

THE RENOVATION

FROM
CHAPTER
ONE

Cameron stood and dusted off the seat of her tan slacks. Deliberately, she turned and looked in the direction of Ethan Willis. He lay stretched over two rows of seats. His cap had some sort of insignia on it—a tool company, maybe, she thought—but she was too far away to see clearly. His dark blond hair, covered by his cap, appeared to be cut close. She wondered if it were thinning. She wasn't close enough to see the color of his eyes. He wore a plain white T-shirt with jeans. A cell phone and tape measure was clipped on his belt.

As she began to make her way to him, her cell phone rang. For a split second, she was startled, forgetting she had the phone with her. She answered quickly.

After listening a moment, she sighed loudly. "But it's a grass fire, Paige. It'll be out by the time I get there. Can't I just send Bart?"

She scowled and nodded. “Okay, okay. I’ll go. We’ll take pictures of the smoking grass. Should I interview any survivors?”

A vacant lot across town was on fire and threatening an empty warehouse. The fire department was on the scene, and Cameron knew there would be no decent pictures, nor an interesting story. But her editor wanted coverage, and coverage is what she would get.

She stopped at the end of the bleachers. “Mr. Willis?”

Ethan sat up straight. “Yep. That’s me.”

She brushed the same errant strand of hair from her face. “I’m Cameron Dane—from *The Derrick*. I’m doing a story on the Flyers baseball team...well, actually the moms of the baseball team. I hear that the team is the favorite to win the Junior Tournament championship again.”

Ethan waited a heartbeat, then nodded.

“Unfortunately, the story on the Flyers is due tomorrow, and I just got a call that a vacant lot on 7th and Egbert is on fire. I’m overdue for a Pulitzer, and my editor thinks that this fire story may push me over the top.”

Ethan smiled easily but seemed most uncertain as to what to say in response.

Cameron gathered her notepad and backpack to her chest and squinted up at him. She did not know why, but she made sure that he could see both her hands, outstretched over her backpack—especially the one without the wedding ring.

He was almost lost in the glare of the afternoon sun. She could still not make out the color of his eyes because of the warm light.

“So you’re too late to be included in this story,” she said, grinning. “And I bet you’re disappointed to hear that.”

He took off his cap and smoothed his head.

She was right—his hair was thinning, but in a slow, gentle manner.

“Well, after you leave, you’ll hear my cries of anguish,” he said. “That’s what the media is used to hearing, isn’t it?”

“It is. Broken lives and trampled emotions. Scars. Lots of emotional scars,” Cameron replied, hoping that his response meant he understood her sarcasm. She found that few people in Franklin really did. “I just heard that you’re renovating the old Carter place. I’d love to do a story on what you’re doing to it. You know, explain the progress to our readers.”

His lips went tight.

She offered a bigger smile. “

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Ethan squinted, trying to see this attractive woman more clearly in the blinding sun. He shaded his eyes with his hand to catch a better glimpse of her. But no matter how good-looking she was, Ethan, in his wildest dream, would not have considered himself fodder for any newspaper story—regardless of how small the market.

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“Please. I know it would be fascinating,” she begged. “You could be like Franklin’s Bob Vila.”

He tried not to wince when he heard the name. Almost every contractor disliked being compared to that man. Ethan considered the former *This Old House* host to be a showman who had the good fortune to find great carpenters, subcontractors, and craftsmen—though he wasn’t one himself.

“Listen, the fire awaits,” she said. “Let me call you tomorrow. We’ll talk about this.”

“Well...”

“Please?” she said, her expression neither coy nor apologetic. “Cameron Dane. From *The Derrick*. I’ll call tomorrow.”

And then she left without waiting for his response, either positive or negative.

Ethan shifted his position and watched the reporter jog toward the parking lot and her car.

Long dark hair, blue eyes, tall. Great smile. She’s well dressed for Franklin, to be sure.

He turned back before she got to her car, not wanting her to see him looking. And as he turned he saw Chase, standing by first base, frowning at him.