

Chapter One

Sean Proper wondered how many other thirty year-old men were stuck late at work that Friday night with stiff necks, sore backs, and no one waiting for them at home. He ran his fingers through his brown hair then massaged his neck with one hand in order to ease a crick he'd developed during days spent reviewing mounds of paperwork. He'd had too much coffee, too little food, and not enough sleep.

The principal who'd been his predecessor had left in a hurry with an eighteen-year-old graduate and a million dollars from the school's funds. The Kensington Board of Directors had hired Sean to collect the debris, provide damage control, and move forward as quickly as possible. The fate of the school, its employees, and the students rested in his capable hands.

As much as he'd prefer to work all day Saturday and Sunday in order to get more accomplished, Sean was well-aware that appearances were everything on the first day of school. He had to make the right impression with the staff and students if he was going to be an effective leader. Looking tired would not bode well for him, especially not during his first address on campus. He would have to take the weekend off and relax.

He left his office and went to his car. Before leaving Kensington for the night, he cruised around the expansive grounds of the school. The northern Georgia hills provided the perfect backdrop for the one-hundred year-old residential campus. Sean loved the atmosphere and academic reputation of Kensington. As an eighth-grader, he'd applied to the high school and had been accepted. The problem had been that his parents' combined annual income didn't come close to the amount of tuition for one year of attendance. He'd known that when he'd submitted his application packet but had wanted to do it anyway. Simply being accepted was an honor, and he'd been proud of his accomplishment.

Sean drove to his rented home, which was located one block from the Town Square in nearby picturesque Aurora. After he'd parked in the one-car garage, he entered the house and headed straight for the tub. Once he'd enjoyed a long, hot bath, he emerged feeling refreshed, toweled his body and hair dry, and then examined his reflection in the mirror. He was tall and muscular. He knew that others considered him to be strikingly handsome, and he supposed he was. However, Sean never thought about that much. He wanted people to be attracted to him because of who he was on the inside, not because of his looks.

His brown eyes automatically went to the tattoo that decorated his chest. The colorful wings spread out from the center of his sternum towards his sides. They were Sean's constant reminder to rise above his challenges no matter how difficult life became. He'd gotten the tattoo on his sixteenth birthday and thought of it as his anchor.

He slipped into pajama bottoms, finished in the bathroom, and went into the small bedroom that was set up as a home office. He paid some of his bills on-line before checking his personal e-mail account. There was one message from his mother and father that made him smile and one from his younger sister that made him sad. He shut off the computer and went to bed.

The following morning, Sean rose then dressed in shorts, a Polo shirt, and tennis shoes. He soon set out on foot to the Town Square. By eight forty-five, he was sitting at the counter at LouAnn's Café. After ordering coffee and breakfast, he picked up what appeared to be some sort of bulletin from the end of the counter. It was labeled *The Aurora Town Talk*. Sean began to read and quickly realized that this was the local version of a newspaper. Sean had never seen

anything quite like it in his life and considered it amusing but charming. He finished reading the few articles and advertisements before his food arrived.

“You’re the new principal, aren’t you?” asked the pudgy, middle-aged blonde woman in the flowery top and lavender knit pants behind the counter. “I’m LouAnn, and this is my place. You moved here last week.”

Sean confirmed this and introduced himself. Glancing around the packed restaurant, he remarked, “This seems to be the hot spot for food in Aurora.”

“Great food served with great smiles,” LouAnn offered. “We don’t get too many new people moving into town. What made you pick Aurora?”

“I’ve lived in big cities all my life and wanted to try small town living. When I was offered the job at Kensington, I happened to take a drive around the area and passed through Aurora. I liked it and decided it would be a nice place to live. I work long hours and don’t want to waste time fighting traffic to and from Atlanta each day.”

“We locals sure love it,” LouAnn said enthusiastically. “Aurora’s a little different from some other small towns. We’re all friendly no matter what color or religion you happen to be, and we don’t have anything against dancing or drinking in moderation. I wish every town could be like ours. We’re old-fashioned but progressive, if that makes any sense. Plus, we can enjoy a slower pace here but drive to Atlanta if we want to spice things up. I’m glad you decided to settle here for now. You’ll love it as much as we do.”

“If everyone is as nice as you, then I’m sure I will.”

“Oh, you are such a flirt!” she said with a laugh, but it was obvious how flattered she was. “You’re welcome here anytime, honey!”

Once he’d finished his breakfast, Sean paid his bill at the old-fashioned cash register near the door and set out to explore his new hometown. LouAnn’s sat on one corner of the Square. Sean skipped the dress shop next door, entered a store called The Book Nook, and was instantly in love. The shop was crammed with books and had a surprising amount of variety. There was a reading area that included a fireplace for colder months. The store’s owner, Remy Artigue, was a black-haired man who appeared slightly older, taller, and thinner than Sean, which meant he was too thin. He had wire-rimmed glasses and wore khaki pants and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The two men chatted for a half hour then Sean spent another hour perusing the shelves before purchasing several books and heading out to do more exploring.

He bypassed a men’s clothing store and a pet shop then entered Aurora Hardware. There were bins of screws and nails, tools of all kinds, mailboxes, plumbing supplies, squirrel feeders, bird baths, and much more. Sean, who had never lived in a house before, was intrigued. Even though he didn’t need anything, he felt compelled to buy something. After wandering for forty minutes, Sean decided to purchase a set of chimes for the porch of his rented home. He paid the store manager, an older man named Buddy Brown, made conversation with some local men who happened to be standing near the register, and left the hardware store.

The final shop on that side of the street was named Prim’s Corner. Looking at the displays in the windows, Sean couldn’t quite discern what kind of store it was. There appeared to be furniture, framed photographs, art pieces, greeting cards, jewelry, blankets, and bric-a-brac. With a mental shrug, he decided he’d take a chance and go in. If it was a “girly” store, then he’d make a hasty exit.

The place was humming with activity. Sean reflected that all of the stores along the Square appeared to be busy and wondered if they always did that much business or if this was an unusually active Saturday. He scanned the shop and decided to brave the unknown. As he

slowly made his way around the corner store, he observed that it held an interesting mixture of the types of articles he'd glimpsed in the window plus some vintage-looking toys, candles, and quirky knick knacks.

"May I help you?"

The woman was young and had pale blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair that fell past her shoulders and was pulled away from her face. About five foot seven, she wore a long dress that had a muted pink and white print. Little white sandals were on her feet. The bones in her face were delicate as was her frame. Sean couldn't tell if she was wearing make-up but quickly decided she didn't need any. She had that all-natural beauty he found most women lacked.

She asked again in her soft, melodic voice if he needed help.

"I'm not quite sure. I'm new in town and am exploring the Square. I came in not knowing what to expect."

"And that's how I hope all my customers feel when they come and go," the woman told him. "I like to change up my inventory as often as possible, although there are some standard favorites. I have quite the following in this region, which is great for me and my shop. I'm Prim, and this is my corner."

"Prim?"

Rolling her eyes, she said dramatically, "Primrose Anastasia Cassandra Aurora, but everyone's called me Prim for as long as I can remember."

"Nice to meet you, Primrose Anastasia Cassandra Aurora. I'm Sean Proper. Are you a descendant of the founder of this town?"

"Yes. There used to be a bunch of us here. Now, there's only me. Well, me and Uncle Buddy, although he married into the family and is a member of the Aurora clan by default."

"Buddy at the hardware store is your uncle?"

She grinned, and Sean thought he might stop breathing. He had never, ever reacted this way to any woman, and he wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He was used to being in charge and wasn't certain what to do with this unexpected response to Prim Aurora.

"The hardware store's been in my family for a century. It was passed down to my Aunt Myrtle. She died last year. That's when I moved back here from Atlanta. I missed my hometown, and I couldn't leave Uncle Buddy all alone."

"Your parents didn't want to stay in Aurora?"

Prim gave him a sad little smile that made his heart hurt and said, "My mama was eighteen when she got pregnant with me. She never would tell anyone who my daddy was. They found out she had leukemia when she was pregnant and wanted to treat her for it, but they told her it would probably kill me. She refused to have an abortion and wouldn't take any cancer-fighting drugs, radiation or chemo. She died when I was three months old. Uncle Buddy and Aunt Myrtle raised me." Smiling, she said, "Forgive me. You're my customer, and I'm talking your ears off. Is there something in particular you're looking for?"

"My sister's birthday is in two weeks, and I have no idea what to get her. Maybe you could give me some suggestions."

"What does she like?"

Emotionally abusive alcoholic men, Sean thought grimly.

"I don't even know anymore," he admitted. "She's a paralegal in Nashville. We've kind of grown apart."

She looked sympathetic and suggested, "Tell me about her, and maybe we can find something you think will be fitting. How old is she?"

“Twenty-four.”

“I’m twenty-four, too. Being the same age as your sister might help me to help you find a present she’ll like. Do you know if she likes fanciful or functional? Was there something in particular she was really into when you were close?”

“She liked Sock Monkeys and stories of magical creatures when she was small.”

Prim smiled broadly and suggested Sean accompany her to the back of the store where there was an area devoted to Sock Monkeys.

“They’ve become very popular again over the last few years. I carry the actual toy and all sorts of things that display the traditional Sock Monkey image on them. Why don’t you look around here while I go help the elderly woman who just came in?”

Sean stared at the Sock Monkeys for a few minutes. They made him think of his little sister as she’d been as a young child and preteen – a cute kid with a happy-go-lucky attitude and lots of charisma. What had happened to that girl? Would buying her a Sock Monkey remind her of what she used to be and help her break away from the behavioral patterns she’d developed as an adult? If he knew it would work, Sean would gladly have bought every Sock Monkey article in the shop.

Deciding on a robe, slippers, and stuffed toy, Sean went to the register in the center of the store and placed the items on the counter. Prim was helping a man who was interested in buying what looked to be a refurbished medicine cabinet, but she nodded to Sean who nodded back that he understood she’d be there to help him when she could. He was in no hurry.

While he waited, he looked down at the display case in front of him and saw several figurines of realistic-looking people and animals. One of the statues caught his eye. The figures all had brown hair and brown eyes and were seated at a square table. There was a mother, a father, an adolescent boy, and a young girl. A nondescript board game rested on the table, and the family members were obviously enjoying playing the game and interacting.

Sean thought of the many times his family had played games like that, put puzzles together, or engaged in card games like Go Fish. When he visited his parents he still had fun doing those things with them, and he knew his parents played with friends or by themselves when there was no one else around.

“Mr. Proper?”

Blinking rapidly to clear his vision, he looked up at Prim Aurora and said, “Call me Sean, please.”

“Are you ready to check out, Sean?”

He nodded but pointed to the statue and said, “I’d like to buy that as well.”

“Is that for your sister, too?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I gift wrap if you buy something as a present and was going to wrap your sister’s gifts in birthday paper.”

“Oh. That would be helpful. I’m not the best at wrapping things.”

“Is the statue a gift? I could wrap it, too.”

“It’s a Christmas present for my parents.”

“Christmas paper it is.”

After he’d paid for the presents, Prim showed him different kinds of paper. For his sister’s gifts, he asked her to pick whichever one she thought would be best. She wrapped the robe, slippers, and toy separately and put a different type of bow on each. He complimented her on her wrapping skills, and she thanked him as she withdrew the Christmas paper and showed him

the selections available. He chose one that had cartoon-like reindeer, snowmen, Santa Clauses, and stars on it. Once the box had been wrapped, Prim asked if this gift was also going to be shipped.

“I’m hoping to have them come here from Tallahassee for Christmas. Why?”

“Because I have a special topper for it that would get squished if you mailed it.”

Turning away from him, she attached whatever the topper was. He watched her from behind as she bent over the package and studied the rounding of her shoulders as she secured the topper. Turning back towards him, Prim announced, “Ta-da!”

Sean laughed. The topper she’d selected looked like a Christmas tree that was curved in the center and seemed as if it would topple over at any moment. His parents would be fascinated by the thing, and that warmed his heart. However, he was worried about getting it home without knocking the topper off, despite the fact that he knew it was surely well-fastened. He voiced his concerns to Prim, who suggested he leave all of his purchases in her back room then return to her store on his way home to pick them up.

“All the shops on the Square close at five,” she told him. “LouAnn’s stays open until nine.”

“Are you sure it’s okay with you to leave my stuff here?”

She assured him it would be fine and said she’d see him later that afternoon. He thanked her and left the shop then returned to LouAnn’s for lunch.

“Fancy meeting you here!” LouAnn greeted him, as he took a seat at the counter. “I guess your breakfast wasn’t too bad considering you’re back for a late lunch.”

“Late?”

“It’s two p.m. That’s late for most folks. Any time’s fine with us.”

Sean ate meatloaf and mashed potatoes with green beans and loved every bite. He had a piece of chocolate pie with whipped topping for dessert and told LouAnn before he paid his bill that he was going to be gaining a lot of weight eating at her café.

“You could stand to put on a few pounds,” she said seriously. “You’re not as thin as Remy, thank goodness. That boy always looks undernourished. Maybe you could get him to come in here once in a while so I can fatten him up a bit!”

Sean promised he would try to talk the man into sharing a meal with him sometime, paid for his food, and left. He wandered along the side of the Square that housed City Hall and the United States Post Office. Sean crossed the street and walked past a lawyers’ office, a doctor’s office, a veterinary clinic, a pharmacy, and the local bank. Crossing to the last block that edged the Square, Sean read the sign in front of the large church with its high steeple and was surprised.

Aurora Community Church

Services: Sunday 10 a.m. and Noon.

Everyone is welcome here.

Curious, Sean climbed the steps and went up to the front doors, which he expected to be locked. They weren’t, and he stepped inside and looked around. He calculated there were enough pews to seat three hundred people. There were stained glass windows but no depictions of saints, only beautiful glass in interesting patterns.

Sean went up to the front pew and took a seat. He enjoyed the silence and tried to simply relax, but his thoughts kept returning to his little sister. He felt like he’d failed her somehow, that her current predicament was his fault. He closed his eyes and said a prayer for her.

“Hello there, friend.”

Sean opened his eyes and twisted around in the pew. A very muscular, fit man who was perhaps fifty-five sat smiling at him. He was of average height, blonde, green-eyed, and evidently extremely strong. Something about the man instantly made Sean feel at ease, and he reached out a hand and introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Caleb Geller. I’m the pastor here.”

“What kind of church is this?”

“This is a non-denominational church. It’s the only church in Aurora. We decided we should focus on bringing all those who believe in God together. So, we have people of all religious backgrounds here. It’s actually worked out really well for our town. If you have a particular denomination in mind, you’ll have to travel to another place.”

“I’m Episcopalian but don’t think I can only find God in an Episcopalian church.”

“Happy to hear it. We’d love to see you at one of our services tomorrow. We usually have a full house for both. The first service is kind of traditional, but the second one is more contemporary. Perhaps you could try the earlier one this week and the later one next week and see if our place of worship fulfills your spiritual needs.”

“I’m really liking Aurora, so far. Have you lived here all your life?”

“Over twenty-three years. I love the place. I hope it retains its charm as times continue to change.”

“I think I’m going to be really happy here once I adjust. This is certainly a different kind of lifestyle than the one I’m used to.”

“Aurora’s different in a good way,” Caleb told him. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a business card and passed it to Sean with the words, “In case you have a spiritual emergency or just want some information on Aurora. If you can’t reach me for some reason, then just drop by the feed store. I work there during the week.”

“Thanks. I wish I had a card with me, but I’m taking the day off for once.” Glancing at his watch, he said, “I’d better get moving if I want to get back to Prim’s Corner before it closes.”

“Prim Aurora is a lovely girl and a great businesswoman for someone so young. I’m glad she moved back after her aunt died. Her uncle’s a wonderful salesman and a nice man, but he’s not really good with the books. I think the family hardware store would have folded if his niece hadn’t returned and taken over his accounts. Her aunt used to handle all that as well as the rest of the business affairs.”

“Rest of what business affairs?”

“The Auroras own that whole block and the main structure that rests on it. They’ve sold the free-standing places that don’t face the Square, but the one long building that’s two-stories high and runs along the Square is still theirs. They collect rent from everyone who has a business there as well as from the tenants who live in the apartments above some of the businesses.”

“And Prim handles all of that business and runs her own store?”

“She does. She’s a very intelligent, determined young woman.”

“Does she attend church here?”

“She alternates services each week. She’ll be at the early service tomorrow. I’ll see you then.”

Sean returned to Prim’s Corner at ten minutes to five. She welcomed him and asked if he minded waiting while she shut down her computerized register, counted her drawer, and locked up the money for the night.

“It doesn’t take long. If you can wait, then I’ll walk with you and carry the Christmas present. Your place is on my way home.”

“You know where I live?”

“Everyone knows where you live. It’s the white house with the red door, big porch, and the wooden swing. This is a small town. Newcomers are an oddity.”

“I don’t want to put you out.”

“It’s no trouble.”

As she flipped the sign that hung in the window from Open to Closed, a little girl knocked and Prim opened the door for her. Sean estimated that the child was six. She wore denim shorts, a faded Sock Monkey t-shirt, and white tennis shoes. Her dark hair was in pigtails.

“May I help you?” Prim asked the child in the same tone of voice she’d used with him and other adults when he’d been in the store earlier that afternoon.

“I need a birthday present for my Grandma,” the little girl said seriously. “I brought all the money I had in my piggy bank. I don’t know if it’s enough for a present.”

“Well, let’s find out,” Prim told her. “Why don’t you put your money on the counter so we can count it?”

The child walked over to the register area and proceeded to withdraw many coins and a dollar bill from her pockets. Sean stood nearby and watched as Prim counted the money, which he saw totaled four dollars and fifty-seven cents.

“Is it enough?” the child asked expectantly. “She’s a really nice Grandma. I live with her.”

“Tell me what you’d like to buy for your grandmother and then we’ll see if you have enough money,” Prim instructed. “You take your time and look around.”

Sean watched as the girl walked carefully through the store. When she got to an area that had nice costume jewelry displayed, she stopped and pointed to a small silver filigree heart necklace and asked, “Do I have enough for this?”

Sean knew that the necklace was definitely more than four dollars and fifty-seven cents. He stuck his hand into his pocket so he could retrieve his wallet, but Prim motioned for him to stop. She gave him a miniscule shake of the head and went over to lift the necklace from where it hung on a hook.

“Let’s see,” she said, as she looked at the price tag. “Well, this necklace was twenty dollars, but it’s on clearance today. That means it’s on sale for four dollars plus tax. I think you’ve got a little more than enough money. Would you like me to gift wrap it for you?” When the girl said she’d like that very much, Prim asked, “Do you want me to write out a birthday message to put in the box?”

“I love you with ALL my heart!”

Prim wrote the note on a small ivory-colored card and asked the little girl for her name, which turned out to be Lindsay. Prim added this under the message. She placed the necklace and card in a box then wrapped it in birthday paper that had balloons printed on it. She topped it with a bow made of red squiggly ribbon. Then she rang up the necklace, typed something on the screen, and printed a receipt, which she directed Lindsay to keep until after she’d given her grandmother the gift. She handed the girl some change then put the wrapped box and receipt in a plastic grocery bag and told the child to go straight home and not to show anyone what she had on the way so the grandmother would be completely surprised. Lindsay thanked her and left the shop with a huge smile on her little face.

“You didn’t know her,” Sean stated.

“No, but I know *of* her. She moved here not long ago when her parents were killed in a drunk driving accident. Her grandmother, who’s not in the best of health, is raising her alone.”

“That was a wonderful thing you did. I could pay you the difference. Why didn’t you let me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to, but I really appreciate that you were so willing to do it.”

“Why did you insist on giving her the receipt?”

“Because I figured her grandmother would know the necklace cost more than four dollars. I just manipulated the computer so that it read CLEARANCE and overrode the amount.”

“And the plastic bag?”

“So no one would see she had a present and try to steal it as she walked home. She doesn’t live in the best of neighborhoods.”

“Should she be walking home by herself?”

“Probably not, but I saw one of our policemen on patrol through the window. He’ll keep an eye on her until she gets home safely.”

As she used the touch screen on the computer, Prim asked, “Do you mind coming in the back room with me while I count the money? I don’t want anyone to see someone in the shop and think we’re still open. I’m tired and hungry.”

As he followed her into the small office, he asked, “What did you have for lunch?”

“I didn’t. I was too busy to eat, which means I was doing a great business all day. That’s a trade-off I’m willing to live with.”

“How about if we stop by LouAnn’s for dinner? I’ve already had breakfast and lunch there, so I might as well eat all three meals there today.”

She paused, and he had a sinking feeling she was going to decline. However, she surprised him by accepting. Within twenty minutes they were seated in a booth at LouAnn’s. Sean had his purchases stacked beside him, except for the Christmas present that rested on the seat beside Prim.

“So, how did you like your tour of the Town Square?” LouAnn asked after she’d taken their orders for Sean’s chef salad and Prim’s beef stew.

“I think I did everything except explore the grass and gazebo in the center.”

“We can do that as we walk home,” Prim told him. “It won’t take long.”

“I’d like that.” After accepting a glass of iced tea from LouAnn, Sean asked Prim, “How long were you in Atlanta?”

Prim talked of attendance and graduation from college and of work at an art gallery both as a salesperson and an accounts manager. She’d returned permanently to Aurora the previous September. Prim’s Corner had opened in early November and had been doing well ever since.

“What about you?” she prompted, as their food arrived. “I know you’re the new principal at Kensington, but how did you end up here?”

As she ate her stew, Sean explained that he’d wanted to see what it was like not to live in a big city. He finished with the words, “It’s so...different here from what I’m used to. I’ve never lived in anyplace this small.”

Prim flashed him a quick smile and tucked a loose strand of strawberry blonde hair behind one ear. She warned him that small-town life had its ups and downs just like every other place. However, she was quick to add that she truly did love her hometown and couldn’t imagine leaving it again.

Sean insisted on paying for dinner, and he and Prim collected his bags and the Christmas box then left the restaurant and walked across the street to the grassy area in the center of the Square. A large wooden gazebo had been constructed on one end. Sean and Prim went inside and sat on a bench for a few minutes then set out for Sean’s house, since she assured him it was

truly on her way home. When they reached his place, he asked if she'd mind coming inside so they could put down his purchases and then he could walk her to her house. She protested she didn't need an escort home, but he insisted.

Prim lived in a large, two-story Victorian home one block down the street from Sean's rented house. An official sign was posted at the edge of the white picket fence that surrounded the place. The sign proclaimed that the dwelling was a historic landmark and was the oldest existing home in Aurora. It had been built in 1898 by a member of the Aurora family. The exterior was white with plum-colored shutters and trim. The front door was stained and looked original to the house.

"This is amazing," Sean said with appreciation, as they stood at the gate. "Did you grow up in this house?"

"I did."

"So, you live with your uncle?"

"No, he moved out when my aunt died. He said he couldn't stand to be in the place after she'd passed. He does come see me here and does work on the house if it needs it."

"It must be nice to have someone who's handy to keep this place up. I never learned how to do any repair work, because I've lived in apartments my entire life."

"Is there anything you need where you are now?"

"A shower attachment on the tub. I love baths but would appreciate being able to take a quick shower when I need to. The owners said I could do it and take the expense off one month's rent, but I've only been there for a week and figured I'd ask around for a referral to a good plumber."

"Uncle Buddy could do it. You should ask him about it."

"I will. Does he go to the Community Church? I was planning on attending the first service tomorrow to see if I like it."

"I'll be at that one, but Uncle Buddy doesn't go to church."

"I'll have to ask him next weekend then. This upcoming week's going to be pretty hectic for me."

"I can imagine. I know it's the first week of school. I hope you like it there. It seems nice, but that scandal at the end of last year really tarnished its image."

"That's why they hired me. I'm sort of the go-to principal for schools with issues."

Cocking her head, Prim said, "I get the impression you're sort of the go-to man for people with all sorts of issues."

"That's true." Looking towards the house, he muttered, "It can be hard sometimes, can't it?"

Prim didn't answer. Sean turned back to look at her and saw that she was staring at her feet. Being the "go-to" man he was, Sean wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. He knew exactly how she felt – appreciated by everyone for her ingenuity and perseverance but isolated by choice and circumstance.

After telling her he'd see her at church the following morning, Sean thanked her again for her help and her company. He wished her a good night then walked unhurriedly back to his rented home. He took his customary long, hot bath and tried to get the image of Prim out of his mind. He felt like a teenager, except he'd never reacted this way to any girl even when he'd been a teenager. He'd felt attraction, admiration, and lust, but he hadn't found the perfect combination until that day.

Sean went to bed trying not to think of Prim undressing, bathing, and putting on nightclothes. He reminded himself that he needed to retain his focus on work but to no avail. When he finally fell asleep, Sean was wondering what it would be like to run his fingers along Prim Aurora's skin and to kiss her soft lips.

Chapter Two

Prim sat on the mattress of her white cast-iron bed and thought of her time spent with Sean Proper. The moment she'd spotted him standing in her shop, she'd felt something akin to a rush of adrenaline and had experienced a sensation of being literally drawn towards him. That had never happened to her in her life, and she was terrified yet oddly excited.

Standing, Prim removed her dress, slip, bra, and panties and brought them to the white wicker clothes hamper in her bathroom. Then she walked naked through the house and down the stairs towards the huge full-length mirror that hung in the formal living room no one ever used anymore. As she entered the room, Prim flipped on the lights. Squaring her shoulders, Prim stepped in front of the mirror. She had never examined her reflection when she'd been nude and wasn't certain what she'd think. Was it a good idea to scrutinize her body? She wasn't sure but decided it was time. After all, she was twenty-four years old. It was past time.

Prim was thin and had small bones and fine facial features. Her lips were defined but not overly plump. Her skin was pale, and that seemed to go well with her strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes. Her breasts were firm, and her nipples were hard in the chill of the air-conditioned house. Her hips had soft curves. Turning sideways, she focused on her backside, which was slightly rounded. She figured the daily yoga she performed was helping to keep her in shape.

She'd never thought of herself as pretty. Sean Proper seemed to be attracted to her. She didn't understand it and wondered if the man would like her body if he saw it. What was his body like under his clothing? The fear gripped her then, and she hastily switched off the lights and went back upstairs to get ready for bed.

Trying not to think about Sean Proper proved fruitless. Prim didn't know what to do about this and was unnerved by her physical and emotional reactions to the man. She wanted to talk to someone about it, but there was no one. She was friends with just about everyone in town but had no close girl friends to confide in and wouldn't dream of mentioning it to Remy, her uncle or someone like Pastor Caleb. She considered having a talk with LouAnn.

Stop it, Prim told herself. You can't tell anyone.

And yet she knew she needed to confide in someone. She knew there was something wrong with her, had known it since she'd been a small child. Although everyone seemed to genuinely like Prim, she'd never felt as though she could share her deepest fears with any of them.

When she was thirteen, she'd tried to talk to her aunt about her feelings regarding the terror she felt at the mere thought of having any male kiss or touch her in a romantic way. Aunt Myrtle had stiffened and told her that some women didn't like to have men touch them, that Prim was better off for it, and that it would spare her pain in the long run. She told Prim not to worry about how she felt and that everything would be fine. It hadn't been fine. Prim had eventually accepted that she'd never marry or have a family. She was broken, and nothing could fix her.

But now Sean Proper had appeared in her life, and she'd responded to him with her mind *and* body. He seemed to be drawn to her as well, and Prim didn't want to push him away. She wanted him.

Before she fell asleep, Prim decided she'd talk with Dr. Stanford the next week. After all, he was the town's most established M.D. and was bound by an oath to keep his patients' information private. He'd been her doctor since she'd been born.

The following morning as she stepped into the church wearing a mint green dress she hoped Sean Proper would find appealing, Prim's heart was pounding. She greeted people as usual but was scanning the crowd for Sean. She waved to LouAnn, who was sitting in the front pew

before taking a seat next to Remy. As the time for the service drew near, she began to wonder whether or not Sean would come after all.

“Hello, Prim.”

She turned, and there he stood wearing a dark blue shirt and khaki pants. Prim felt elation and worked hard not to allow her overwhelming relief to show on her face. She smiled pleasantly at him and told him she was glad he’d made it to the service. He asked if he could sit next to her, and she graciously informed him that he could.

As Sean exchanged introductions with those sitting nearby, Prim studied him. He presented himself as a man who was relaxed but in charge. However, Prim had glimpsed a side of the man during each of their encounters the day before that led her to believe he was not quite as in charge as he’d like. The look he’d had on his face when they’d talked about his younger sister had been the most telling example of some deep sadness within him.

The church service started. It was evident Sean had no idea what to expect, and that was understandable. Prim whispered to him here and there when it was time to sit, stand, kneel, and sing. He appeared surprised but not displeased when those gathered began to file up to the front for Communion. After the final hymn, Prim turned towards Sean and asked him what he’d thought about his experience at the Aurora Community Church.

“That was one of the oddest services I’ve ever attended, but I liked it. It was interesting the way it seemed to combine a bunch of different traditions. I just felt a little lost at times. I’ll figure it out.”

Their departure from the church took quite some time, as it seemed everyone present wanted to meet the newcomer. When they finally made it to the door, Prim and Sean were two of the last people to leave the building. Sean talked with Caleb about the service, while Prim stood waiting and not knowing what to do. After Sean had thanked the pastor, Prim told Caleb to have a beautiful afternoon before heading down the steps with Mr. Proper.

“Do you have any special plans for the afternoon?” Sean asked as they walked back in the direction of their respective homes.

“I usually go to Uncle Buddy’s for lunch then do whatever for myself or work on the business accounts in the afternoon. You?”

“I’ll make a sandwich and maybe read and play some video games then call my parents. They live in Florida. I always call them at least once a week to talk and to see how they’re doing.”

“That’s sweet.”

“They’re sweet. I feel great after I talk to them. It’s like getting a shot of happiness.”

“Everyone should be so lucky. You want to come with me to Uncle Buddy’s for lunch? He’s a great cook but always makes too much.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude on your family time.”

“We’d both be thrilled.”

Sean shrugged and said, “You know him better than I do. Whatever he’s cooking is probably tastier than my turkey and Swiss sandwich.”

Scared but pleased that he’d decided to accept her invitation, Prim said, “Whatever it is will be horrible for your arteries.”

“How long were he and your aunt married before she died?”

“Thirty-eight years. My aunt was seventeen years older than my mom. She and Uncle Buddy were thirty-five when I was born and had been married since they were twenty. Uncle Buddy’s sixty now.”

“He seems like a great guy.”

“He is. Hey, maybe he can come look at your bathtub later today.”

“It’s his day off.”

“He likes to feel needed and important. He’s an excellent carpenter and plumber. You’d probably make his day if you asked him.”

Prim’s uncle was very happy to have Sean join them for their lunch, which consisted of a sugar-glazed ham, black-eyed peas, sweet potato casserole with marshmallow topping, and macaroni and cheese. He’d made cupcakes for dessert.

“You’re very multi-talented,” Sean told him during the meal. “This is all delicious.”

“Cooking is kind of like building,” Buddy remarked. “You construct the meal like you construct anything else. If you don’t take your time and do it right, then it doesn’t work and everything falls apart.”

Prim listened to her uncle regale Sean with stories of his long life in Aurora, of how the town had retained its character, and of his years spent with Myrtle and Prim. After they’d each eaten a cupcake for dessert, Buddy packed those that remained in a tinfoil pan and gave them to Sean to take home. Prim took this opportunity to explain Sean’s desire for a shower attachment in the bathroom, and Buddy eagerly agreed to see what would be involved. The three of them walked the five blocks to Sean’s house.

Prim took her time and surveyed the living room more carefully than she had the previous day. The modern furnishings and décor were out of place in the older dwelling. The living room was well-kept, but Sean’s purchases from the day before still rested on the coffee table. As her uncle went with Sean to the bathroom, she sat in a black leather recliner and half-listened to their conversation. Then the pictures caught her eye.

Prim went across the room to the entertainment center and looked at the three framed photos that rested on one shelf. The first was of a middle-aged couple who had brown hair and brown eyes and looked very relaxed, happy, and in love. There was a family portrait of the couple with a teenaged boy and a preteen girl. The final photo was of the children when they’d been younger and showed Sean dressed as Wolverine from the X-Men, while the little girl was a princess.

Prim suddenly felt eyes upon her and turned. Sean, who was looking rather melancholy, was staring at her. She felt like a snoop and was compelled to apologize.

“For what?” he asked. “I wouldn’t put these pictures out if I didn’t want to display them.” Walking over to where she stood, he pointed to his parents and said, “That’s Mom and Dad. Her name’s Tiffany, and his is Kenny.” Pointing to the next photo, he went on, “The whole family when I was seventeen and my sister was eleven.” Lifting the final picture, he said, “Of course, this is Wolverine and Princess Debra.”

“They’re all wonderful. You and your sister look so much like your parents.”

He smiled and nodded as he stared down at the photo of himself and his sister in their Halloween finery then said, “My mom made our costumes every year.”

“You’re kidding! They don’t look homemade.”

“She’s good with cloth.”

“Is she a seamstress?”

“For the family. Her actual job is working in a laundry. She likes the repetition.”

Confused but not wanting to pry, Prim continued by asking, “And your dad?”

“Bags groceries and collects shopping carts. He likes repetition, too. Both of them like to work hard and do a good job.” Replacing the picture on the bookshelf, Sean said, “My folks are beautiful people. They’re also developmentally delayed.”

Prim was at a total loss for words. She tried to think of what one should say in response to this admission.

Sean grinned and said, "It's okay. I'm not ashamed of my parents and their limitations. They gave me and Debra more love when we were growing up than most parents do with their kids."

"How did they take care of you? If they're delayed, then how could they be responsible parents?"

"I didn't say they were severely delayed. They just have lower IQs than the average person. They're great parents and always have been; they simply have their own special challenges."

"Like what?"

"Learning in general. It was a good thing Debra and I were both smart, because our folks couldn't have helped us with homework after about the fourth grade. I started taking care of the bills when I was nine. Things were sort of a disaster business-wise before then. I still have to help them manage their money."

"That had to be hard for a nine year-old boy," Prim said quietly.

"It taught me to like challenges."

"You didn't resent them?"

"For having lower than average intelligence levels? For falling in love and having me and Debra? For loving us unconditionally and doing whatever they could to make us happy? How could I resent them for that? They're amazing. You'll see when they come for Christmas."

"I'd like that very much. Will Debra come too?"

"I doubt it. We'll see."

They heard Prim's uncle walking down the hallway and greeted him as he came into the room. He announced that he could have the job done by that evening if Sean didn't mind him running to the hardware store to get a few supplies. Within minutes, the older man had left the house promising to return shortly.

Once Buddy had gone, Sean asked Prim if she wanted to have a seat on the couch. She nervously accepted. The two of them sat a couple of feet apart. There was an awkward pause.

"Aurora's having a strange effect on me," Sean admitted. "I'm used to being really private, but being in this place makes me want to share."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, just unusual." He was quiet for a minute then said, "I'm really attracted to you. I've been attracted to other women before but not like this. I guess I don't really know what to do with how I'm feeling, yet."

Prim looked across the couch at him and said, "I'm very attracted to you, too. I've never felt this way about any other man. I don't know what to do about it either."

"You mind if we take it slowly?"

She shook her head and said, "Slow would be preferable. I'm...I'm kind of scared."

His eyes narrowed, and she worried that she'd said too much. Perhaps he would think she was crazy. She considered the possibility but dismissed it. She wasn't crazy, but she wasn't normal either.

Her uncle's return to the house saved her from further discussion on the topic. As he worked in Sean's bathroom, Sean asked Prim if she wanted to play a video game with him. Her face flushed, and she admitted she'd never played any video games outside an arcade.

"I could teach you. Do you want to go on a quest or shoot something?"

"Questing sounds better to me."

He selected a game that involved a boy looking for his sister in a magical land and spent the following hour instructing her on how to play. At first, she wasn't any good, but her skill level increased as she quested. By the time her uncle finished the work in Sean's bathroom, she was thoroughly enjoying herself and suggested to the older man that he try it.

"Another time," he told her. "It's getting late, and I need to get back to the house before the sun sets so I can fix those boards on the fence in the backyard." Turning to Sean, he asked, "Did you hang those chimes, yet?"

The chimes were soon hung, and Buddy shook hands with Sean and told him he could come by anytime the next Saturday to pay his bill for the work in the bathroom and get his receipt for the house's owners. Sean thanked him for all of his help and the food. Her uncle said it was his pleasure then told the two younger people to have a good evening and set off for his own home.

There was a breeze, and the chimes gently clanged against one another. Sean asked Prim if she wanted to sit on the porch swing with him for a while before she left. She hesitated but then agreed. They sat and pushed the swing slightly back and forth. Sean seemed to be resisting the urge to kiss her, and she was thankful for that even though she wanted him to try.

"Prim, am I doing something wrong?"

She stared at the chimes and shook her head.

"Are you afraid of me?"

She nodded, and tears filled her eyes.

"Will you tell me what I did to make you scared so I can undo it?"

Refusing to look at him, she said softly, "It's not you. I can't explain it, and I'm... I'm afraid you're not going to be attracted to me if you know that I..." She let her voice trail off and wiped at the corners of her eyes before saying, "I wouldn't blame you."

Sean stopped the swing and said, "I meant what I told you earlier. If there's some problem you have that you can't talk to me about yet, then that's okay. I only met you yesterday. I'm not going anywhere. Take your time."

"Thank you. I'm sorry."

Sean leaned towards her. She expected that he wanted to take her in his arms and instinctively drew back. He immediately stopped and asked if he could hold her hand. She answered that she didn't know.

"May I try?"

Feeling miserable and sick, she forced herself to nod. Sean held out a hand and waited for her to put hers into it. She did so with effort. She could feel herself trembling with anxiety, but she was relieved she'd managed to place her palm in his.

Sean didn't say anything or ask her any questions. He did start the swing moving again, and they listened to the chimes. Prim realized she wasn't trembling so badly and relaxed. After about an hour, she told him she needed to go home. She declined his invitation to walk her to her house.

Once she'd shut and locked her front door behind her, Prim burst into tears. What was wrong with her? Why was she like this? She wanted to be with Sean and to get to know him better. She wanted to be eager to hold his hand without trembling, to kiss him, to embrace him, and to make love to him.

She wondered what it would feel like to have Sean kiss her deeply, touch her body with his hands and mouth, and have sex with her. It wasn't like she didn't know what men looked like naked, and she'd seen people have sex on television and in movies. She'd read fiction and non-

fiction books that talked about sex. It seemed like sex was all couples really wanted. So why did the thought of physical intimacy leave Prim petrified?

The following morning, Prim went directly to Dr. Philip Stanford's office. He and his partners' clinic faced the Square, and she had plenty of time to see him and open her store unless there was a long line of people waiting for appointments after the weekend break. As it turned out, she was the first person to arrive and was accepted as a walk-in patient. When asked what her problem was, she told the receptionist she had a sore throat.

Dr. Stanford was about her uncle's age and had silvery gray hair and a good bedside manner. When he inquired about her sore throat, she confessed she'd fabricated that illness in order to talk with him. He frowned and asked her if he could still check her vitals before they spoke so he could document them for her records. Once this had been accomplished, he asked her what was wrong. She burst into tears as she had at home the previous evening and told him she wasn't sure. The M.D. offered her some tissues and encouraged her to tell him the cause of her problem.

"I don't know. I've never known. I'm afraid to have men touch me, and I don't know why. I've always been afraid, and I've *never* known why."

Dr. Stanford reminded her that he'd seen her since she'd been a newborn. He had touched her as part of his examinations, and he'd seen her shake hands with men and hug them in a friendly manner or to comfort them in times of sadness.

"You're my doctor, and those men didn't want to...to be romantic with me!" she clarified. "If a man touches me in an ordinary way, then it doesn't bother me. But I've never been able to...to even kiss a boy in high school or afterwards or to let them hold me or anything else." Her face burning with embarrassment, she admitted, "I had to force myself to take a man's hand yesterday, even though I really wanted to."

The doctor looked contemplative and asked Prim if there was anything she could remember in her childhood that might have led to her fear. Had someone ever tried to touch her inappropriately when she'd been a young girl? When she shook her head, he asked whether she was afraid to read about intercourse or watch people having sex on television or in films. She told him no.

"It's only when it has to do with *me*," she said as she wiped at her eyes. "I'm so scared, and I know it's irrational. What can I do?"

"Well, I think the first step is to forgive yourself for feeling this way. Whatever triggered this response was not your fault. The next thing I'd recommend is that you see a licensed mental health counselor."

Prim quickly got to her feet and insisted that she couldn't. When Dr. Stanford asked her why not, she repeated she couldn't and reached for her purse. She began to walk towards the door, but the doctor stopped her.

"Prim, listen to me. I've literally known you since the day you were born. I wish I'd known about this problem sooner, because I would've recommended therapy a long time ago and it might have saved you years of suffering. Did your Aunt Myrtle know?"

Prim explained about the conversation she'd had with her aunt, and Dr. Stanford looked startled and asked if her uncle knew.

"I never talked to him about not being able to let boys touch me. It's not the sort of thing you say to your uncle."

"I understand. I also understand that there must be someone you want to touch you, otherwise you wouldn't be here today."

“Sean Proper.”

“Isn’t he the new principal at Kensington?”

“Yes, we met Saturday and spent a lot of Saturday and Sunday together. He...we both...he said he wouldn’t run off because I can’t explain about...because I couldn’t even hold his hand without struggling. But how long will he wait, and what if I never get over this?”

“Did he try to do anything with you over the weekend?”

“No, he was very respectful, but I know he wants to do *something* eventually. I want to be able to, but I’m so scared.”

“Prim, you need a psychologist or a social worker to help you through this.”

“My aunt always told me therapists were bad people.”

“There are some who are bad, just like there are bad people in every profession. There are also some very good therapists out there. That would be the best way to assist you with your fear. I could recommend someone in Atlanta if you don’t want to see anyone in the area. Please, consider it.”

Feeling slightly calmer, she agreed to think about it.

“I’m your primary care doctor, which means I’m responsible for your overall medical care. Let me reflect on this for a bit and see if I can come up with an answer. In the meantime, call if you need help day or night.”

Dr. Stanford escorted her out to the waiting room, which was now full. As she headed for the door, he reminded her to take some ibuprofen for her sore throat and asked that she come back to see him soon. She gave him a grateful smile and told him she would. Then, she headed for her shop and a world she knew she could handle.

At one p.m. she answered the phone at Prim’s Corner and was surprised to hear Sean Proper’s voice. She was glad that at that moment she had no customers in the store.

“Isn’t today your first school day at Kensington?”

“It is, and it’s going great, so far. I just thought I’d take a minute to phone you and see if you could meet me at LouAnn’s tonight at seven for dinner. I want to share what’s happened today with someone and decided that someone was definitely you.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so shocked?”

“What about your parents?”

She could hear the smile in his voice as he said, “I’ll tell my parents that my new job is going great and a few details, but they’d get bored with the rest. They’d listen, but they wouldn’t really make the connections.”

“You could talk to Remy.”

He paused then asked directly, “Are you blowing me off?”

“What? No! I just didn’t know after last night if...if you were still interested. If you’re not, then I’d understand.”

“I’m very interested in you, Prim.”

“Because you feel sorry for me?”

“No. I told you how I felt yesterday. That hasn’t changed.”

“Even though you know how I am?”

“I love a challenge and can be very patient if I have a goal in mind.”

“And your goal is?”

“In the short term, I’d like to be able to hold your hand without it upsetting you.”

“And after that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe put my arm around your shoulder. Can we shoot for that?”

“Yes, but –”

“Not today. Don’t panic. We’re going to take the whole thing slowly, remember?”

“I remember.”

“So, see you at seven at LouAnn’s?”

She was waiting in a booth at five minutes to seven. Sean was ten minutes late and was full of apologies but told her he’d gotten hung up with paperwork and hadn’t been able to leave as early as he’d wanted.

“I think my administrative assistant, Maureen, was shocked I left at six-thirty on the first day. I’d told her to remind me if we were still there at six unless it was an emergency, but she figured we’d stay a lot later today.”

Prim was amused by how excited he was. She listened with interest as he told her about his overwhelmingly successful address to the staff and students, his interactions with visiting Board members, and his wonderfully productive first staff meeting after school. There had been problems, and he’d promptly handled them all. The students seemed to respect him but also seemed to think he was cool because of his youth and energy, which was a plus.

“I know every day won’t go as smoothly as today did, but it was a great start.”

“It sounds like it couldn’t have gone any better.”

They left LouAnn’s at nine when the restaurant closed. Sean insisted on walking Prim home and asked her if he could hold her hand.

“I’d like that.”

“But you’re afraid.”

“Yes, but I’d still like it.”

He extended his hand towards her. She bit her lip and took it after only a few moments of hesitation.

“You’re not trembling as badly as you were yesterday.”

She realized he was right and smiled before impulsively squeezing his hand. He grinned at her, and she experienced an ache within her. It made her want to tell him to kiss her, to hold her, to make love to her and –

“Prim?” Sean asked with a worried expression on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I want to be normal and don’t know why I’m not,” she confessed, as tears trickled down her cheeks. “I can’t touch men who might be romantically interested in me.”

“And you had no idea why? Have you seen a therapist about it?”

She immediately pulled her hand from his and said rather loudly, “I can’t!”

“Okay,” he said soothingly. “No therapist. Got it.”

“I’m sorry. You should walk away from me now. All I’m going to do is make your life harder.”

He laughed rather bitterly and said, “My life has always had its share of hardness. The struggles only make the successes more sweet.” When they reached her house, Sean stopped at the gate and asked, “Can we meet for dinner every night this week?”

“People will talk.”

“So? Let them. How about if I call you each day to set a time? I doubt if it will be exactly the same Monday through Friday.”

She put a hand on the gate and confided, “I don’t know if I can do this, Sean.”

“I do, and you can.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

“Someday you will.”

Prim went into her big, empty house and wandered to what had once been her mother’s room. Her aunt had kept it exactly as it was when her mother had been alive, but Prim had never gone in before. She felt responsible for the woman’s death, and her guilt was magnified exponentially by the mere thought of entering her mother’s bedroom.

Now, she opened the door and went in without pause. Aunt Myrtle had come in to dust every week. Myrtle had been dead for over a year, so there was visible dust on the exposed surfaces. It didn’t detract from the room or its contents.

Prim looked at the peach-colored bedspread and white ruffled skirt on the bed. There were cheerleading trophies and yearbooks on the bookshelves. A framed photo of her mother’s dark-haired, heavysset parents was on the desk. White curtains hung in the windows; posters were tacked to the walls; and her mother’s clothing still hung in the closet.

It’s time to move on, Prim thought. I know Uncle Buddy will be upset, but it’s time to do a little housecleaning and not just in this room.

Prim suddenly got the idea that Sean could help her. Perhaps it would give them something to do that would keep them together but occupied. She would have to broach the subject with him the next time they talked.

Feeling encouraged, Prim left her mother’s room. She wanted to be done with the past and wanted her future in the form of one Mr. Sean Proper.