

Slow and Sweet

A Love Story, with Zombies

### STEPHANIE BECK



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# DEDICATION

For the girls who helped me get my zombie facts straight... only for me to change the rules and make them my own. Thanks, ladies!

## TRADEMARKS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

> *Popsicle:* Unilever *Pepto:* Proctor & Gamble

### CHAPTER ONE

Abby looked at her Popsicle and frowned. It was even too hot for her cold, delicious treat to do any good. To make things worse, it was nearly November and that made the oppressive heat especially unbearable. If she'd gone to visit her grandma in Florida, the weather would have been nicer, but no, she was still in South Dakota, preparing to melt into the slats of the front porch.

Of course, if she fixed the slats, that wouldn't be a problem. She took in the run-down place around her and knew there were more problems than she had time, ambition, or money to fix. That's why she'd stayed on the extra few weeks. It had been her dad's house, long neglected before she'd inherited it, but since he'd willed it to her, she felt some need to try to fix things. So far she'd done some of the plumbing, her only ability that approached a 'skill'. That left replacing electrical outlets, fixing plaster, re-laying floorboards, and her least favorite in it all, painting.

She shuddered at just the thought of pulling out a paintbrush. It should have been the easiest part, but she hated it. The smell, the mess, the enduring quality, or at least in her case, it ended up being permanent. Once she finally broke down and painted, she didn't do it again, no

matter what. She'd lived in a Pepto pink apartment for three years because of that policy.

Two kids on bikes rang their bells at her, and she waved. Lots of folks in the small neighborhood had stopped in to visit. Apparently they'd loved her dad, and it helped her remember good memories when they shared stories about him. Abby was happy to have them over and to visit because, honestly, she got creeped out alone in the house on occasion. She looked over her shoulder at the innocent, chipped screen door. Just an old house, she always told herself when the odd creaks and groans woke her at night.

"Hey, Ms. Maples."

Abby turned from the door and smiled at the milkman. Milkman. It was crazy that some towns actually still had them. This one was more of a dairy delivery service for the local creamery, but Dan Ferrin preferred 'Milkman' as his official title.

"Hi, Dan." She wasn't surprised when the handsome, flirty man sat beside her on the porch. Her small order of skim milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese was tucked in the refrigerated bag he always used to keep things fresh. "How are you today?"

"Warm," he answered, and just like the first time he'd pulled up to her house, he smiled. It was an equal

opportunity smile, and she'd seen him use it on every woman in town. Still, having a blond-haired, blue-eyed stud in a white uniform stretched out on her stairs aiming that killer smile at her wasn't a bad thing. It might not mean love, but it was still mighty nice.

"Yeah, even my Popsicle melted before I could finish." She held up her sticky stick for inspection.

"Aw, and it was a green one? That's a damn shame. I bet it matched your eyes." The way he shook his head made her laugh. He was such a tease, and he made Tuesdays and Fridays her favorite days of the week. "So, what are your big plans for the day, since it's too hot to eat Popsicles?"

She sighed. So much for enjoying a break from thinking. There was too much to do to avoid anyway. She was looking for the most dramatic, least expensive fixes for the house, but without central air, it was too hot inside to do any of it.

"I don't know. Maybe I should just hitch a ride in the milk truck for the rest of the afternoon."

When his smile changed to one that was less flirty and more happy, Abby felt a change in herself too. Maybe Dan was more than a flirt.

"I could certainly arrange that," he replied.

"Unfortunately, today you are my last stop before I head to the courthouse to renew my license and tags. How about next week?"

"I think I'd really like that."

Five minutes later, both of them were laughing and sweaty, but Dan only had half an hour left to get his paperwork done, so he left. Abby waved as the truck pulled away, and he took an extra minute to wave back.

What a sweetheart, she thought, watching the truck turn the corner. Maybe there was something more for her in Montgomery, South Dakota, than she'd thought. Unable to justifiably be a bum any longer, Abby pushed to her feet and winced when a splinter embedded itself in her toe. She limped inside and headed for the bathroom. The house was stifling, but not as bad as it had been at three when she'd escaped to the porch with her Popsicle.

She pulled out her first aid kit which was more like tackle box, and took it to the kitchen table. There are perks to being a pharmacist, Abby thought. One of them was her discount when it came to buying wholesale. She pulled out all the equipment she could possibly need to extract the two-by-four currently housed in her big toe. She took a pair of tweezers and began the splinter search.

Of course, not being gainfully employed for the

moment made buying more supplies a bit of a hassle, but as soon as she was done in South Dakota, she'd be back to her real life in Seattle. Back in her condo, back at her job filling prescriptions somewhere and back to... Well, not a whole lot more. She'd spent nearly two months in her father's former home and didn't know how much longer she could stay.

"Ah ha, got you," she cried in triumph when the sliver slid free. It was too depressing to think about leaving just yet, so she disinfected her tiny wound instead, and planned.

It was too hot to work upstairs. She'd even been sleeping in the living room to combat the heat. The locals promised the unexpected heat meant a nice, snowy winter, but in the meantime, something had to give. Maybe the basement. Abby paused as she put away her supplies. Of course, the basement. Why hadn't she thought of it? The cellar was supposed to be all finished with concrete, and the lawyer who'd handled everything had said her father had used the space for his lab. The space had to be nicer than she'd thought.

Sweat poured down her back, soaking her thin tank top even more. Yes, she thought, basement where it will be cool and even if she were cleaning, she would not be

sweating her pigtails off. Behind the refrigerator hid the small door she'd ignored for too long. Grabbing a bucket and rag, Abby opened the door, turned on the light, and started down the stairs.

She expected the small space to smell a little stale, and it did, but the undeniable scent of chemicals also clung to the air. The walls were concrete block and very clean, but she'd expected that in her dad's work space. Her mother never had an unkind thing to say about her father. In her way, she'd understood the importance of her husband's work. She just couldn't live with the long hours, oddly timed trips, and constant focus on other things. The two times a year Abby had seen him since she was three had always been at her own house or at a hotel. His fastidiousness had shown in little ways even then, and as she stepped onto the basement floor, she was surrounded by it.

"Holy crap. It's a lab."

Beakers, burners, and shelves full of flasks and microfilm lined the walls on stainless steel tables. In the center of the room was an adjustable table, like in the mortuary Abby worked at one summer. It was too bizarre to think of her father doing something so grand. She walked closer to the shelves, looking at the vials and texts,

fascinated to see how much he'd gathered about cell regeneration. That had been his focus, always looking for the key to regenerate healthy cells. With cancer and other degenerative diseases only having cures that killed all instead of making new, her father had made it his life mission to find a way.

She smiled sadly at the open notebook with formulas, details and hypotheses. He'd never quite gotten there. It took only minutes to wipe everything down and Abby realized why when she found an aeration filter that kept a fresh supply of clean air coming in. If it weren't so creepy, she'd bring down a sleeping bag and crash on the examining table. But it was creepy, so instead of doing that, Abby grabbed the laptop she'd found while cleaning, along with her father's most recent notebook. There were bound to be interesting things in them, and maybe they would distract her from the heat.

She froze in her mental planning when, from overhead, she heard footsteps. Abby couldn't imagine crime in the tiny farming town. Hell, she knew every person there was to know within fifty miles. Who would have just walked in? Maybe it was a rural, come-as-you-are, happy neighbor sort of thing. Yeah, she thought, as she silently climbed the stairs toward the door, there is nothing to be

scared of. Someone probably just thought she was in the backyard or kitchen and hadn't heard their knock.

The door opened before she could reach it, and she jumped back. She'd lied to herself and should have grabbed something to defend herself instead of assuming someone had brought pie.

"Oh, good, you're there," Marion Clemons, local librarian and all around sweetheart busybody, said. Abby eased the clutch on her chest where she was holding in her ricocheting heart. "So sorry to startle you, dear, but when I saw the light on, I just had to hurry over. Past due for my shot, you know. Oh, and Mable should be here any minute."

"Um." Abby replayed what the older woman had said, but it didn't make sense the second or third time, either. "What do you want from me?"

"My shot, dear," Marion said, descending the stairs and nudging Abby back into the lab. Abby looked around for some kind of weapon. She couldn't imagine using one on the sweet old woman who had brought her pie during her first week in South Dakota, but there was no denying that Marion looked odd. "I'm sure Dr. Maples put it all in his notebook. He kept fastidious records, you know. I'm so glad you finally got around to looking at them. I'm feeling

positively green around the gills. Martha said they looked fine, but what do you think?"

The scream that threatened to bubble out of Abby's throat was held in check by some freak step in of fate. There were gills on Marion's neck beneath her unseasonal turtleneck. The older women in town always wore them, and Abby had just chalked it up to them having poor circulation. Her skin had a blue tinge in the area not covered with makeup. It looked too droopy, too... lifeless.

"What are you?" she whispered, fascinated, terrified and confused all at once.

"Oh, dear." The voice wasn't Mable's but Ms. Martha, the bakery owner who had brought Abby a tray full of cream cheese Danish after she heard it was her favorite. "Marion, are you showing that poor girl your gangrene gills? She looks ready to lose her lunch. Maybe I was wrong about them being fine. Those things are definitely turning."

Abby watched Martha, a big baker's box in hand, descend and look around the lab. "I'd hoped you'd redecorated the house by now, Abby. You have such style when you dress, all those neutrals and pastels with that bright red hair of yours. Maybe something country-themed. What do you think, Marion?"

"I think she's going down."

Why, yes, Abby thought, her head spinning as blackness dotted her eyes, going down sounds wonderful.

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### CHAPTER TWO

Her back was cold. Very cold. And uncomfortable on what felt much harder than her bed. Even her butt was cold and uncomfortable and *that* had enough padding to hold its own in nearly any situation.

"Oh, good, she's coming around. Dan, I think you can hold off on that call to Dr. Jeffers."

Abby opened her eyes and found Martha and Marion leaning over her face but toward her feet stood Dan, the milkman. "Oh, my gosh, you're one too?" She whimpered, not surprised she sounded as pitiful as she did. After all, she was surrounded by creatures with gills and was now lying on the dissection slab.

"Hi there, sunshine," Dan said, though his smile was a little forced. "Ladies, why don't you run upstairs and get Abby something to drink?"

"Good idea. Dan, you talk to her, and we'll be right back down and have some of my Black Forest cake. Oh, and we'll call Mable, too, see if she's going to make it over or not." Martha's cold, damp hand patted Abby's, and Abby did her best not to wince. "But then, we really need some attention, dear. We're both in need of our shots, and my hand has been acting up something fierce. I might need a new one."

"Again," Marion added and rolled her eyes. "I swear, Martha, use the mixer, that's why you have the darn thing. You go through hands like dirty socks."

"Well, I never..."

The two bickered and walked up the stairs, and Abby found she couldn't take her eyes off them. They looked almost normal enough, certainly sounded like the little old ladies she'd met, but something was so off.

"What are they?" Abby whispered when the door at the top of the stairs closed.

"You haven't read your dad's diaries yet, have you?" Dan asked, offering his hand.

She gratefully accepted, and though she still felt lightheaded, she hopped off the table. There was no reason to be on it any longer than had been absolutely necessary. "Ah, no. I actually just found the lab a few hours ago and started looking around. Why? What was my father doing here?"

"Dr. Maples was a good man," Dan said firmly.

"I believe you," she assured him. "I loved my dad, and I know he was doing important work. That doesn't explain the, um... Were they really gills?"

Dan nodded. "Yes. Lung regeneration was something Dr. Maples just couldn't make work long term.

If patients missed even one dose of their serum or were late, they ended up drowning in lung fluid. The gills are surgically in place and enhanced to make the lungs obsolete."

"That's amazing," she muttered.

"He was an amazing man." Dan's devotion was obvious. She wondered what her father had done to ensure such loyalty. "But, misunderstood. Everyone in Masters understood his work and supported him, even the regular folks. If anyone outside of town knew what he could do, he would have been called a monster. And the people he saved, well, I can only imagine what the outside world would do if they got a hold of Marion or Martha or any of the others."

"Others?"

"Almost half the town has been saved by your father, Abby," he explained gently. "Some were young and had accidents, and others, like Martha and Marion, were older, but still healthy despite one illness or another. Your father found ways to not only keep them alive, but to keep them flourishing in the community they love."

What did that mean? Abby's mind raced but she took a deep breath to center herself. She didn't need to pass out. What she needed was action. She glanced to the

bookshelf and saw a bright green binder, nearly five inches thick that said *Checkups*. That had to be it. She stepped away from Dan, who had changed out of his milkman whites and was now in casual shorts and a blue polo, and pulled out the binder.

"Oh my gosh, Dad. What were you doing?" she whispered as she read the first patient's history, dosages and chronology of care.

"He was saving lives and making the world better."

"By playing God? Dan, this is not only immoral it's extremely illegal. Those dosages alone... How did he get this much?" she demanded, and when she looked up, Dan had a slight blush across his cheeks. "Well?"

He opened his mouth and closed it once before his words came at a rush. "Ah, well, your father was a doctor so he could write the proper prescriptions, then me and a couple of the guys would drive to Canada—"

"Of course," she muttered. "Canada. There's no other way he could have made this affordable enough for anyone to actually benefit without adding another party to the mix."

"It was legal," Dan defended.

"I know." She sighed and turned a few pages, getting lost in Marion's papers. Her father had kept

amazing notes, and she could see everything she needed right there in black and white along with a warning about green gills. "Oh man. So... they die or what if they don't get all of this?"

Abby looked up to find Dan's face was bright red. He fumbled over words before they even came out of his mouth.

"Dan? What happens?"

"Well... that's only happened once or twice and... and it wasn't a big deal—"

"Dan," she snapped.

"Okay, they start eating people," he admitted in a rush. "But it only happened twice in the very beginning, and then it was only a few bites. Dr. Maple sewed the two right up, and Lance and Rita were never late for their meds again."

"Are they... zombies?" she asked hesitantly.

"Technically, they are reanimated, not corpses. Dr. Maples never killed anyone, but the way I understand it, he started replacing pieces of them while still keeping their minds the same."

"The same, right, until they start eating human flesh," she summed up. "Okay, zombies. That need their meds."

"Yes, they do. They've tried to be very patient, but the second that light went on, the community started their call tree, and there are already a dozen waiting on your front step."

Dozens who needed meds or they would start eating people before they completely keeled over and rotted. Abby knew what she wanted to do, but she also knew what had to be done.

"Well. Send them in."

\* \* \* \*

Dan couldn't believe his eyes. Well, actually, he could. Abby was a good woman. He'd thought she was sweet right off the bat and that had given him hope for the town. She'd also seemed very innocent and sheltered, though, and that hadn't boded well for his cause. But there she was, sewing a new foot on his cousin Ed as if she was hemming a pair of pants. Hell, she was even laughing and had Ed, who'd been in misery since his latest accident right after Dr. Maples' death, laughing with her.

She was amazing. Absolutely stunning, too. Doc had been a gnome-ish sort of guy, so Dan hadn't known what to expect from his daughter. Abby, with her fiery

pigtails and brushing of freckles, had been a perfect surprise. Slim and petite except for an apple bottom that he'd spent far too long staring at since she'd come to town, she was more beautiful than he had a right to think of as his. But he did. Or at least he hoped.

"There you go, Ed. Now, please keep this attached. I don't know how my dad got the, ah, spare parts for the spare parts bin, so I don't know when there will be more." She laughed again. Dan could hear how tired she was, and Ed must have, too, because he looked over Abby's shoulder to Dan and nodded.

"Thanks, Dr. Abby. I'll be careful," Ed promised and gingerly stepped off the lab table and onto his foot. Already Dan could see Ed's color coming back after his foot was fixed and he'd had his supplements. The zombies —for lack of a better word— had been getting mighty edgy, and Dan had taken more than one on a long ride in his milk truck to cool down. That seemed to help the cravings when it came to eating flesh.

"Dan."

He looked up, startled by the abrupt call. He'd been distracted and now his cousin was right in his face. At least the blue tinge was backing off around his ears.

"What, Ed?" he demanded while Abby tidied up.

"I just said I'm going home, and I was the last one," Ed said, his eyebrows drawn low. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," he muttered, and Ed looked from Dan to Abby and his expression changed to one of understanding.

"Oh, gotcha."

Dan watched his cousin smirk and walk away, lumbering up the stairs, and finally leaving the basement in peace. The cake Martha had brought sat on one of the benches, untouched, and Dan couldn't blame Abby. It always creeped Dan out when Doc ate while working on the patients. He turned and saw her put syringes in the disinfectant sink. They'd learned intense germ precautions weren't necessary over years of experiments. There was nothing contagious about the reanimated people, and they seemed to be immune to everything. With the exception of the occasional case of rotting, they were in amazing health.

"So." Nothing was on the tip of his tongue to say, but the silence was stretching too long. Dan needed to know what she was thinking. "You were great with everyone. I'm surprised, with your bedside manner, that you didn't become a doctor."

"I thought about it," she said, but didn't look at him. "But I think if I'd had to deal with insurance companies and

higher ups and all that crap, I wouldn't be nearly as able to cope with people. Or, um, zombies."

"Yeah, what did you think about everyone?"

The 'zombies' moniker that she couldn't seem to get away from was apt enough that he was starting to think the name could stick. He couldn't think of any of the beneficiaries of Doc Maples' research who wouldn't get a kick out of the title.

"I think everyone is very nice. I always did. I just... This isn't what I expected when I came here. A cobwebby house, a reasonable amount of back taxes, maybe a dirty refrigerator. A patient list full of zombies... Yeah, that didn't even cross my mind."

"Ha, I don't imagine it did." He laughed and crossed the distance to work beside her when he realized she was starting to run the sterilizer. He pulled on a pair of gloves and a second pair of the thicker protective covers. Doc hadn't recommended testing cross contamination between regenerates and full humans. Dan had no intention of being the guinea pig at this point in the game. "Your dad was a good guy with all of this. Saved a lot of good people with his research and willingness to help. He was very proud of you."

"Yeah," she said, but paused. "He always said that,

but compared to what he was doing here, I was just a tool handing out pills and selling breath mints. This whole thing here is amazing."

"I'm glad you think so. And your dad never had anything but good to say about you and your profession, Abby. You were helping people in your own way."

Not everyone would have thought making zombies was amazing. Dan wasn't in the dark on how most people would view their little operation, but Abby kept showing how extremely wonderful she was.

"But this way is better," she said, and when she looked up at him, her eyes sparkled. "I mean, really better. All I want to do now is break open the laptop and read everything Dad ever wrote. I want to go through his records and rearrange them so they make more sense to me and learn how to help everyone."

"Really?"

"Crazy, right?" She laughed, and he heard the fatigue even if there was confused happiness there as well. "I just... Tonight, I loved it so much, Danny."

*Danny*. No one called him that anymore, and for the most part, that was fine with him. He liked how it sounded on Abby's lips though, and didn't correct her.

"That's what we all hoped you'd say. I'm happy to

help in any way possible, honey, and I know everyone in town feels the same way."

She laughed again, and he knew it was time to go tuck her in despite her excitement. He gathered the rest of the instruments, put them in the machine and turned it on. She was still giggling when he was finished, so he pulled off her gloves and did the same with his own.

"It's time for bed, pretty girl," he said and began turning off lights.

"But there's so much work," she protested, adorable when she yawned over her words. "Darn it. I suppose I should sleep. Too bad it's so much cooler down here than upstairs."

"Doc slept down here when it got too hot." He wasn't surprised when she immediately shook her head. "Yeah, I couldn't do it, either. I don't think I could make myself forget about the cooler full of spare parts long enough to get a good night's sleep."

"Exactly. Where the heck did he even get those parts?" she demanded. When she lifted her apron over her head, Dan caught a tiny glimpse of the milky white flesh of her abdomen. It was a shame when she fixed it back in place. "Danny?"

He fought his blush when he realized he'd probably

gotten caught staring. "Um, spare parts. Yeah, your dad had a supplier at the university hospital in Pierre and at a few hospitals in Minnesota. He had several grants and connections because of his research. Even if the zombies aren't widely known, his other works in cell regeneration have done major good for cancer drugs and stem cell research. That research and reputation gave him enough clout to stay in parts."

"So wily." She nodded and finally looked him straight in the eyes. Her eyelashes were long, dark, and considering the heat, there was no way they were makeup enhanced. Just pretty. "Oh, I'm tired."

"Yes, you are," he agreed and offered her his arm as they approached the stairs. "You're so tired you won't even notice the heat."

"Wow, that's a strong arm." She squeezed his forearm. "Is that from all the milk hauling, Mr. Milkman?"

"Yep, milk does a body good in more ways than one, little lady."

She was still giggling when they made it to the top of the stairs. It was definitely warmer than in the basement, but the after-midnight cool had finally settled over the town, and Dan hoped Abby would be able to sleep comfortably. She was stumbling over her feet, so he didn't

even bother trying to get her upstairs. He settled her on the sofa where a pillow and light blanket already announced it to be her sleeping area of choice.

"Oh, darn. Finally have you beside my bed and there you go running."

Her words were everything he could hope for. She did like him. Even if her sleepy state was the reason behind her indulging secrets, he'd take the confession.

"Not running, pretty Abby." He lifted her feet until she was stretched out, her little frame taking only half of the couch's length. "I just need to get home and ready for my route tomorrow. The milk won't deliver itself, you know."

"Oh, I do," she replied solemnly. "Otherwise I'd have to eat my cereal with water. And that is disgusting."

"Well, you just call me those mornings, and I'll make your house my first stop."

So adorable, so sweet, and as Dan watched, her eyes stayed closed beneath their blinks longer and longer. She felt safe enough to fall asleep with him there. The urge to lean down and kiss her sleeping cheek was intense, but he denied himself the taste of heaven. She'd just shown how much she trusted him. He wasn't going to screw that up. Instead, Dan pulled the blanket over her body, checked the

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locks, and turned off the lights before he headed for home. Tomorrow was nearly upon them, and it would bring a whole new day to get closer to Abby.

### CHAPTER THREE

Even though going through her father's notes would have been much more rewarding, her refrigerator required food in it if she was going to function. Instead of immersing herself in the files, Abby headed to the grocery store. The sky was still blue, the temperature still scorching, and her car was still a piece of crap. She smiled as she pulled out of her driveway. The confirmation of zombies had not ruined her life, or even changed it much, for that matter.

The only real change was her new desire to help. She felt consumed with wanting to find better, more efficient ways to help the zombies function. Some had complained about the heat and how they ended up having to stay inside to prevent premature molding. There had to be a way to make their bodies more tolerant of heat.

It only took a few minutes to get to the tiny grocery store, and even less to actually fill her list, so Abby was excited to start her experiments soon. She grinned at the thought. She'd loved her lab classes in high school and college. The promise of trial and error, frustration and triumph, had her itching to get to the front of the grocery line.

"Good morning, Susan." Abby added a bright smile

to her greeting when her turn came in the brief line of people headed to work. "How's the arm feel?"

"Good as new, Doc," Susan replied. She was a middle-aged single mother of two teenage boys. When she'd been diagnosed with inoperable thyroid cancer, Abby's father had offered her the procedure. She'd been reanimated for five years and would see her eldest graduate at the end of the school year. The night before, Abby had sewn on a few fingers she'd lost in a freezer accident. "Let me call Peter to bag these and take them out for you. Oh, put that pocketbook away. Didn't Dan explain the arrangement?"

"Um, no?" Dan had explained some of what was happening, but nowhere did he mention not paying for groceries.

"Well, there's just no way most of us could pay for the treatments the other Doc Maples, your father, offered. He never made a big deal out of payment, but because he helped us keep our livelihood, we eventually came to a give and take system I hope you'll continue. I provided groceries, Martha always has her baker's rack open, Phil down at the shop did all the mechanic stuff— You get my drift?"

"But he wouldn't have wanted to accept those things

and I can't either," Abby protested, pulling two twenties from her wallet.

Susan's sewn-on fingers, pink and lively with only the slight show of a scar, settled on Abby's wrist. Abby looked up, and the older woman's expression was a mix of earnest honesty and pleading. "Please, Abby. We have our pride around here, and we take care of our own. It takes a lot of time and energy to take care of all of us. For my part in it, I want to make sure you have the groceries you need so you can focus on helping more people instead of having to worry about buying off-brand cereal to make your budget. Let me do this."

When she put it like that, Abby had to admit she was going to have to bend somewhere. It still seemed wrong to just take the groceries, but when Susan's son came to the front and gave his mom a quick hug before bagging, Abby understood. Her father had given these people something they were genuinely grateful for, and Abby had already decided to stay on and continue his work. That meant she would have to let them show their gratefulness in their own way and be grateful herself for being able to help.

"Thanks, Susan," Abby said after the young man handed her the two bags. "I appreciate this very much."

"Not nearly as much as I do this." The older woman

wiggled her fingers. "Oh wait. Petey, run to the meats and get a pound of hamburger and buns for Doc Abby. I was just thinking that Dan would probably be around tonight, and you should have him grill for you."

Dan. She'd been trying to keep him off her mind since she couldn't remember every little thing she'd said in her exhaustion after being up half the night fixing zombies. He was such a nice guy and so handsome, and the night before had shown her he had depth of character as well. The man cared about his friends, family, and community. Those things had always been an afterthought for her in the past, because she'd never gotten close to those outside her immediate family. Now, though, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to let others into her business and make sure things in their world were okay, too.

"So, is having a personal chef part of this deal, too?" Abby joked when Susan's son brought up the burger, condiments and buns.

Susan gave her a knowing look, a very female one similar to her mother's expression when she'd set her up on dates. "Oh, consider this a perk, Abby. Dan's one of the very best we have to offer in our little town. We've been waiting a long time for him to find a woman to take a shine to. Just give it some time and see if you don't shine back."

Shine back. The words stayed with Abby long after she'd put her groceries away. Wasn't she already shining back on Dan? According to her mother, she'd never hidden her feelings worth a darn, and obviously Susan had seen a spark to grow on. Maybe Abby had been dragging her feet because she was in a new place and, before the zombie thing, hadn't known if she would stay.

She looked around the kitchen, wishing it were prettier than the graying peach-colored wallpaper could make it. Maybe one of the zombies loved to paint. She smiled and knew that even without paint, she'd finally found the home, occupation, and life she'd been waiting for. Abby couldn't say she'd been unhappy in her life in Seattle, but after only a few months in South Dakota, she knew there was no reason to leave.

\* \* \* \*

"So, Ms. Abby, no, *Doc* Abby." The stuttering zombie, whose cheeks were bright red, was adorable. He was heartbreakingly young, too. Jeff had been crushed under a tractor and was one of her father's first zombies. Luckily, the experiment had worked on young Jeff and seven years after his 'death' at nineteen, he was still up and kicking, married with a wonderful bride and three adopted children.

"Ms. Abby is just fine, Jeff," Abby assured him, doing a thorough study of the foot he'd complained about. He hadn't really complained, but he'd expressed mild worry over it because it had turned green. "I'm not a doctor, just a pharmacist. Has this ever happened to you before? You know, a limb turning green?"

"Well, once or twice," he admitted. "It's the heat. Usually this time of year we're getting a nice cool fall, even some early snow and that helps our parts last longer. This year, though, I got in a third crop of hay, and I guess I pushed the limit. The extra money will sure make Christmas easier at the house with all the kids. My foot though... whenever I came in like this, Doc Maples ended up having to put on a new one."

Abby nodded. That's what she'd thought would have to happen. Luckily, she'd just signed for a package that contained half a dozen body parts, including a large, male foot. It would be best if things lined up size-wise, though in a pinch, she'd found in her father's notes that the zombies were more than willing to make-do with what was available.

"Okay, Jeff. You're in luck. I've got a new foot for

you and a new serum I made up that might help against the rot. Would you be interested in being my guinea pig?" she asked, pulling out the drawer of spare parts and locating the foot. "How about a nice size thirteen?"

"Great. It'll match the other," Jeff said with a grin. "And about the shot. I hesitate only because it's new, and I'd hate to have effects around the kids."

"Oh, of course." She grabbed a saw and an apron. "I should have thought of that. Sorry, Jeff. It should be perfectly safe, but you're right. I'll test it a lot more before I even try with a single zombie who might be willing."

"There are loads that will be willing to help." Jeff lay back on the dissection table, offering his foot right at eye level to her chair. "And I'll certainly be grateful to help when it's confirmed that it won't lead to brain eating or anything. Oh, and I was going to say earlier that a couple of the guys and I were hoping you'd let us fix up your house a bit. Most of the rooms have needed new paint for years, but the old Doc Maples wouldn't hear of it. We really want to help, if you'll let us."

"That is so sweet, Jeff." She looked up from checking the saw's circular blade. "I'll buy all the paint and do the prep if you guys don't mind doing the rest. I hate painting with a passion. Oh and food. I'll cook and—"

"Doc, you're not getting the way this works," Jeff interrupted and pushed up to his elbows. "You're about to cut off my foot and sew on a new one that will allow me to walk and run and play with my kids. I'm the one who is grateful. My wife already said she'd do sandwiches, and Kevin is doing the desserts and all that. We're hoping you won't be as damn stubborn as your dad and you'll let us help you. It gets pretty old being on the receiving end of good when there's a desire to reciprocate."

Abby sighed and turned on the saw. The quiet buzz had creeped her out for the first few minutes when she'd been helping Mable the night before, but the zombies really didn't feel the pain, and in the end, the product had been so much better for Mable that Abby had put aside her disquiet. Maybe, like the saw, she was going to have to set aside her reservations on this issue as well. "Okay, but you guys aren't doing anything until I have an air conditioner put in. I already ordered a system online, and Susan said to ask Jack to help install it. After I can be sure it's nice and cool in here for you guys, I'd be very grateful if you'd work on the place."

"And bring sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies," Jeff added, with a challenging eyebrow. "That you'll eat."

"Okay, deal. And I like butterscotch chips, too, if Kevin's wife is taking requests."

"There you go, Doc." Jeff chuckled and lay back down on the table. "You'll get it."

Two hours later, with a new foot and a fresh shot of zombie juice, Jeff left a happy camper with plans of returning when the air conditioner was installed. Abby checked her watch and flinched. Dan had called earlier in the day and offered to help with the after-dinner crowd. She'd suggested dinner instead. He'd accepted the invitation and was due at the house in minutes. The apron she'd worn during the amputation had helped, but there were flecks of flesh on her shoes and shirtsleeves. A shower was definitely in order if there was going to be any kind of seduction or even appetizing dining in the near future.

Not seduction, she scolded herself as she marched up the stairs to the house's only bathroom. No, she would not be seducing the milkman. She was going to have a nice dinner with him and... shine. Abby paused and smiled when she saw her thoughts had put her in front of one of the few pictures hanging in the house. On the stairwell wall was the last family portrait taken before her parents divorced. She'd been little with bright red pigtails. Her dad had been frazzled even then, but her mom was smiling,

happy. She'd remarried eventually, but had held out for many years because she loved Abby's father very much. There was nothing like love in the whole world, her mother had once told her.

Abby finished the stairs at a run with a new vigor to be showered and ready when Dan made it to the house. Love had to start somewhere, and Abby wasn't about to let her chance fly by.

Stephanie Beck

# CHAPTER FOUR

Burgers on the grill, fresh corn on the cob steaming in its husks, a fresh tub of butter waiting, and an ice cold beer and Dan was as close to heaven as a man could get on earth. He turned and looked over his shoulder after he closed the hot grill's lid. Abby was lying back in a lounge chair with a daiquiri in her hand. Her eyes were closed, enjoying the sun. He realized he'd forgotten something in that list of perfect things. He'd had burgers, corn, and beer, but he'd never shared them with Abby before. She was the added ingredient that made the night extra nice.

"So, I ran into Jeff. He looks a lot better." Dan quickly flipped the corn before setting aside his spatula and retaking his seat beside Abby.

"Yep, he stopped in and got a new foot," she replied without opening her eyes. The sun was setting, but it was still bright on her face, and in a few minutes, she was sure to burn. Dan hopped up and unfolded the patio umbrella. "Oh, thanks, Danny."

"You're welcome, beautiful," he replied, still enjoying that 'Danny' on her lips. "It's good you're out here enjoying all this. Your dad's neighbor gave him the patio set a few years ago, but he never used it much except for the annual summer party he hosted. I always thought this was too nice of a yard not to be enjoyed."

"I do, too." She looked at him with a content, quiet smile on her face. "I'm glad you could stop over tonight before patients started coming. Last night went by too fast."

"It sure did." Dan adjusted his seat so he could see her pretty face better. It was worth setting aside his beer when he got a clear view of her freckles. "I was glad you offered. Susan said something about it, too, so I guess our secret is out."

"Yeah. Do you think everyone knows about the triplets yet?"

It was a good thing he'd set aside his beer, because, if he'd had a drink, he'd have choked on it. So innocent, so naughty. If he'd had any doubts, Dan knew now that Abby couldn't be more perfect. She understood the town and the humor required to get along.

"Triplets, huh? Last I'd heard it was twins."

"Oh no, triplets," she informed him with a casual tone that made him snort aloud. "They run in my family, you know. Oh, and when I spoke to your mother this afternoon right before you came over —sans zombie guts, thank goodness— she made sure I knew you had twins in every family but your immediate one."

"Did she scare you?" His mother, while always full

of good intentions, had terrified his girlfriends in high school. She was just so Holly Homemaker perfect that some women were threatened by her. Really, she'd burned her fair share of scrambled eggs and swore when she stepped in dog poop just like everyone else, but it didn't show often.

"Not at all. She's a sweetheart and the reason we have double fudge brownies for dessert," Abby replied, just as cool and relaxed as she had been earlier. "She's a super nice lady who assured me flat-out that we don't all have to be good at everything. But since she's good at cooking and baking and household things, she'll be happy to help me out if I ever wanted to learn. No strings attached."

"She's a good teacher," he replied.

"I've heard that. Oh, and she offered to let me take credit for the brownies, since they are your favorite. She's already teaching me the way to her baby boy's heart."

There was extra humor laced in her tone, but also the smallest part of trepidation. She was testing the waters, just like he'd been doing the past few weeks without much return. True, he'd probably been too discreet like his cousin and friends said, but now that he finally had Abby's attention, Dan wasn't about to let her test go unfulfilled.

"I am my father's son," he admitted. "I like my

brownies, though I'm just as happy with the ones from Martha's place or the ones in the plastic wrapper. But don't tell my mother that. I think just knowing someone was thinking about what I like makes the treats special. I can buy them myself, but when someone else thinks about it..."

"Yeah, I think that's exactly right," Abby agreed. "When someone goes out of their way to make you happy, it doesn't matter if they get it perfect or not."

Dan smiled. Abby made him happy just the way she was. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to come home to her and have her holding a pan of brownies. Well, he had imagined a variation of it, but she'd been buck naked and her toenails had been painted bright pink.

"That look on your face. I have to know what you were thinking."

Dan shook himself at the sound of Abby's voice full of fascinated giggles. He didn't even try to hide his blush because there was no way to avoid it at this point.

"Um, what look?" he asked.

"The one you just had. It looked like someone just offered you a big serving of fun with a pan of brownies on the side."

\* \* \* \*

Dan's eyes widened and Abby felt hers do the same. "Oh, my gosh, were you really thinking about something like that? Come on, Danny, you have to spill all now!"

Abby hadn't had so much fun since she'd been in high school playing truth and dare with her girlfriends. It was so much more fun with Dan. How had she missed the way he wore his emotions on his face? The man was an open book now, where before he'd seemed like just a pretty face. So wrong, so wrong.

"Well, if you must know," he said and cleared his throat. "There were brownies involved and maybe you were there wearing pink nail polish."

"Pink?" She hadn't bothered with any polish in years, but when she looked at her bare toes, pink seemed like a fine idea. "What else was I wearing?"

The redness on his cheeks sped to his ears, making Dan's whole face looked sunburned. If there had been any doubt about him taking a shine toward her, all questions were answered with his expression alone.

"Danny, was I only wearing nail polish?"

He took a long gulp of beer and seemed to center himself a bit, the red still there, but not as bright. He locked eyes with her and the playing ebbed when she saw his

sincerity.

"Yep. You did happen to only be in that pink nail polish. You had a pretty smile for me, too, and if we're just going to be friends, I'll be happy if as far as we ever get is that smile."

Her heart melted, and it had nothing to do with the heat. What a sweet man. And she knew that it was who Dan was. Everyone she'd run into the last few days had sung the man's praises, and not just his mother. The town thought the world of Dan, and well, the reasons were getting more apparent with their every meeting.

"Well, I'd say it's fair that you think about me just in nail polish as long as you don't mind that I've been having impure thoughts related to your milkman uniform and ways to get you out of it."

There, it was said. They couldn't start writing their story together until they were both on the same page, and Abby hoped that now they could have a chance at— He kissed her. She didn't see it coming, but when Dan's lips landed on her mouth, the world stopped spinning.

It was so good. His lips were warm with just the right amount of moisture to glide smoothly over hers as he deepened the kiss effortlessly. Kissing Dan was easy, like filling blood pressure prescriptions, but so much more

enjoyable. Abby moved her hands up to cradle his face between her palms, loving the slight stubble there from his full day. Right. It all felt just right. He lifted her slowly so she had loads of time to protest, but the thought never entered her mind. When she was settled astride his lap, the body-to-body contact should have been uncomfortable in the heat, but if it didn't bother him, Abby wasn't going to let it distract her. She'd been dreaming of this moment for eight weeks.

His hands roamed with a respectful freedom, not taking too much, just exploring over her thin cotton top. When his fingers passed and re-passed the middle of her back, she knew he'd caught her without her bra. Not having much in the boobs department made it easier for her to go braless under the roomy style that was the rage this summer. His exploration moved lower, and she wished he'd moved around front to her relatively unprotected breasts, but his hands settled at her waist and then her bottom, tugging her until they were as close as possible and his impossibly hot hands squeezed her backside.

"Holy smokes, Danny," she gasped. His eyes were hooded, but from what she could see of them, lust and happiness were close at hand.

"That was amazing." She was so glad he said it

because she needed to know he was as affected as she was. "Abby, that was... What the hell are we going to do about this?"

The sudden question, asked in near panic, wasn't what she'd expected after the kiss. She'd been thinking more along the lines of asking him inside to continue where they'd left off, but he pushed her aside and hustled to the grill. He cursed as he flipped burgers, and while done, they didn't smell burnt. That was just Abby, slightly singed from first the heat of his kiss then of his rejection.

"What do you mean, Danny?"

"Just a sec," he muttered as he saw to the food. A minute later, he had the platter she'd set out full of burgers and corn and had the buttered buns over the grill to toast. He closed the grill but stayed close to it, turning to face her with solemn eyes. "Honey, that was more than I've ever known. I don't know about you —okay, I do know what I think about you— and I don't think you usually jump into bed with men on your first date."

That was a sobering thought. It was only their first date, their first real one anyway. It sounded like he thought things were moving too quickly, and they probably were. Abby felt deflated as she realized what she'd done. She'd let the townspeople's excitement cloud her judgment. Others

had seen her and Dan as possibly the perfect couple, and she'd fallen into it. So had he for a moment. But that piece of time was gone, and they had to be reasonable.

"Don't get me wrong, Abby. Please don't misunderstand me. I want to kiss you more this second than when we were a minute ago, and I really don't think that's going to change. I just... Even though I believe this is right between us, I think we could still short-change ourselves if we rush this."

"Rush what?" she asked, wincing when she heard the slow tone of her voice. She wasn't sure if he was talking sex or not, but from the inflection of her words, he probably assumed she was.

His lips kicked up in a little grin, the half one that was so adorable and addicting to have pointed in her direction. "Falling in love, silly. That's always seemed like one of those things that should be done low and slow, savored and snuggled. That way, when we have late nights with little ones and whatever comes in the next few years, we'll have something to remind us of why we care. Now, do you like garlic on your bun or not?"

Abby had to swallow twice to get rid of the lump in her throat as the sweetness of his words settled in. Sex was nice, but it was sex and anyone could have it. Love, on the

other hand, love with a man like Dan who was everything she'd ever dreamed of, was something she wanted to savor.

"Um, this falling in love business does include kissing and making out, right?" she asked and that kickedup grin turned wide.

"Absolutely. On that note, let's just set this garlic aside for another night."

"You read my mind."

# CHAPTER FIVE

Slow and sweet. Right. He could handle it. Dan turned down Abby's street two weeks after their first 'official' date and told himself he was thrilled with where their relationship was. It was nearly Halloween, and she'd more than found her niche in town, endearing herself to human and zombie alike with her likable personality and willingness to help. Her house was even being painted and redecorated by a joint coalition of zombies led by his cousin Cody and human women led by Dan's mother. The house was a complete mess, but it sure was showing its potential, and he knew Abby was excited for the finished product.

Dan was excited, too, because once the work was done he could come visit Abby without every gossip in town sharing it with everyone else. They were all horrible talkers, himself included, but Dan had hoped 'slow and sweet' would have kept him and Abby off the radar at least for a while. As it was, his mother and his aunts stood on Abby's porch, lunch in their arms, unnecessary matchmaking plans in their grandbaby-hungry eyes.

"There you are," Dan's mother exclaimed when he hopped out of the truck. He loved his mother, and Harriet Market Ferrin made sure the whole world knew how much

she loved her son. It was a combination he usually enjoyed, but since she'd taken such an active role in his love life, he was reconsidering. "It's about time you got here, young man. It's not a good thing to keep a young lady waiting, you know. One of these guys working on the house is bound to scoop her up if you don't give her the attention she deserves."

"Mom, I'm not late," he insisted, but knew it was futile. "And who is going to scoop up Abby? Most of the guys are married."

"Your cousin, for one," she replied, and his aunts nodded along, making the three of them look like the triplets they sometimes claimed to be. "That Drew is a smooth talker and has been making Abby laugh all morning."

Dan understood, and while he would have rather not dealt with his mother on this point, he held in his sigh and mounted the stairs. "Mom, I like when Abby laughs, and I don't mind if it's other people making her smile because I know when I'm with her, she's got plenty of those smiles for me, too. Don't worry about this."

His mother sighed, her freshly styled blonde-gray hair not daring to move out of place despite the great movement. "I will worry, Danny. The second I saw Abby, I

*knew* she was the girl for you. Before I even learned she was Doc Maples' daughter, somewhere in my soul, I recognized my daughter-in-law, the woman who would finally make my baby boy happy. If you screw all that up by being a stupid male, well, I'd forgive you, but it might take a while before I could look at you."

Dan didn't think his mother had a romantic bone in her body, too South Dakota practical for all that nonsense. As far as he could remember, she'd never picked up a romance novel or cried at a wedding or any such thing, but with her confession, he saw her actions through new eyes and loved her all the more for it.

"And, of course, I want grandchildren before I have to start hiding my gills from them," she went on.

"Oh, yeah," his aunt Henrietta seconded. "Gills and little fingers do not mesh well. You'd best get working, Danny Boy. None of us are getting any younger, but with your gal's help, we'll be around for a good long while to enjoy your family. That doesn't give you leave to drag your feet, though."

"And my Drew will snap her right up," Aunt Helen continued. "So you get in there and get to courting. I wouldn't mind one bit to have Abby as my daughter-in-law, but my bets are on you, Danny. A nice Christmas

engagement would be wonderful."

Dan walked through his female relatives as they launched into discussion of Christmas weddings and why they loved Drew, but didn't think he would do well with Abby. They were right about that, he thought as he ducked the plastic on the door. There was no way in hell Drew was poaching. Dan heard Abby's laugh from the kitchen and headed that way. What he'd told his mother was true: He wanted Abby to always be happy even when he wasn't around, but it was time for those smiles to shine on him.

"Oh, Danny, my milkman in shining armor! Save me from these zombies who won't stop telling bad knockknock jokes!"

The guys laughed when Abby held her arms out theatrically. She was on a small stepladder that put her face-to-face with him, and when Dan scooped her up in his arms, cradling her like a true damsel in distress, hoots and hollers followed them into the backyard.

Abby looked up at him, merriment in her eyes as she beamed at him. When he got to the enclosed porch he could have put her down beside him on the porch swing, but instead he kept her in his lap and basked in the air conditioned air he'd teased her was a waste in the three season area.

"So, my fine damsel," he said, letting Abby lean back only enough to see her pretty face. "How's your day been, other than the vicious, bad joke telling zombies?"

"Oh, it's been great. I actually made my first zombie today." Excitement made her words come too fast, a trait he found incredibly cute on her. In combination with the freckles and curls, the excitement made her seem even younger and move vibrant than she usually was.

"Mr. Danners?" he asked.

"Aw, how'd you guess?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your surprise, but he was on the list for Doc Maples. Lung cancer on an otherwise healthy, functioning person is one of the biggest complaints for that generation. Between smoking and mining, this area especially seems to have plenty of patients looking for help," he explained.

"Yep, but now he's free to be with his family as long as he'd like to be," she said and smiled. "I love that feeling. I mean, I've never believed that we had expiration dates stamped on our feet by fate, so being able to help good people make this an option is so wonderful. His wife cried and brought me butterscotch crispy rice bars because she heard I liked butterscotch. How sweet is that?"

It would be the crispy rice bars she thought was

sweet. Some people would give millions for the option to elongate their lives, and some people would charge them millions. But Abby was happy as a clam with a pan of bars and knowing the person had more time.

"So, do I get any of those bars, Doc?" he teased, knowing full well they were probably gone. She paid her dues for her sweet tooth by riding her bike more often than driving her car, but he'd discovered in their short association that sweets weren't safe with her.

"I actually saved you some, smarty-pants. But if you're going to act all superior, I'll just eat them myself."

"Oh, yeah?" Abby was incredibly ticklish, and he started in on her without mercy.

"Danny, come on. Oh, heck. Stop, you bully!" she squealed, rocking the swing hard with her kicking and ineffectual tries to escape. "Danny, please. You suck. Let me go."

"Do I get a bar?" he asked, finding the sweet spot on her rib cage and digging in his fingers.

"No, I already ate them. Ha, so there, you are a smarty-pants."

He stopped his fingers, threw his head back and laughed. "Damn, I should have known. You're such a tease, Abby Maples. It's a good thing my mom and aunts are here.

They won't leave me hanging."

"I would never leave you hanging," Abby scolded, drawing deep breaths but still letting random giggles slip. "Mrs. Danners also brought a pan of peanut butter and cream cheese brownies, which happen to be untouched and hidden from the sweets-chasing zombies as well."

His stomach growled at just the mention of those brownies. They were the ones that went neck and neck with his mother's every year at the Halloween fair. "You wouldn't tease me about those, would you now, Abby?"

She leaned close until they were nose to nose, her body heat a welcome touch in the cool room. "I would never tease my Danny about brownies. After lunch, I'll sneak them out just for you. There are a few things my sweetheart milkman doesn't have to share, and his favorite brownies are one of them. Now, I heard that belly of yours growl. Let's go have some sloppy joes and potato salad to make those brownies that much sweeter."

She started getting up, but Dan stopped her. His throat was tight for some reason, and he didn't know if he could explain it if he tried. He pulled her as close as possible and hugged her until his arms hurt. When he thought he could speak, he freed her, and she slowly pulled away, concern and confusion in her expression.

"Are you okay, Danny?"

What a question. He hadn't been okay since he'd met her. "I'm... I don't know, Abby. All of a sudden, I just got smacked upside my head with how much I love you. How can I love you this much already?"

When he'd mentioned love the first time, she'd had a shocked, uncertain look, but now her smile was gentle, and her eyes twinkled.

"Whew, it's good to know I'm not the only one head over heels. Like you said before, we've got time to figure all that out. For now, let's just have lunch."

Stephanie Beck

## CHAPTER SIX

Abby waved goodbye to the rest of her guests. Her house was a completely different place, one she could see herself being happy in for a very long time. The zombie crew was headed to the bar for their running karaoke competition. Apparently Drew was in contention to headline the Halloween Fair. Abby couldn't wait to see the town's main festival. It had been their annual tradition long before her father started making zombies, so it was just a happy coincidence that over half the town didn't have to dress in costumes if they didn't want to.

But she was going to. Danny had already said she could borrow some milkman whites, and she was lending him her doctor garb. She let loose a happy sigh as she closed her door. Abby had never been one to do foolish things with her man of the moment, not in any relationship. But now, she couldn't wait to have their pictures taken with them in matching clothes for Christmas cards. She could see their kids in them, too, and that really made her grin.

The house was quiet, and after the very long day long week actually— that wasn't a bad thing. Even Danny'd had to leave to give his truck its weekly scrubbing. She wished he would be back, but he didn't usually finish the cleaning until after midnight. They had plans to meet for

the Halloween fair though, and that would be soon enough. They'd have a whole day to walk around and enjoy the best food and festivities the town could offer.

Not just the town, Abby thought, pouring herself a glass of the milk Danny had brought with him. It was *her* town now. The phone rang, interrupting her musings. Abby frowned a moment, but realized it was Thursday night and the call was probably from her mother. She put down her glass and ran for the phone in the den. She couldn't wait to tell her mom more about Dan. She'd already told her a few details, but Abby wanted to share everything. As she picked up the phone, Abby smiled as she thought of her mother indulgently rolling her eyes.

"Hey, Mom. You won't believe what happened today."

There was silence on the other end, and Abby kicked herself for being rude. "Oh, sorry Mom. Hi, how are you? Did you have a good day?"

"Um, is this Abigail Maples?"

The hesitant male voice on the other end of the line was one Abby couldn't place.

"Yes, this is she. Can I help you?"

There was more silence, and Abby started getting a bad feeling about the call. It might have been a

telemarketer, but even that didn't seem right.

"Hey, who is this?" she demanded and walked to the front and back doors, locking them for the first time since she'd moved in.

"Are you aware that your town is overrun with the undead?"

It was a different voice, and though their words came quickly, they broke in nervous tension.

"Undead? What in the world are you talking about?" Her mind immediately ran to the possibility of someone knowing about the zombies, but everyone was sure that they were keeping the secret contained. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, listen, lady, we're here to help. We'll clean the town of the undead scum if you'll get them all together. We brought our weapons, and we're ready. We're brave and stuff. Just get them all together."

"This is stupid and insane. If you ever call here again, I'll contact the police." Abby hung up and shivered. The voices had been young, but the words had been ugly ones. Weapons? What in the world did that mean?

She walked to the front of her house and looked out the window. The street was quiet and nearly dark, but down the block, she saw an unfamiliar van. Annoyance warred

with worry, and she tried to convince herself she was overreacting. After all, who would make threats in their little town? It didn't make sense, and irritation welled the more she thought about it. She flipped on her porch light and moved closer to the front window. The van squealed away, driving right in front of Abby, giving her a clear look at the four faces in the van that looked toward her as they sped away.

Young, pimpled and if dumb had a look, their hangjaw expressions hit it on the head. But they'd said they had weapons, and their van was plenty big enough to hide them. Abby stepped away from the window and flipped the deadbolt on the front door. She picked up the phone and started dialing. There was no way she was going to let her town be threatened, let alone hurt, by a group of stupid kids looking for a zombie thrill.

Stephanie Beck

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Just relax."

That was easy for Dan to say, but Abby felt ready to jump out of her skin at the very open fall fair. After a latenight gathering in her newly decorated living room, she'd been assured that the problem wasn't anything they couldn't handle and to just go about her business as usual. That didn't make sense, though. There were zombie hunters out who had weapons and wanted to hurt the town's zombie population, the very ones she'd come to think of as her own. Apparently, the town had dealt with zombie zealots on a few occasions in the past when a cousin of a cousin blabbed to the wrong person, but so far they hadn't had any real problems.

"Abby, honey, I promise you when those boys show their faces, all they will see is a bunch of normal people enjoying the day," Dan said as they passed stands full of textiles and fancy jewelry. "The police know to look for them, and last night, the call tree was on fire. Everyone knows to be extra careful, so there's nothing left for us to do except enjoy the day."

"You're right," she said, squeezing his hand tighter as they walked. She even put her head on his strong shoulder. "I'm just... Things were too perfect, I guess."

"Perfect? Honey, you live in a town full of zombies and have the local milkman in love with you. That doesn't strike me as perfect," he said and laughed out loud.

"Then you're nuts, Danny. Because this has all been more than a dream. But if the price of this dream is putting up with crazies on occasion, well, I can do that."

He stopped, right there in front of everyone, and when a few older couples passed by they smiled, but Abby wasn't sure why Danny had paused.

"What?" she asked as he continued to just stare at her. "Danny, come on. We're supposed to go to the pumpkin booth, remember? We're the honorary taste testers."

Still, he didn't move. He just stood there, and she started to worry something was wrong. She knew she hadn't said anything new or shocking so maybe something was physically wrong with him.

"Are you okay, honey?" She grabbed his arms when he started to sink to his knee, but he didn't feel limp or faint under her grip.

With Danny on one knee, it was Abby who started to feel light-headed when he reached into his pocket.

"Will you marry me, Abby?"

"That..." she sputtered and wasn't sure what to say

next. It was so abrupt, so unexpected, and suddenly, she felt all the surrounding eyes on them. "Just like that, Danny? No lead-up? No privacy?"

"Would it change the answer?" he asked, and the red flush to his face began to fade to pale. "I love you, Abby. I might have started the second I saw you, but it's grown to something much more than I've ever experienced. We can have a long engagement if you want, I just... Please, will you marry me?"

"Oh, my gosh." She hated to hear the nerves in his voice, but she felt the very same butterflies not only in her stomach but also throughout her whole body. Marriage? Already? Was that what she wanted with Danny?

Did she really want a reliable, sweet, funny guy to come home to her every night and make her laugh and hold her in the hard times? Could she picture anyone else snuggled in her bed during the long South Dakota winters? Was there anyone she even considered sharing her treats with? In the lasting silence of her inner debate, Abby knew before she'd even finished the questions that the answer to Danny's question was yes and would always be yes. She loved him, and with him still on his knee, the simple gold and diamond ring in his hand, she knew it was time to answer.

"Yes."

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, lady! Get out of there! You're surrounded by zombies!"

The shout broke Dan out of his immediate elation. *Zombie hunters*. He looked over along with everyone else who had gathered around during the proposal, and sure enough, on the street beside an ugly van stood four young men. One with a hedge trimmer, one carrying a baseball bat, a third held another garden tool, but the fourth held a double-barreled shotgun.

"Now, boys, what in the world are you thinking?" Sheriff Melroy ambled away from the crowd toward the young men, and when their focus changed to the older man, Danny pushed Abby behind him. "We're having us a nice time here, and there's no reason at all for any of you to have those weapons."

"This town is overrun by zombies, Sheriff," the boy with the hedge clippers insisted. At least the blades were shiny so Dan hoped they hadn't been used to hurt anyone. If the boys were new to the zombie hunting business, and it looked like they were, the sheriff had a better chance of

getting them to walk away.

"Really? And where are these so-called zombies?" the sheriff demanded with a touch of good humor in his tone. He didn't want to spook the kids into shooting or attacking. It would be a damn shame if anyone got hurt, so Dan was glad to see the older man, a zombie himself, take things slow and easy.

"The spare parts," the kid with the gun said. His voice shook worse than any of the others so far, and Dan knew that was a very bad sign. Nervous with a firearm spelled disaster. Dan tucked Abby behind him farther, even though he could feel her peeking out on occasion. "I checked all the data from hospitals and all the amputee parts come to this town. Why would anyone but zombies need those kind of replacements? They are either eating them or using them to prolong their evil fates."

"Evil?" Abby said, and Dan heard the outrage in her voice. So did the boys because they turned their attention back to her. Dan tried to grab her when she stepped from behind him, but she was too quick. "I'll have you know, you little idiots, that this town is full of some of the sweetest, kindest and most thoughtful people in the world. People, not anything else. You all need to get the hell out of here before the sheriff calls your parents."

"What?" the one with the baseball bat said. "You don't gotta call our parents."

"You have a gun." Abby was shrieking, and Dan winced along with the boys. "You, moron on the end, you put that damn thing on the ground."

"I... um..." The boy hesitated and looked to his friends.

"You heard Ms. Maples," Dan's mother yelled from the crowd in the tone that had sent dread down his spine since he was old enough to understand it meant he was in deep shit. "Put that down before you hurt someone. Why, it could even be one of your friends that you hurt."

"Or a kid!" Jeffery Townsend called, and Dan saw the zombie farmer and his wife had their family along, all tucked behind them. "I know you boys wouldn't want to hurt any kids."

"What if they're zombies, too?" the boy with the soil aerator filled with spikes said. "You know, like in the movie with the birthday party scene."

"Y'all are basing this off a movie?" Miss Martha stepped forward beside the sheriff with a platter of muffins. Together the two made many major decisions for the town, and though both denied it, they'd been a couple for some years. Dan was glad to see her step up and speak. "Boys,

put down the weapons, and after you have a nice long talk with the sheriff, you can come and enjoy some treats and see we're just people. Not a zombie among us, though it is Halloween. There may be a few who in poor taste choose to dress as one, but that's just make-up and costumes. You know the difference, don't you, boys?"

"Oh, heck." The boy with hedge trimmers tossed down his tool. "I knew we shouldn't have gotten out of the car. That's what I learned from the movie— that and zombies look way freaking creepier than any of these guys. Dang it, Will, I knew I shouldn't have listened to you."

The other boys laid down their weapons, saying the same thing to Will, who was the one still holding the gun. Everyone was relaxing a bit, but as long as the one on the end held the gun, Dan knew that no one would really go off guard. He moved Abby behind him once again, ignoring her protest.

"Will," Dan said, holding Abby still where she was safer. "Put the gun down. This can all go down as a misunderstanding if no one is hurt. We're real easygoing around here, and I think everyone would rather go on and enjoy the evening. Wouldn't you?"

The kid was skinny, zit covered and, to Dan's relief, smarter than he looked. He finally leaned down to lay the

gun on the ground.

Then the local construction office's door flew open and Drew staggered out in all his zombie finest. His face was slightly green, covered in sores, and he was dressed in rags. To make it worse, he was grunting and screaming like a crazy person.

"Drew, no! Don't—"

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

Dan's words were cut short by the sound of Will's gun. Abby watched from the corner of her eye as the sheriff and others tackled the teen, but she was already running to Drew. When she slid in beside him, the town doctor was there, applying pressure to the gushing chest wound.

"Oh, my gosh, how can I help?" Abby gathered some of the rags of Drew's costume to help stop the blood. "CPR, I know it."

"Of course you do," Dr. Stanley said calmly. "But that shot went straight through his heart, and we're already losing him. Look at that blood. Without a miracle surgery neither of us know how to do, this boy is going to die before any medical helicopter could even get here."

"Oh, Drew," she whimpered, checking his eyes, so like Dan's that it hurt her heart. The pupils were wide with shock, and he was completely unresponsive. The pain and blood loss were more than even a healthy young man could fight. "Hang in there, we'll figure this out."

"No, you'll fix this," Dr. Stanley replied. "Eddy ran to get Doc's emergency kit and will be— Here he is."

"But," she hesitated, even as the teenager set her huge tackle box beside her. "Did Dad ever make the change work on a gunshot like this? I thought they had to be mostly alive."

"Are you telling me you won't try?" the doctor challenged, and from behind her, a few of the women started weeping. Abby didn't know what to do. She didn't even know if Drew wanted to be a zombie. It was a very personal decision, and they'd never discussed it.

"Oh, God in heaven." The voice was familiar. Dan's mother. She was praying, and the practical, tough woman's voice cracked with pain and tears. That was all Abby needed to know what she had to do.

She broke open the tackle box, pulled on a pair of gloves, and looked Dr. Stanley in the eyes. "It's going to take more than a shot to make this work. I need you to make his heart work long enough to get the serum all the way through his system, and then we'll need to sew him back up."

Fire sparked in the older man's eyes along with hope. Dr. Stanley nodded, and Abby pulled out her supplies.

Abby didn't look up from the nearly dead man, but she knew the crowd needed to hear something. "Keep praying, everyone. We're going to try."

# CHAPTER NINE

"No cravings for human flesh. It just seems wrong to be a zombie and not want to eat someone's brains."

Abby rolled her eyes as Dan turned her around the dance floor. Her snug white milkman uniform wasn't the most flowing ensemble for dancing, but for the Halloween party, it had roped her third place in the costume contest. The win might have also had something to do with saving the party's guest of honor, though.

She squeezed Dan closer as she remembered how close they'd come to completely losing Drew. His heart had simply given out when the serum had only been half through his system. Abby had nearly burst into tears when she realized CPR wasn't even helping anymore, but Dr. Stanley had torn away more tissue and bone around the gunshot wound. With more determination than skill, he'd manually forced Drew's heart to pump until the serum had taken effect. Five hours later, Drew was perfectly fine, well, perfectly fine for a zombie who'd been shot in the chest not long before. He was sore, but there was nothing to keep him from his place at the bar, his ruined zombie costume replaced with jeans and a fresh shirt.

"I told you how proud I am of you, right?" Danny whispered in her ear as the music changed to something

faster even though his slow, sweet rhythm didn't alter.

"Yeah." The look in his eyes when he'd realized Drew would live would stay with her forever. Just remembering it made her throat tight because then she remembered the rest of the family and town. She wasn't an outsider anymore, and that meant in saving Drew, she'd saved one of her own. She'd thought she understood her father's work before, but now she would spend the rest of her life helping the town and its people because it was her home and they were *her* people.

"And I have something that belongs to you."

"Oh?" She frowned and pulled back in his arms. "My stuff? Do you mind holding my wallet and lip gloss a while longer? I don't want to carry my purse and these slacks are mighty tight."

"Honey, I don't mind holding your stuff and I've already ordered you a few more pairs of those pants," he said and laughed. "I think it's about time to get you home and into bed. I can already see you're wilting."

"Wilting, good word," she agreed and laid her head back on his hard, warm chest. "I'm exhausted, but I wasn't about to miss my first Halloween in Zombieville. That would have been just wrong."

"I suppose that's true." His fingers ran through her

hair and the bed he spoke of sounded even nicer. "But, now that you've had your taste of the festival, how about we get back to what we were discussing before the moron hunters came into town?"

"They were morons," she said bitterly. The three who hadn't done anything but follow and threaten had been let go with warnings. The triggerman, however, was in the town's jail, awaiting extradition to a larger facility for attempted murder. If there were a charge for blatant stupidity, Abby hoped the judge would throw that at the teen's pimpled face.

"Yes, but before that," he replied. The teasing there said she was missing something, not surprising with the fatigue that was already closing her eyes in Danny's safe, warm arms. "You said you would marry me, remember?"

"Oh hell, how could I forget?" She stopped even pretending to dance and pulled away from him. "You owe me my ring."

Dan threw his head back and laughed as he pulled the ring, sans case, from his pocket and slipped it on her finger. Abby had never felt so much love in a piece of jewelry. Her father had given her a necklace on her sixteenth birthday that she adored, but this ring from Danny held all the promises in the world. She couldn't wait until

the second one was in place and had a match on Danny's left hand.

"It's a tiny bit too big," she said and made a fist so it wouldn't fall off.

"Shoot, I'll get it fixed tomorrow," Danny promised. "Sorry about that, Abby. I thought I had it right on."

"It's very close, but I'll keep my fingers closed so I don't lose it." She looked up at him and burst out laughing. She was gasping for breath by the time she finally calmed herself down and fought herself not to blush at the scrutiny from the crowd. "Um, sorry, Danny, I was just thinking it was serendipitous that you didn't have time to put it on. Just imagine if I'd had it while I was working on Drew."

Dan's face split in a grin that halted fast. "Hell, I didn't even think of that. Maybe a necklace or something instead of a ring? I'd hate to have you lose it inside a zombie at work."

"Oh, no." She kept her fist tight and pulled it from his hand in case he decided to take it back. "I love it. We'll just size it, and I'll be extra careful. I want to wear your ring, Danny. I think I've been waiting my whole life to wear it."

He leaned down to kiss her just as she jumped and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. The crowd

Slow and Sweet

Stephanie Beck

cheered, but Abby didn't mind. She was in the arms of her man, safe in her new hometown, and surrounded by people she genuinely cared for. The future, even with the promise of being surrounded by zombies, was looking mighty bright.

#### The End

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Even before she understood what all the thrusting meant, Stephanie Beck loved reading romance. When the stories didn't end the way she wanted, writing her own was the perfect solution. From ridiculous humor to erotica, Stephanie loves being transported within a story. When she's not elbow deep in words, her husband and two daughters command her attention. After they are sleeping, she knits or bakes cookies... or squeezes in more writing. Visit www.stephaniebeck.net for free stories and excerpts. Stephanie loves to hear from readers. Email her at stephaniebeckauthor@gmail.com.

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