. "Go ahead, and I'll close."

So. Her presentation was over before she'd had time to get into the details. Just like that. She reached over and flipped her laptop shut as Mr. Marshall began a measured prayer to the Lord above.

It wasn't that she wanted to waste time fleshing out ideas only to be shot down in five minutes. It was that she didn't want to spend time with Grady Akers. He was flirting. Using his charm to get in her good graces so he could... no. She wouldn't let him. She'd left Salt Lake City to get away from Pierce, not

to meet another man equally as full of himself. She’d moved her consulting business to this small Idaho town because her brother needed help with the boys. The church had hired her to create a viable plan for a piece of land and had no right to push her into going for lunch with this man.

Conscience bit. Not that she’d never gone for lunch with clients before. It was part of doing business. She’d even survived handsome, single, male clients before, so what made this time different? Grady was more than the sum of those parts.

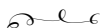
He was hot. Sizzling hot. He made more than her blood boil.

She glanced down the table at him, past the board members with their bowed heads.

His grin widened, and his eyes gleamed with amusement.

Joanna scrunched her eyes shut. Why wasn’t he focusing? Why wasn’t *she*? Mr. Marshall intoned the end of his prayer, and Mrs. Poncetta began an impassioned plea for God’s guidance.

As though they hadn’t all been praying for that these past two weeks. At least, Joanna knew she had. Who knew what Grady Akers prayed for? She didn’t even want to guess.



“Thanks for joining me for lunch.” Grady took in the beautiful woman across the polished wooden table. Her dark brown hair surrounded a perfect face before falling in loose curls past her shoulders. *Really, Grady? A perfect face?*

Joanna raised her eyebrows. “It’s not like I had much choice.”

She didn’t think of him as perfect anything, that was for sure, unless it was a perfect nuisance. What was her problem? He wasn’t that bad. Women had been falling over themselves to get his attention for years. At thirty-two, he wasn’t precisely over the hill. The mirror told him he wasn’t ugly, though his hair needed a trim.

“Granddad has lunch at eleven-thirty and then naps until two, so we’ve got a bit of time.”

Her lips pulled into a tight line.

She was going to be like that, was she? He could handle it. “Have you eaten at the Sunrise before? The owners source many ingredients locally. Really good food.” He tapped the menu in front of her. “Order whatever you like. You won’t be disappointed.”

“I’ll pay for my own lunch, thank you.”

He grinned. “But it was my invitation. I insist.”

“Mr. Akers—”

“My name is Grady. Save the *Mr. Akers* bit for my grandfather.”

She stared at him.

Okay, he’d try again. She’d moved recently from Salt Lake City, right? “Arcadia Valley is a small town, Joanna. Twelve thousand people when everyone is home. We don’t stand on that kind of formality around here, even when we’re talking business.”

She flipped open the tall menu, blocking his view. Blocking his words, too, no doubt. Man, whatever had he done to her?

“The baked potato and bacon chowder sounds good.” She lowered the menu. “I’ll have a coffee as well. Thank you.”

“Good choice.” He signaled for the server and placed the same order for them both. When he looked back, she was fiddling on her phone. “Did you come up with any thoughts on using the property more as it exists now?”

Joanna gave him a sharp glance and clicked off her device. “I’m not sure what anyone would want with old greenhouses and a house that must have been built in the forties.”

“That’s where Granddad started Akers Garden Center. My father expanded the business and moved it to the outskirts of town twenty-five years ago.”

She drummed her fingers, drawing his attention to the large ruby ring on her right hand. It had been hard to miss earlier, even down the length of the boardroom table, catching the light every time she gestured. Right hand. That didn’t mean anything, did it?

“Leaving the old property to fall into disrepair.”

She was starting to get under his skin. “Granddad started seedlings for the garden center for years afterward. My sister and I helped out after school to earn spending money.”

“How nice.”

Grady’s temper flared. “Look, I don’t know why you hate me so much. We are on the same team here, trying to find a way to fulfill the terms of Granddad’s living trust to the benefit of all parties involved.”

“I don’t hate you.”

The server set down two bowls of soup and a basket with fragrant sourdough biscuits.

“Hate might be too strong a word.” It didn’t feel too strong. “But you seem to avidly dislike me and be opposed to everything I say.”

Joanna’s brown eyes narrowed, staring at him as she bit her lip. Finally, she nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Is it something I said?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

Okay then. Grady broke a steaming biscuit in half and slathered it with butter. No sense letting good food go cold.

She took a tentative bite of the chowder.

Maybe she was the sort whose blood sugar got out of whack if she hadn’t eaten. Maybe a good meal would flip her world right-side-up.

After a few minutes, Joanna set her spoon down. “So tell me what people use greenhouses for besides growing plants.”

*Besides plants?* Grady tilted his head.

“And who grows plants if they’re not selling them?” she pressed on. “I’m sure your grandfather doesn’t expect the church to go into competition with the family business.”

“Uh...”

“Exactly. There isn’t any practical reason to keep the greenhouses.”

“Just because I don’t have a quick answer doesn’t mean there isn’t one. That’s why the church hired you. To come up with creative ideas.”

“Low-income housing—”

“No. Ideas for the property as it is now.”

Joanna shook her head and smeared a tiny dab of butter across a biscuit. “I think we’ve established that the greenhouses aren’t viable. A number of panes are broken and the whole set-up is in disrepair. I imagine there would be a significant cost to revitalizing them, and to what purpose, if the site isn’t being used for business?”

She had a point, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. Grady couldn’t imagine up and telling Granddad they were bulldozing the lot. “There must be something.”

“The house at least could be rented out.” Her nose wrinkled in distaste. “When was it last updated? Is everything up to code, or would the church be liable if, say, an electrical fire broke out?”

He could do without the hostility, but at least she was talking. “The house was rewired about twenty years ago. My grandmother became wheelchair bound, so some upgrades to the kitchen and bathroom were required then.”

“I see.” She pushed her bowl aside, still with some soup in it. “So it likely wouldn’t attract a high-caliber renter.”

“It’s not about money.”

Joanna met his gaze with her eyebrows raised. “It’s always about money.”

“Actually, it isn’t.” He didn’t really want to explain the family finances to her. It wasn’t any of her business. “Renting out the house might be a short-term fix, but it doesn’t create a solution for the entire property.”

“What else do people do with a house besides live in it?” She took a deep breath and let it out audibly. “You want solutions, but you want them on very specific terms. I’m not sure I can help.”

“The church is paying you to think outside the box.”

“While making sure the box stays intact.”

“There has to be something.”

“So you say.” Joanna checked her watch. “How long a drive is it to the nursing home? Will your grandfather be up yet?”

‘Sown in Love’ by Valerie Comer

Why did it bug him so much that she didn’t see him as anything other than an obstacle to pushing through her own agenda? Most unattached women he met at least pretended to be interested... and kicked that up a notch once they got an idea what the family business was worth. Though he should be glad she wasn’t like Vanessa.

Maybe Joanna had a serious boyfriend. Maybe she’d get a giant diamond for her other hand any day now.

It couldn’t be because he’d lost his charm.

Could it?

## *Sown in Love*

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