

A Small-Town Bride

Excerpt

Chapter One

Amy Lyndon's first clue that her life was about to change came at eleven forty-five on a sunny Friday, the last day of March, when Daddy stormed into her room without knocking. Luckily, Amy, who had just gotten out of bed, was wearing her bathrobe or there might have been an embarrassing father-daughter moment.

"I've had it up to here with you," Daddy said, gesturing wildly, his face as red as a glass of Bella Vista Vineyards Pinot Noir.

"What's the matter?" Amy kept her voice low and calm. She'd learned this trick from Mom, who had been an expert at handling Daddy's sudden, but infrequent, rages.

"What's the—" His words came to a sputtering stop as a vein popped from his forehead. Uh-oh. The vein thing was a bad sign. And his complexion had turned almost purple, closer to the color of Malbec than Pinot Noir.

"Daddy, calm down. You'll give yourself a stroke or something."

He spoke again in a voice that rattled Amy's bedroom windows. "Get dressed. Then get out."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want you out of this house by..." He checked his Rolex. "Noon. That gives you fifteen minutes. And if you're smart, you'll run straight to Grady Carson. I understand he's proposed. Congratulations."

"How did you know that?"

“Everyone knows it. You’ve been dating him for a year and a half, and he’s everything you need in a husband.”

Amy said nothing because Grady Carson was most definitely not everything she needed. Who knew he was planning to pop the question at Tammy’s wedding? Like from out of nowhere. She’d turned him down in no uncertain terms and kept her mouth shut about the whole thing. If Daddy knew about Grady’s proposal, then Grady must have told him.

Damn him. Damn both of them.

“Daddy, I don’t plan to—”

“Don’t tell me you don’t want to get married. Because, to be honest, Amy, I’m tired of you living off my goodwill. It’s time you go live off someone else’s.” Daddy waved a piece of paper in front of Amy’s nose, then pulled his reading glasses down from their resting place above his bushy eyebrows. The paper appeared to be an American Express bill. “You spent twelve hundred dollars on shoes last month? Really?”

“They were Jimmy Choos, and I—”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass who made them. Amy, your credit card bill last month was more than ten thousand dollars.”

“Oh? That much, huh?” She was bad with money, like Mom had been. Most of Daddy’s rages were precipitated by the arrival of credit card statements. This was a known fact.

“You’re twenty-eight, still unemployed, and living at home. This can’t go on any longer. Either accept Grady’s proposal or move out. Today.” He marched out of her bedroom.

She followed him out into the hallway. “You can’t make me go,” Amy said to his retreating back. “And you can’t force me to marry someone either.”

He turned, one eyebrow arched in that classic angry-daddy look. “Wanna bet? Now, get your things out of here before noon.”

“But the Z4 won’t hold all my stuff.” The sports car held two people, barely.

“Oh...that’s too bad. When you come back engaged to Grady, I’ll let you get your stuff. Until then, it’s *my* stuff. God knows I paid for it all, including the sports car.”

They stood with gazes locked for a moment. “I’m not marrying Grady. He’s an idiot.”

“No, he’s not. He’s made a fortune as a hedge fund manager, and that takes brains. Honestly, if you were more like your brothers or cousins we wouldn’t be having this discussion.” Daddy stopped yelling at her and strode down the hallway.

Amy didn’t argue any further; she’d heard Daddy’s complaints many times over the years. She just didn’t measure up like her brothers and her cousins, most of whom were super smart, had gone to Ivy League colleges, and completed law school. Amy was just...ordinary.

She returned to her room and stared at the clothes in her ginormous walk-in closet. She’d give Daddy a couple of hours to calm down about the credit card bill. That’s how Mom had always handled him. Tomorrow he would be his normal, happy self.

In the meantime, she needed to get out of the house.

She threw on a plain white tank top, a pair of Rag and Bone boyfriend jeans, her new Isabel Marant sneakers, and the black Burberry biker jacket that had most definitely contributed to the size of her Amex bill this month. Daddy needed to get over it. She only went shopping in New York twice a year. And besides, she’d had to go shopping—Tammy, one of her sorority sisters, needed someone to help her pull together her honeymoon wardrobe, and Amy had a killer eye for fashion.

Thoughts of Tammy and Evan off together on a three-week honeymoon tour of Paris, Rome, and Athens unleashed a wave of envy. She could have a honeymoon like that, but marrying Grady would be too high a price.

She headed out to the circular drive and fired up the BMW Z4. Fifteen minutes later, she took a seat at the Red Fern Inn, a two-hundred-year-old taproom and restaurant in downtown Shenandoah Falls. She waited a long time before Bryce Summerville, the inn's owner, came over to the table, wringing his hands.

"Miss Lyndon," he said in a deferential tone. "I'm sorry to ask this, but how do you intend to pay for your lunch today?"

"What?"

"Um, this is sort of embarrassing, but your father called not five minutes ago and told me not to accept your credit card."

"He did what?"

"He called me—"

"I heard you. I'm just having a hard time believing you. How did he know I was getting lunch here?"

"You get lunch here quite frequently."

That was true.

"He told me he's canceled your card."

Heat climbed up Amy's face. "I'll pay with cash, and I'd like the eggs Benedict." Her appetite had disappeared, but she couldn't get up and walk out now. Not with Viola Ingram and Faye Appleby, card-carrying members of the Shenandoah Falls gossip association, sitting at the adjacent table listening in.

Amy waved at Viola. “Hey, Ms. Ingram. How’re you doing today?”

“Just fine and dandy,” the senior citizen said in a bright voice. “I heard that you and Grady Carson are about to make a big announcement.”

Oh, great. Everyone in town must know about Grady’s proposal. “No, Ms. Ingram, no big announcements are pending,” she said. She was going to kick Grady’s ass the next time she saw him.

When her lunch finally arrived, Amy could only choke down two or three bites. She sat there steaming about Grady and Daddy for a long time and then paid her check with the last of the cash in her wallet.

She strolled down Liberty Avenue to the Bank of America branch, where she visited the ATM only to discover that the machine wouldn’t give her any money. The bank said she was overdrawn, but Daddy had deposited her allowance last week. Daddy was a joint signer on the account, which made it easier for him to transfer funds. And that’s when it struck her, literally like a hammer to the head, that what Daddy could transfer in, he could just as easily transfer out.

How dare he?

She drove back to the four-thousand-square-foot California contemporary that she shared with her father. The house sat up on the ridge not far from Bella Vista Vineyard, the winery Daddy had started thirty-five years ago, before Virginia wines had become all the rage.

She stormed up the front walk and discovered a locked front door. That was surprising since Daddy’s office was located in the house, and even if he’d gone up to the vineyard, Lucy, the housekeeper, was always around.

She dug out her house key, but it wouldn’t work the lock. What the hell? When had she started hallucinating? She pinched herself.

Ouch.

In desperate need for reassurance, she reached for her iPhone, but it might as well have been a brick. She had no bars of service.

That's when the panic set in. She ran the short distance up the drive to the Bella Vista Vineyard's headquarters, and by the time she arrived, gasping for air, her panic had morphed into a dark sinking hole in the middle of her stomach.

Ozzie Cassano, Daddy's chief winemaker, greeted her in the courtyard right by the entrance to the tasting room. It was almost as if he'd been waiting for her.

"Where's Daddy and Lucy?" she asked without preamble.

"Lucy's on vacation."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning. And your father isn't here either."

Ozzie's soft Italian accent failed to calm her. "What do you mean? Daddy's always here unless he's at home or at Charlotte's Grove."

"I'm sorry. He told me to tell you he's taking a vacation, too."

OMG! She hadn't seen this one coming. "Not with Lucy, I hope."

"I don't know, miss."

"Look, Ozzie, can I borrow your keys to the house? Lucy and Daddy locked it when they left, and my key didn't work."

Ozzie stared down at his dusty boots and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm very sorry, Miss Lyndon," he said. "Your father, he told me you were not to be let into the house under any circumstances. He also told me you were getting married soon." Ozzie finally looked up and flashed his gold fillings. "Congratulations."

#####

If there'd been a pay phone anywhere in Shenandoah Falls, Virginia, Amy could have called Grady and demanded that he rescue her. But pay phones were like dinosaurs, totally extinct.

And if she'd had the forethought to fill up the Z4's tank last night, she could have driven herself to DC and rescued herself. But she hadn't filled the tank because she'd planned to do it this morning.

Proving that procrastination could be a mean bitch. Or maybe procrastination had saved her from making a bad decision.

She parked in the town lot and spent the afternoon thinking things through.

Daddy assumed she would find an easy way out of this predicament. At the very least, he would expect her to run up to Charlotte's Grove and throw herself on Aunt Pam's mercy, which would be about the same as calling Grady and telling him she'd changed her mind about marrying him. Or maybe he expected her to call her brothers, Andrew and Edward, but Grady was their friend and landlord. So asking her brothers for help—assuming she could beg a telephone for that purpose—was out, too.

She was not going to take the easy way. She'd show Daddy. She would sleep in her car.

This decision proved more challenging than it sounded. The Z4 had two bucket seats with a console between them, and neither of the seats reclined enough to make sleeping easy. Plus the sunny March day turned into a bitterly cold March night. Could a person die from exposure in forty-degree weather? She would have asked Siri if her iPhone had been working.

By the time the sky began to turn pink, she felt as if she'd won a moral victory even though it was hard to feel morally victorious when you were starving, had to pee, and didn't have a bathroom handy.

Lucky for her, Gracie's Diner was located a block away from the garage, opened early, and had a bathroom.

Amy had never set foot in the diner before eleven in the morning, so it surprised her when she opened the door and discovered no other customers. Damn. Her bathroom plan depended on Gracie being too busy to notice Amy slinking in to use the bathroom.

Instead, Gracie was on her the moment Amy stepped through the door. "Morning, Amy. You're here early today. You want the usual?"

So awkward. How could Amy use the diner's bathroom and not purchase anything? But what other choice did she have? She was in danger of wetting her pants. "Uh, I'm on my way out of town," she lied, "but I needed the restroom."

Gracie cocked her head and gave Amy a once-over. Oh my God, she probably looked like a mess after trying to sleep in a Z4. Not knowing what else to do, and needing to pee really bad, Amy turned her back on Gracie and walked to the ladies' room with her shoulders straight.

She was a Lyndon, a member of a prominent, wealthy, and influential family. She did not need to beg for the chance to pee in a toilet instead of somewhere outside. The thought of peeing in the woods left her trembling. How did a girl do that, anyway? And what about toilet paper? Since she'd never been a Girl Scout, she didn't know the answers to these suddenly existential questions.

The diner's bathroom was basic but clean. She did her business, washed her hands and face, and gave her hair a quick comb. She felt much better.

Hungry, but better. She lingered for a while, hoping other customers might show up and trying to figure out how to leave the diner without humiliating herself. She'd just started running various scenarios in her head when the truth descended like an atom bomb.

She was homeless. And penniless (almost—she had fifty cents in her purse).

How did a person do poor, hungry, and homeless? Amy had never wanted for anything in her life. Maybe she should say sayonara to her hard-won moral victory. She could always borrow Gracie's phone and call Grady.

A knock sounded on the door, followed by Gracie's voice. "Hon, are you all right? You've been in there a while, and I..."

Amy opened the door. "I'm fine." Her voice wobbled. She would not ask to borrow the phone. There had to be another way.

"No, I don't think so," Gracie said. "You come out and have your eggs and bacon."

Oh crap. What was she supposed to do now?

"I...I...don't. I mean I can't..." She let go of a long, trembling breath. "Daddy locked me out of the house yesterday and told me I had to marry Grady Carson. Then he took all the money out of my checking account. And I probably should call Grady, but I have to borrow your phone." The words came out in a terrible, hoarse whisper.

She expected Gracie to yell at her for using the bathroom without having any intention of buying food. Or, worse yet, to take her into the back room and hand her a phone. But instead Gracie draped her arm over Amy's shoulder. "Come get your breakfast. You can pay me for it later, after you sort things out with your father. And no woman should ever marry someone she has second thoughts about. Shame on your daddy."

The tense muscles in Amy's neck and shoulders relaxed as Gracie led her to the counter, where a plate of eggs and bacon awaited. "Eat your breakfast. You'll feel better."

Amy did as she was told, downing the eggs and bacon like a starving person. She had no idea where her next meal would come from, so she allowed Gracie to refill her coffee cup several times while the diner filled up with the usual Saturday crowd.

Pippa Custis, the owner of Ewe and Me, the yarn shop in town, came in for a bowl of oatmeal.

Walter Braden came in holding hands with his new wife, the former Poppy Marchand. For a couple of old people, they were sweet. They ordered two big breakfasts and spent the entire time gazing into each other's eyes.

Alicia Mulloy, the hygienist at Dr. Dinnen's office, ordered three different kinds of donuts. Amy wondered if Dr. Dinnen knew about Alicia's sugar habit.

And then Dusty McNeil strolled through the door and turned Saturday into Man Candy Monday. Wow. He was like some unholy combination of Thor and Captain America all rolled into one gorgeous example of maleness.

Gracie swooped down on him with a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon, as if she'd been expecting his arrival. He gave Gracie a smile full of laugh lines and dimples and white teeth. And then he turned toward Amy.

Unlike the other customers, he didn't pretend she was invisible. Oh no. He gave her a long, assessing gaze that made Amy's pulse jump. Dusty McNeil had a badass reputation as a player who preferred the showgirls and cocktail waitresses who worked up at the casinos in Charles Town, West Virginia.

So why was he ogling her?

She had no idea, but she returned the favor. Who wouldn't enjoy gazing at that chiseled face or those bright baby blues or all that golden blond hair?

And that's when a crazy idea popped into her desperate head. Maybe she could invite herself over to his place for some Netflix and chill. Spending a night with him wouldn't be much of a sacrifice. And it would probably be way more fun (and warmer) than sleeping in the Z4.

Or sleeping with Grady for that matter.

But no. Initiating a booty call would not be the right next step. She'd chosen to sleep in her car instead of falling back on a man. She'd taken a principled position. So she pushed the ridiculous idea of sleeping with Dusty McNeil out of her mind and concentrated on her coffee mug while she tried to figure out what her next step ought to be.

She came up with exactly nothing.

"Y'all seem to be busy up at Eagle Hill Manor these days," Gracie said to Dusty. And since Amy didn't have anything better to do, she eavesdropped.

"Yep. Ever since that article in *Brides*. Willow's hiring another event planner. Know anyone who might be interested?"

Gracie shook her head. "No, but I'll keep my eye out."

A job.

Why hadn't Amy thought of that before?

A job would solve all her problems. And becoming an event planner sounded like the perfect fit except for the fact that she had zero real work experience. But she had been her sorority's social secretary and had planned all kinds of themed parties and charitable events. She'd even had a hand in helping several of her sorority sisters with their wedding plans.

This was perfect. She'd get a job instead of a husband. And wouldn't that blow Daddy's mind?