

Chapter One

“I really don’t think this is a good idea.” Brianne Nave flipped through her hangers, not finding anything less boring this time than she had the last cycle through. What had she been thinking, letting her two best friends talk her into a blind date?

“Yeah, you’ve said that half a dozen times since you walked through the door.” Avery stretched out on the bed, her legs hanging over the edge. “Don’t spend too much time putting your face on, though. You don’t want to be late.”

The only thing worse than going on this date to begin with was being late for it. Bri cast a panicked look at the clock. She still had a full hour before he arrived. Under normal circumstances, it was more than enough time for her to shower and be ready, but she didn’t normally spend fifteen minutes in front of her closet, pondering clothing choices. She glanced at the nightstand, feeling guilty all over again. The reason she was running late had nothing to do with not knowing what to wear. She’d picked up her book, fully intending to put it away, and had ended up losing an hour reading. If that weren’t bad enough, she’d been so...riled...by what the hero had done to the heroine, she’d given into the temptation to use the buzzy gift her best friend had given her a few days ago for Christmas. She couldn’t admit that she’d let herself get unbearably turned on by a fictional man, no matter how awesome his muscles were or how dreamy his blue eyes, without Avery making fun of her—again—so she just said, “I don’t know what to wear.”

“You’d have better luck pestering Drew about that than me. He’s the one who’s got an opinion about everything. I don’t know the first thing about fashion.”

Neither did Bri, which was the problem. Beyond that, even if it were Avery going on this date, she’d just grab a pair of faded jeans and a t-shirt—just like she had on now. She wouldn’t

even bother with makeup, not when she already looked so exotic and beautiful without it, though she never seemed to notice. And she'd look comfortable and fabulous and would have the guy eating out of her hand. All without putting forth any sort of effort.

Avery rolled over and propped her chin on her fists. "That said...you aren't really going to wear that, are you?"

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

She gave a disbelieving look. "You look like my grandma."

God forbid she dress like the wizened old woman who ruled over Avery's family with an iron fist. She was a strange mix of rude and sweet—one moment she'd be telling Bri she'd be single for the rest of her life if she never learned to cook, and the next she'd be piling cookies into a Tupperware container and sending them in for the pre-kindergartners' Story Time at the library.

"Oh, and Ryan is running early. So he'll be here in..." Avery glanced at her phone. "In about twenty minutes."

All the blood that had been rushing to her face drained away. Twenty minutes? She couldn't possibly be ready in time. Not to mention, from the way her friend was looking at her, nothing in her wardrobe would be suitable. With her luck, Drew had spun a story for his younger brother about her being a sexy librarian who was never seen without six-inch heels, pencil skirts, and thigh high stockings.

The reality was far less stimulating, even if it had felt like her hormones were in overdrive lately.

Hating that she felt like she had something to be ashamed of, Bri grabbed the first things she touched—a fitted gray sweater and a skirt that would hit the tops of her comfy boots. She wasn't

going to pretend to be anything other than what she was. This entire mess hadn't been her idea, and she already regretted agreeing to it.

While both Drew and Avery assured her that she and this Ryan guy would get along fabulously, she wasn't so sure. What did she have in common with a Marine? Even if he were similar to his brother—full of quick wit and snarky charm—she doubted they'd have much to talk about. Though she'd known Drew for years now, she had always been closer to Avery. He was too much... too loud and too out-there. He'd spent the first six months of their acquaintance trying to drag her into the two bars their little town of Wellingford offered. It wasn't until Avery threatened his very life and limb that he finally stopped trying to force Bri into being something she wasn't.

She simply couldn't see herself with someone like that.

"I feel sick."

Avery shook out her straight black hair and then pulled it back into a ponytail. "No, you don't. You're trying to talk yourself out of this even though you already agreed, and it's stressing you out."

That was exactly what she was doing. "I don't think I can do this."

"Sure you can. Drew might give you grief, but Ryan's really nice, and he's not going to be a dick on a blind date."

"Then why aren't *you* going out with him?"

"Me? Eew." She made a face. "Ryan is like the big brother I never had. He's even more over-protective than Drew is, if you can believe it."

She had a hard time crediting it. For all his Devil-may-care attitude, Drew was worse than a mother hen sometimes. "Still... I'm not ready for this."

“Just think—maybe you’ll fall madly in love and run off to Vegas to get married and make babies.”

The marriage and family thing was more Avery’s forte than hers. Bri wanted family in an abstract way—it was something she’d never had for herself since her parents died when she was so young—but she didn’t feel the pressing need for children the same way her best friend did. “I don’t know.”

“You two will get along like a house on fire. Trust me.”

And that was the final nail in her coffin. If Avery had been against this, nothing Drew could have said would have been able to convince her to let Bri go on this date. But her best friend grew up with the Flannery brothers and she was equally convinced that Ryan and Bri would be brilliant together.

Against those two joining forces, Bri hadn’t stood a chance. “I remain unconvinced.”

“Okay, let’s look at it this way. Worst-case, you get a free meal out of it, right?”

“I suppose…” Though she’d much rather spend the night curled up on the couch with the Jesse Warner book she’d just started. Bri shifted, a shiver working through her as she thought back to where she’d stopped reading. The hero had just given the heroine an ultimatum she couldn’t—and didn’t want to—say no to. The chemistry was already scorching off the page and she’d barely gotten to chapter six. How could some man in reality compare to the Duke?

If she were living in one of her books, this blind date would be the perfect opportunity to meet the man of her dreams. He’d be wealthy and beautifully damaged and would sweep her off her feet because she was the only person in the world who understood him and soothed the ache he felt.

But this wasn’t one of her books. In reality, she was going out with a Marine who’d probably

seen things no man should and who was leaving Wellingford in two weeks. It didn't matter if they somehow got on fabulously—he was still leaving. Even under the best-case scenario, this could only be temporary, no matter what Avery and Drew thought.

She took a deep breath and pushed her worries down. There was no use stressing herself out before she even met the man. It was entirely possible she was wrong about him and would be pleasantly surprised.

Hopefully.

The last thing Ryan Flannery had planned on when he came back to visit his family was having his brother and Avery browbeat him into a blind date with some friend of theirs. He'd been looking for was a welcome break from the Marines for a few weeks, but he should have known a trip home would be anything but restful, but the siren call of home had been too much to resist after so long away.

Of course the Twosome had chosen to jump on him being here and start hatching plans. Speaking of, his phone buzzed on the seat next to him. With a sigh he swiped his finger over the screen. "Yeah?"

"You don't sound very excited for someone who's about to go on a fabulous blind date."

"You say fabulous but I'm not convinced."

His big brother, Drew, laughed. "You'll love Bri. She's sweet and cute and always walks around with her nose stuck in a book."

She sounded perfectly boring. God, what had he agreed to? "Did I do something to piss you off and now you're getting revenge?"

"Would I do that?"

“Yes.”

“Drew—”

His brother laughed again. “Don’t let the mousy first impression fool you. Bri’s the marrying kind.”

Just like that, he saw where this was going. All the pushing and planning was some grand scheme to get him back into Wellingford. His brother had dangled plenty of things in front of him over the past ten years, but he’d never stooped so low to bring a woman into it. “What the hell would you know about the marrying kind? Aren’t you Wellingford’s most eligible bachelor?”

“Six years and going strong.”

Ryan leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. “Tell me you aren’t trying to push this woman at me so I’ll fall for her and move back.”

“No way. I mean, if you like her and you decide to slide a rock onto her hand and make babies, I’d be okay with that. And I think Mom might actually pass out from joy.”

Sheer rage washed over Ryan at his brother’s underhandedness. “I swear to God, Drew—”

“Don’t be late. Avery said she’s thrilled over this date”

Ryan stared at his phone, wanting nothing more than to throw it out the window. Just when he’d been about to call the whole damn thing off, Drew had to go and drop a thick layer of guilt on his shoulders. Whatever the woman was, he had no doubt she was an innocent. The Twosome were more than capable of steamrolling a nice girl into doing damn near whatever they wanted.

He couldn’t just leave her waiting. She didn’t deserve that.

Which was how he found himself stepping into the screened in porch of a tidy little bungalow and stomping his feet to get the snow off. He glanced at his watch and cursed. He was

early—way earlier than he'd anticipated.

There was no help for it. He could sit here like an idiot and wait for another fifteen to twenty minutes, or he could knock on the door and get this date over with. No matter how much he dreaded eating dinner with some woman he'd never met, it wasn't like he could back out now. Not when he knew how much she was looking forward to it.

He took a deep breath and knocked. It opened almost immediately, as if she'd been standing there waiting for him. Ryan stared. Whatever he was expecting, this woman wasn't it. She wasn't particularly tall or curvy, but she that drew the eye despite what appeared to be her best attempts to do otherwise. Her clothes weren't blatantly provocative, but there was something about the way her sweater clung to her breasts and stomach, leading his eye down to the skirt twirling around her hips that made his hands itch to touch her.

Because of that insane impulse, he took a step back and forced his gaze up. She was really quite pretty, despite the mass of dark hair and heavy bangs that nearly hid her face. Red cat's eye glasses perched on a nose he could only classify as adorable.

Drew couldn't have picked a more subtly tempting package if he'd tried.

Then she shifted, crossing her arms, and he realized he'd been standing here, staring, for long enough to be seriously rude. Shit, what the hell was wrong with him? He stepped forward and held out a hand. "Ryan."

She took it, reluctance screaming from every line of her body. "Brianne."

"Nice to meet you." He forced the lie out, wincing when it came across flat.

She reclaimed her hand and tucked it back against her body. "I hardly think so." A flicker of something like disappointment passed over her face before she gave a smile that looked as forced as his greeting had sounded. "Let's be honest—we're both here because Drew and Avery forced

us to be.”

Shit. He'd really gone and fucked this up. He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to think beyond his anger at the Twosome. “I'm sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry for? It's obvious that you didn't choose this. I didn't, either. So let's just make the best of it.”

Just close your eyes and think of England. If that's the level she considered this, Drew had obviously exaggerated her enthusiasm over the date. He should just keep his mouth shut, feed her, and deliver her home, but Ryan couldn't help asking, “Don't you think it's kind of early to have already made up your mind about this?”

She gave him a disbelieving look and then motioned, seeming to encompass his entire body. “This could never work.”

Well, hell, he didn't think so, either. But for reasons she couldn't begin to guess. If she didn't want this, why had she even agreed to it? “You're jumping to the end of the race and the gun hasn't even gone off yet.”

If anything, she was even less impressed. “I'm being practical. You obviously want to be anywhere but here. I understand. You don't have to pretend for me.”

“Honey, I don't pretend for anyone.”

She slammed her door behind her and locked it. Then she walked by him with a sniff. “Let's just get this over with.”

With that rousing comment, she marched to his Suburban, leaving him staring after her like an idiot. Ryan shook his head. Drew and Avery had obviously lost whatever little amount of common sense they'd had—even if he hadn't realized their insane scheme, he couldn't see this night turning out as anything short of a disaster.

