

Worthless Treasures Sample

Chapter 1

Diamond Lange could make dust and clutter disappear from any home—except Eva Malone’s. What does one call a professional cleaner/organizer whose own mother’s house might be classified as a minor landfill? A failure, that’s what.

As Eva’s house came into view, Di vowed once again to avoid criticizing her housekeeping habits, or lack of. Such promises had yet to be kept.

The car rocked over driveway pavement cracked and broken by roots from an ancient live oak tree that shaded the house from the blistering Texas sun. This being late April, the summer heat was getting an early start. At least the white siding was in good shape, thanks to her husband, Mitch’s patching and painting last fall. If only the inside of the house looked as good.

She sighed, grabbed the pharmacy bag from the front seat, and hurried past a struggling azalea bush. The yard looked dry, the grass sparse, especially under the trees, and the beds needed some fresh color. But all that would have to wait. Her next appointment was in forty-five minutes, so this would be a short visit.

Di knocked twice on the front door of the older ranch-style home, steeled herself against the mess inside, then twisted the knob and shouted, “It’s me.” Eva’s increasing difficulty in getting around prompted her to leave the door unlocked so visitors could enter easily. Di prayed no unsavory characters would come to visit. Then again, anyone intending harm to Eva Malone would first have to surmount the obstacle course inside. And the prospect of wading through the debris for anything valuable would certainly deter any thieves.

Di pushed open the door and grimaced at the jam-packed living room. The old piano that took up space but hadn’t uttered a purposeful note in decades held piles of outdated magazines, a couple of plastic eggs left over from Easter, and a Christmas snow globe. Newspapers, calendars, and other useless knickknacks littered every square inch and contributed to the odor of dust and mildew. Even the abstract art on the walls looked as if someone had simply framed a well-used drop cloth. But what did she know about art?

Eva, still in her frumpy bathrobe, strained to push her ample body out of her worn recliner with its frayed and thread-bare upholstery. Her arms gave way, sending her back onto the faded seat cushion. She inched forward to the edge and tried again.

“Would you like some help?” Di moved closer to support her efforts. Her heart ached watching Eva struggle. Not so long ago, the woman was a dynamo, hard to keep up with.

Eva waved her off and nearly lost the battle again. “I can”—huff, puff—“do it.” She stood upright, as much as her bent frame would allow, and glared at Di. “What happened to Aunt Glori? I thought she was coming.”

Di held up the pharmacy bag. “She’s showing a house. Asked me to pick up your medicines. Do you want them here or should I put them in the kitchen?” The bag rattled when she shook it.

“I’ll take them.” Holding onto the recliner, Eva reached across a footstool stacked with books.

“Aunt Glori said your power is out. Has it been off long?” Di flicked the light switch. Nothing. She tried the lamp beside the recliner, but it remained dark. Despite the outside warmth, the house was a little on the cool side. “Are you chilly? Would you like me to get your sweater?”

Eva waved away the offer and shuffled a few steps to set the bag of medicines on the end table beside her recliner. Pressing one hand to the back of her hip, she straightened to her five-foot height.

“I told Gloria I’d take care of it myself. She wasn’t supposed to mention it.”

“She’s only trying to help, Mother. Mind if I go out and check the breakers?”

“I already looked.”

Di doubted Eva would’ve made it all the way out to the garage, but her mother detested appearing less than competent. “I’m sure you did, but I’ll recheck just to be sure. While I’m out there, I’ll look around to see if I can figure out what’s going on.”

Stepping lightly, Di maneuvered around the landmines of papers, books, and other detritus as she proceeded to the kitchen, biting her tongue to keep from starting the familiar argument that never brought about any change. A sour smell emanated from the kitchen. Or had something died? She wrinkled her nose.

Inside the garage, she automatically reached to flip the light switch, then shook her head. *Duh, no power.* She used her phone to light the way around the perimeter of a musty garage as full of junk as the house. A sneezing fit briefly interrupted her progress.

All the breakers were intact, but she flipped each one to be certain. She let herself out the door to the side yard and checked the power line to the house. Nothing appeared amiss, other than a garbage bin on its side. She righted it and returned it to the driveway side of the house. Letting herself in the back door, she wiped her feet on a faded towel and made a mental note to buy a doormat the next time she went to the store. Adding one more thing to an already overflowing house might not be wise but at least a mat was useful. Eva would love one of the cute ones she'd seen at the craft store.

"Everything looks okay. Have you asked any neighbors if they have power?" Di twisted the knob on the electric stove and held her hand above the burner while surveying the messy counter. A white envelope peeked out from under a mound of restaurant and real estate flyers. The envelope bore a red ink stamp that read "Final Notice." Di snatched it from the pile, glanced at the return address, and tore it open.

"Mother? When was the last time you paid your electric bill?" She stumbled through the narrow trail and handed the notice to Eva. "Have you paid this?"

"Of course, I—" Eva backed her head away, adjusted her glasses, and studied the paper. Her forehead wrinkled and she turned away. "Where did you find that? I've been looking all over for it."

"So, you haven't paid it."

Eva scooped down in her recliner. Her gaze darted around the room. "I set it down somewhere, then couldn't find it when I went to write the check. Figured I'd come across it sooner or later."

Di exhaled her frustration. "It was buried under a pile of advertisements. You wouldn't lose important bills if you'd get rid of all this junk."

"Don't call my stuff junk."

"Restaurant and real estate flyers that you'll never use, or need, are junk." Di picked up a yellowed newspaper from a nearby stool. "And a three-year-old newspaper is junk. Why are you keeping it?"

“There’s something in there I want to read.” Eva attempted to snatch the paper from her, but Di whipped it behind her back.

“Tell me what it is, and I’ll cut it out for you. There’s no reason to keep the whole paper for one article.”

Eva put a finger to her cheek. “There might have been more than one. I don’t remember. I’d have to look through it.”

“And when were you planning to do that?”

“As soon as I have time.” Eva pushed herself forward to the edge of her chair.

Di’s earlier promise not to criticize flitted through her mind. She ignored it when her foot caught on a nearby stack of magazines, and they cascaded in all directions. An old TV Guide landed at her feet. Di picked it up and held it out to Eva.

“The information in here is outdated. It’s useless and needs to go.”

Eva grabbed it and riffled the pages. “I wanted to read the article from the front cover.”

Di gritted her teeth. “Mother, how can you live like this?”

Eva jabbed her finger at Di. “You know I don’t like being called that.”

“And you know I don’t like you living in the middle of such a mess.”

With more energy than she’d shown earlier, Eva pushed herself up and glared.

“It’s my house.” She bent over to straighten the magazines, but halfway down she gripped the arm of the recliner while her other hand went to her lower back. Rising slowly, she said, “I’ll get those later.”

“This is not a healthy way to live.” Di squatted to gather and restack the publications.

“Do I look sick?” Eva patted her Clairol-red hair with its white roots and raised a thickly penciled eyebrow.

“Not all illnesses are obvious. Speaking of which, how’s your blood pressure? The pharmacist mentioned your meds have been increased.”

Eva’s shoulders slouched. “Doc says I need to lose weight, but what does he know? He’s not even old enough to drive. How am I supposed to lose weight when it hurts to move?”

Di stared at the *Southern Living* magazine in her hands. Her throat tightened as she considered the difficulties that accompanied Eva’s age and health. Squinting at the 2015 date on the magazine, she shook her head and softened her voice.

“What if we cleared out some of this stuff to give you more space? I think you’d be happier with room to move around in.”

“Who says I’m not happy?” Eva nudged a stray periodical toward Di with her foot.

Di topped the stack with a *Reader’s Digest* and slid the pile farther away from the narrow traffic lane. Arguing only made Eva more obstinate. She’d try a different approach. Brushing the dust from her hands, she motioned for Eva to sit and settled cross-legged on the floor near her feet. Di willed her voice to a conciliatory tone.

“Won’t you please let me work with you, Eva? We can at least organize your things so you can find them easier. Other people trust me to do that for them.”

Eva sniffed. “Your idea of organizing is throwing things away.” She reached back for the armrests and aimed her backside onto the seat of her oversized recliner. “You were always good at making things disappear. You should work with that woman who flips houses.”

“Is that all I am? A cleaning lady?” Di quelled her rising irritation. “I’m a businesswoman, Mother, same as the house flipper. I have employees who do the cleaning now. I do the organizing. People hire me to put things in order. Sometimes that does include getting rid of stuff that’s no longer useful or necessary.”

She pushed aside a pile of folded clothes lying on the couch and moved onto the sagging cushions. The odd assortment of apparel beside her included the red plaid jumper she’d worn for her fifth-grade school picture. Speaking of no longer useful or necessary . . .

Breathing deep to control her anger, she leaned forward. “I worry about you, Eva. What if you catch your foot on something and fall? You could hit your head, break an arm or a hip. What if you need to get out quickly? All the clutter and junk in here makes the house a real fire hazard.”

Pointing an arthritic finger at her, Eva narrowed her eyes. “Leave it alone. When I’m gone, you can throw everything away. But until then this is my house and my stuff.”

“Fine.” Palms up in surrender, Di rose to her feet. She was finished. No more arguing. “If that’s the way you want it, you can have it.”

“This is the way I want it. Although when the time comes, I do have a few things I don’t want you to throw away. A few . . . treasures.”

“Like what? The artwork on your walls? Your jewelry?”

“No, I don’t care what you do with those. I’ll make a list for you. But you must promise you’ll give them to people who will cherish them like I do.”

A list—as likely to get lost in the mess as the electric bill.

The pharmacy bag caught Di’s eye, and a shiver of alarm passed through her. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Did you get bad news from the doctor?”

“Psh.” Eva waved away the suggestion. “Nothing like that, but at my age, you just never know.” She fixed a steady gaze on Di. “But I want your promise.”

If Di had her way right now, she’d throw out the mostly-burned candles, the bag of peppermint candies so old they had melted and stuck together, and the cheap knickknack from the local gift shop that bore a Bible verse. She had to remind herself this wasn’t her house.

“All right, I promise. But Eva,” Di sighed, “this clutter chokes the life out of me. I can’t even catch a deep breath.” She sucked in as much air as she could. “I’ll do what you ask. But if you’re not willing to clean all this out, I’ll only come back inside this house if it’s an emergency.”

Eva’s eyes glinted and she raised her chin. “If that’s the way you want it—”

“It’s not the way I want it, Mother. I want to come and spend time with you. But you’d rather have your clutter than your own daughter.”

Eva’s mouth took on a firm set. “I guess that makes us two of a kind, doesn’t it? Neither of us is willing to give up our comfort for the other.”

“It’s not the same thing, Mother.”

“Isn’t it?” She shook her finger at Di. “I don’t appreciate you coming in here telling me what to do with my own house. What if I did that to you? If it bothers you so much, then just leave.”

Thrown out of her own mother’s house?

Di stomped to the door and yanked it open. “Do you want me to contact the power company for you?”

“I told Gloria I’d take care of it, and I will. You don’t need to do a thing.”

Without saying good-bye, Di closed the door firmly and inhaled the fresh air. She mumbled all the way to her car. “House is a death trap. She clings to all that useless junk like it’s the gold of Fort Knox.” She could almost recite the lines from their repeated arguments, going over the same things time after time.

Was it so unreasonable to expect a 79-year-old woman to change? She shuddered to think of Eva falling, lying alone for hours or days, unable to call for help. Or burning to death in a fire. She resisted even imagining that horror, but she'd never forgive herself if such a tragedy occurred.

People would naturally ask who allowed her to live in such deplorable conditions. What would happen when they found out the person responsible was not only her daughter, but also the owner/operator of Diamond Cleaning and Organizing?

Her hand shook as she pressed the button to start the engine. She hated leaving on such a bitter note. Should she go back in and say a proper good-bye? Maybe even scoot a few more things farther from Eva's path? She recalled Eva's finger pointing and the order to leave it alone.

All right then.

Di backed out of the driveway, realizing for the first time how few neighbors Eva might have called regarding the power. She drove slowly through the neighborhood, the number of vacant houses finally registering in her brain. Torn screens on broken windows, trash strewn in front yards, and spray-painted gang symbols on doors attested to the presence of vandals and those unsavory characters she'd feared.

What had happened to this solid middle-class neighborhood where she grew up? A downturn in the economy had resulted in many of the houses being snapped up by investors who turned them into rentals. Those hadn't been kept up and showed signs of age and neglect. But why were so many now vacant?

With the corresponding rise in crime, Di had begged and pleaded with Eva to move, but she refused to leave the small, three-bedroom home she'd occupied for nearly a half-century. And despite concerns for Eva's safety, Diamond hated the thought of moving all that junk.

Even cleaning ladies had limits.

Chapter 2

In contrast to the jungle at Eva's house, Di's newest client lived in a pleasant open meadow.

Alice McCormack led Di into the living room of her large, two-story home in Waco's historic Castle Heights neighborhood. Floor-to-ceiling windows revealed a landscaped yard with colorful flowers in various planters and beds. Inside cushioned chairs formed a cozy semi-circle around the fieldstone hearth. Di stepped between them to examine the matching Oriental tapestries hanging on either side of the fireplace.

A trim, white-haired woman in her 80s, Alice possessed a posture and bearing that left no doubt about her self-confidence, yet without the arrogance and overbearing attitude Di had encountered in a few clients.

"I've decided to move to a condominium in that new retirement community." Alice's jewel-bedecked hand rested on a seat back.

Di turned from the tapestries. "The one that overlooks Lake Waco?"

"Yes. Obviously, I'll need to downsize, and I'd like your help."

"How big is the condo?" Di dug her stockinged toes into the plush white carpeting, having slipped her shoes off at the door.

"It's a two-bedroom, smaller than this first floor. I've offered my children anything they might want but things are so different nowadays. No one wants heavy furniture, fine china, or silver place settings anymore." A frown tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"Giving your kids first choice is a good start. Next, you'll want to make a couple of lists—one for everything you definitely don't want and another for what you do want to take with you."

Alice nodded her understanding, then led the way through a modern kitchen into the formal dining room.

An antique buffet caught Di's attention. "What a beautiful piece of furniture. Is it walnut?"

"Yes, a family heirloom on my husband's side. He passed away last year. Worked for an oil company back when they moved their engineers around every few years."

"I'm sorry about your husband." Di examined the buffet. "Will you be keeping this?"

Alice hesitated, then shook her head. “It wouldn’t fit. I’ll see if any of his extended relatives might want it.”

“If not, I can give you a list of antique and collectible dealers who might give you something for it.”

Alice continued up the stairs and pointed out each bedroom and bath as they passed. Di observed the rooms with an eye to assessing the work.

“Was it hard on your family to move around so often?”

“Sometimes, but we enjoyed seeing different parts of the world. And the frequent moves required me to keep our possessions to a minimum. Until he retired and we settled here.”

Di stopped to admire a small teardrop-shaped bottle on a dresser. “Is this for perfume?” Gold leaf ringed the bottom and top of the pedestal base while the purple glass body held an etched leaf and berry design. A purple topper rose to a steeple tipped with a clear bead.

“That’s from our time in Egypt. It’s hand-blown glass.” Alice picked it up, pulled out the stopper, and handed the two pieces to Di.

“It’s beautiful. So delicate.” Di sniffed the bottle but detected no scent.

“You can put perfume in it, but I’ve only used it for decoration. Keep it if you’d like.”

“Oh no.” Di replaced the stopper and handed it back, but Alice pushed it away.

“It’s not going with me. You appreciate its beauty, so take it.”

“But it’s small. Are you sure you don’t want to keep it?”

“I’ll keep the memory of it.” Alice smiled, looking pleased with herself. “And if I happen to lose the memory, I won’t miss it anyway.”

Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the kitchen window splashing lilac-colored hues from the perfume bottle across the counters, the leaf pattern distorted in the refracted light. What a difference between Alice and Eva. The two might as well be day and night, summer and winter, ice cream and kale.

Eva’s comment about making things disappear came to mind while Di unpacked the groceries she’d picked up on the way home. Not the first time she’d disparaged Di’s profession, but it stung. Every time. Di stiffened her shoulders and spoke her rebuttal into the empty kitchen.

“If I hadn’t spent half my life cleaning up after you, Eva, maybe I could’ve accomplished something more worthy of your respect.” She plunked the soup cans on the counter with a

thwack, then wrapped a package of chicken breasts and shoved it into the freezer. Having loaded her arms with as many boxes and cans as she could carry, she entered the walk-in pantry and arranged them on the shelves.

Hmmm. Maybe she should move the soups next to the canned tomatoes. The pasta boxes needed straightening. And what's a can of black beans doing among the pinto beans?

A door slammed.

"Di?" Mitch poked his head into the pantry. "Uh-oh. Re-organizing?"

"Not exactly." She kissed Mitch and quickly relocated the black beans before following him back to the bedroom. "How was your day?"

"I closed two sales, one on a car and the other a pickup. And I made top sales associate again this month."

"Congratulations." She hugged him, and they exchanged another kiss, his breath holding a latent hint of coffee. "Does that mean I can start planning a Hawaiian vacation?"

She loved hearing his laugh. That full-on smile was what first attracted her, along with his sense of humor that took the edge off her tendency to be too serious. Touches of gray traced the dark edges of hair at his temples, giving him a young George Clooney look.

While Mitch exchanged his work pants for running shorts, Di related the story of Eva's power being shut off. She followed behind him, flipping a pant leg that hung over the edge of the hamper and straightening the socks in his drawer.

"I told her I'm not going back unless there's an emergency. And then she kicked me out of her house." She pushed the drawer closed.

Mitch stopped unbuttoning his shirt and winced. "Are you sure you want to do handle it that way? I mean, her health isn't great and she's not getting any younger."

"Her house isn't getting any cleaner, either. She won't listen when I tell her how dangerous it is to live with all that clutter."

Mitch hesitated only a moment. "You do know your perfectionism is showing, right?" He shrugged out of his shirt and tossed it in the hamper.

"I'm not a perfectionist. I just like things neat. And I'm so frustrated." She adjusted one of his shirts so it hung evenly on the hanger. "Be glad I'm not into retail therapy."

“Oh, I’m very happy about that. But if you don’t like going into her house, I think you’ll need to take her out. Often. For a meal or a show or something. Anything. You don’t want to regret this when she’s gone for good.”

“Well, that’s a cheery thought.” A niggles of conviction made her pause. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll call tomorrow and see if she wants to go for lunch on Saturday.”

A door slammed again, and Julianna called out, “Mom? Dad?”

“We’re back in the bedroom.” Di stifled a groan. “Doesn’t anyone in this family know how to close a door softly?”

Mitch grinned and bent over to tie the laces on his running shoes. “Only two years before she’s off to college. Then you’ll miss those slamming doors.”

Julianna bounded into the room, dropped her backpack, and threw her arms in the air. “I’m up for the lead role in the children’s theater production.”

“Congratulations!” Di applauded. “Is this for Cinderella?”

Julianna nodded, but her expression clouded. “It’s between Briana and me. She’d be fantastic, but her parents are threatening to make her drop out of the play because of her grades. I feel so bad for her.”

“That is a shame,” Di said, “but grades are lots more important than a play.”

“I know.” Julianna bit her lip. “But if she has to drop out, I get the part.” A smile returned to her face and her feet did a happy dance. “Can you imagine me as Cinderella?”

Mitch walked over, hugged her, and planted a kiss on her forehead. “If you need to do any research for this role, I’m sure Mom has some floors that need mopping. You could clean out the fireplace ashes, sweep the garage—”

“Da-ad.” Julianna swatted at his arm, but he sidestepped and headed for the door.

“I’m going out for a run. Back before supper. Make sure it’s on time, Cinderella.”

Di pointed to the door and she and Julianna chorused, “Go!”

Julianna bounced on her toes. Her chestnut-colored ponytail bobbed and swished across her shoulders. “I’m so excited, Mom. If I do well, I’ll have a good chance of getting more parts, maybe even acting in one of the adult productions.”

“Think you can handle practices with homework?”

“I’ll make it work. I’ve dreamed of a starring role since forever.” She hugged herself then ran to answer the doorbell. “I’ll get it. It’s probably Namiko. Wait ’til I tell him.”

Di stared after her daughter, listening to her excited report and the soft response of her latest boyfriend.

Absently, she fingered the diamond on her necklace, a gift from her parents when she was around Julianna's age. Had she entertained such grand dreams at that age? Or had she been too much of a Cinderella, working hard to stay ahead of Eva's clutter? Maybe Mother was right. She could've done more than organizing people's homes, if only she'd learned to flip houses rather than clean them.

"Is it too much to ask a nearly 80-year-old to change a habit they've had for most of their life?" Standing in the doorway of their ensuite bathroom, Di spoke through the mint foam in her mouth and waved her toothbrush in the air. "I mean, she's been like this to some extent as far back as I can remember. Dad helped keep it in check when he was alive, but after he passed away, the mess kept expanding, creeping into every room, every corner." She hurried to rinse her mouth while Mitch headed for the bed.

"Could it be related to the depression you said she was treated for after he died?" Mitch pulled back the pale green duvet and climbed into bed. The lamp on the nightstand cast a soft glow over his reading glasses and a couple of books that Di kept trying to relocate to the bookcase. He plumped the pillow behind him and relaxed against it, spreading his arm toward Di.

"Maybe, but I think it's more than that." She snuggled in beside him, catching a whiff of the sporty soap he showered with. "I was always a little embarrassed to have friends over because of the mess. But they all loved Eva and never said anything about it. She always excused it, saying creativity is messy and, as an artist, she couldn't help it. Now they say it's actually a mental health issue, related to obsessive-compulsive disorders."

Mitch yawned. "It's amazing she stayed organized enough to teach her classes at the university. Must've been creative enough to wing it."

"Or she had taught so long she simply knew what to do." She turned her head and gazed up at him. His eyes were closed, but his breathing wasn't the slow, steady pace of sleep. And his arm hadn't yet relaxed around her.

"I noticed another vacant house a couple of blocks from Eva's. The gangs have already claimed it. I wish I could persuade her to move."

“That would upset all her stuff.” He opened his eyes and met her gaze. “But she may not have a choice. One of the women in our sales office owned a rental in that neighborhood. She says a redevelopment plan is in the works.”

Di pulled away and sat up straight. “As in tearing down the old houses and building big fancy new ones?”

“Something like that. Has Aunt Glori mentioned anything about it?”

“Not a word.”

“I wonder if she even knows. According to Yvonne, it’s all been rather hush-hush. When I said my mother-in-law lived over there, she asked how much they offered her.”

Di blinked. “Eva hasn’t mentioned any offers, but I doubt she would’ve accepted no matter how much they promised. She has enough to live on and that’s the home she and Dad bought when they were young marrieds.”

“Yvonne says the powers-that-be held a meeting with homeowners to discuss the plans, but by then all the permits had been approved. She claims the meeting was merely a courtesy to let everyone know what was coming and give them time to sell out on their own.”

Di pondered the news. “I hate to think of our long-time neighbors and friends being displaced. The few who still live there are elderly like Eva.”

“But it could be the opportunity you’re looking for to get Eva into a safer neighborhood. If her house is within the boundary of the development, she’ll have to move by a certain deadline. And that way, you won’t be the bad guy forcing her to leave her house.” His arm still outstretched, Mitch wiggled his fingers, inviting her back, and she snuggled into him again.

“It’s sad to imagine the house, the community where I grew up all gone.”

Mitch bent his head toward her. “I thought you’d be happy. You wanted her house cleaned out.”

“Cleaned, yes. Not destroyed. Isn’t there anything we can do to stop it? Protest to the mayor or someone?”

“Yvonne and her husband checked into it but, as far as they can tell, everything was done within regulations. It’s all settled. You could try complaining to the city council, but I doubt it would do any good at this point.”

“You know I’d love to get Eva out of there, but this seems so wrong. The elderly have no power against progress and development. If I were mayor, I’d—” Now there was an idea that would elevate her status from lowly cleaning woman. “Maybe that’s what I should do.”

Mitch threw back his head and hooted. “You want to run for mayor?” He snickered again and wiped his eyes.

Di sat up and backhanded his arm. “What’s so funny? You don’t think I’m capable?”

“It’s not that.” He still looked amused. “You’ve never shown any interest in holding a public office. You don’t know the first thing about running a town.”

“I can learn. Or am I only a cleaning woman to you, too?”

His smile faded. “Where’d that come from?” Shadows gathered on his face as he studied her. “I’ve never seen you as less than capable, Diamond. Are you serious about this?”

“Why not?”

“For one thing,” he leaned toward her and ran his hand down her arm, “do you want the pressure of running the city *and* a business *and* being mom to an active teenager? Campaigning by itself is a lot of exhausting work.” He took her hands in his. “Honey, I know you could do it if you put your mind to it, but I’ve never known you to have any aspirations of that sort.”

He tried to pull her close again. When she resisted, he said, “Maybe you should first try for a position on city council. Run to represent Eva’s district. You’ll accomplish more that way than being mayor.”

That made sense, but his mocking laughter still rang in her ears. She moved to her side of the bed, punched her pillow, and pulled the covers up, her back to him.

“I’ll think about it.”

Chapter 3

City council or mayor?

Di contemplated the question while driving through a light fog the next morning on her way to the car dealership. Did she really want to get into public office? Deal with local politics? Wasn't running a business enough of a challenge?

Clutching the file of paperwork Mitch had forgotten at home, she headed inside and found him in the showroom with a customer. She stepped aside to wait until he finished. An aroma of coffee sifted through the air as a woman approached her with a steaming mug. Her name tag, and her cup, read Liza.

"You must be Mitch's wife," she said. "He mentioned you'd be coming by. I can make sure he gets that, so you don't have to wait around." She took the packet from Di's hand, stuffed it under her arm, and walked over to chat with another salesman.

Di hesitated. Liza's impersonal boldness touched a nerve, tempting Di to snatch the packet back and insist on handing it off herself. But best not to make waves among Mitch's coworkers and trust Liza's promise to get it to Mitch. Swallowing her annoyance, she threw a quick glance at Mitch and his customer on the way out. He broke from the customer just long enough to wink and give her a quick smile.

A stop at the grocery store for that one item she'd forgotten took longer than expected. The tiered racks of personal shoppers clogged the aisles, but she managed to squeeze between them to the jars of salsa. Another woman stopped beside her with a toddler squirming in her cart.

"Aren't you Julianna's mom?" The woman opened a box of fruit gummies and handed the boy a pouch.

"Yes. I'm sorry, I don't remember your name." She looked vaguely familiar. Di shifted the salsa from one hand to the other.

"We haven't met. I saw you with her at the auditions for the children's theater play. My daughter, Zoey, auditioned but she was so nervous she didn't do very well. Julianna came over and encouraged her to keep trying, not give up. Such a nice young lady."

"Well, thank you."

“She said you clean houses?”

Mitch’s wife, Julianna’s mom, cleaning lady. When had she become a nameless entity?

“I focus more on personal organizing, but yes, I have a cleaning business. Would you like my card?”

“How much do you charge?” The boy threw his snack bag to the floor and fought to stand up in the seat. The woman wrestled him back down while he screamed in protest.

“Call me when you have a minute, and we can discuss cost.” Di rooted in her purse, handed her a card, and used the distraction to make a quick getaway.

The fog had deepened into mist by the time she got home, which didn’t help her mood. Still stewing about her non-identity, Di stomped into her office. Schedules, an upcoming staff meeting, and ideas for some community classes suggested by her employees all needed her attention, but her mind refused to cooperate. Di threw her pen onto the desk at the very moment Aunt Glori called from the kitchen.

“Yoo-hoo. Anybody home?”

“I’m back here.” Di stood to greet her aunt. Though not a blood relative, Gloria had been Eva’s best friend since their college days. And Di’s surrogate aunty, the one whose affection and attention often salved her bumpy relationship with Eva.

She swept into the office and with a hug for Di. “Whoo! It’s wet out there. I have a meeting this morning, but I stopped by to see Eva and thought I’d make a quick visit here too. She’s excited you’re taking her to lunch tomorrow. I still can’t believe she forgot to pay her electric bill.”

“She wouldn’t have lost it if she’d get rid of all that junk.”

“She doesn’t see it that way.” Aunt Glori picked up a file folder from the desk and fanned herself.

“I know.” Di turned on the ceiling fan for her. “The same old arguments every time. And more.”

“More?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Tell me.” Hands on hips, Gloria tipped her head like a teacher reprimanding a reluctant student.

Di had seen that posture often during her teenage years when Aunt Glori often acted as an impartial sounding board for Di's complaints against parental restrictions.

"Apparently, I've disappointed her with my profession. She'd much rather I flipped houses."

Gloria slapped the file folder onto the desk. "Trust me, dear. She talks about you all the time when you're not around. She's very proud of you."

"She's got a funny way of showing it." Di squared up the folder with the others on her desk. "But she's not the only one. Julianna thinks I'm just a cleaning woman, too."

Gloria raised an eyebrow. "Julianna said that?"

"That's what she told one of the other kids at the auditions. And then Mitch laughed when I brought up the idea of running for mayor of Waco."

A brief cackle erupted before Gloria covered her mouth and went into a coughing fit. She choked out a response. "Why would you want to be mayor of Waco? Or anywhere else for that matter."

"Because who am I?" She ticked them off on her fingers. "I'm Eva's daughter, Julianna's mom, Mitch's wife, the cleaning lady, the organizer of junk people can't throw away on their own. I'm tired of being in everyone else's shadow." Di sank into her chair.

Gloria took Di's hands in hers and leaned down to look into her eyes. "Diamond, where is this coming from? Wife, mother, daughter, friend—they're all respectable titles, even without business owner."

Di shook her head and pulled her hands away. "I want a name, my name. I want to be known as Diamond Lange." She raked her fingers through her hair, then hugged her shoulders and hung her head. "Sorry. I didn't mean for all that to spill out."

"I'm glad it did. I had no idea you felt that way."

Di got up and paced around the desk, then turned toward Gloria. "That's not my only reason to run for mayor. Did you know there are plans to demolish Eva's neighborhood and build fancy new homes?"

Gloria frowned. "I'd heard rumors. Did Eva tell you that?"

"No, it came from one of Mitch's co-workers. Mitch said running for the council seat in Eva's district might be more effective in trying to stop it."

"He's right, although by the time the election rolls around, it could be too late."

Di sat on the edge of her desk and sighed. “You’re right. Honestly, the city council doesn’t interest me in the least. Neither does being mayor. I have no intention of doing either. I only wanted them so that ...”

Aunt Glori filled in the blank. “... so you’d be known for who you are.”

Di pressed her lips together and stared at the floor. Hearing it out loud made it sound selfish.

Aunt Glori pulled her chin up. “There’s nothing wrong with being known for what we do. I doubt many remember my name. They only know I’m that real estate agent. The people who know your name are the ones who recognize your worth. Don’t waste time fretting about the others.”

Di’s jaw tightened. “But that’s just it. I’m not sure the people who know my name even consider my worth.”

“You can’t see it right now, but I assure you they do. You’ve accomplished more than most people have with your business and you have every right to hold your head high.”

Gloria glanced at her watch. “Gotta run. Enjoy your lunch with Eva tomorrow and give my love to Julianna and Mitch. We can talk again later if you want.” She waggled her fingers at Di and left the office. Her footsteps echoed down the hall, then returned and she peeked into the office.

“Forgot to mention. I recommended you to a fellow agent. Expect a call from Jill Morgan.” Gloria waved again and made her exit.

Her advice didn’t entirely quell Di’s resentment, but her encouragement dulled the sting. It was a shame the woman never had children of her own. But then Di might not have been able to count on Aunt Glori’s listening ear and down-to-earth counsel.

An incoming call brought Di back to her desk chair.

“Diamond Cleaning and Organizing. How can I help you?”

“Di? This is Jill Morgan. Gloria Fuller recommended you.”

“Yes, she was just here and told me to expect your call.” Di picked up a pen and held it poised over a notepad.

“Great. I have a client who’s moving here for work. He’s finishing up another project and asked if I could find someone to set up and organize his condo. He wants it ready when he gets here. Gloria said you’re the one to do this.”

“Absolutely. How soon do you expect him?”

“Next week. He shipped his belongings here and they’re due to arrive Monday. Can someone meet me when they get here so I can hand off the key?”

“I’ll be there myself. Just let me know what time.”

A shiver of excitement ran through Di at the end of the call. Nothing satisfied her as much as organizing. Setting up a whole apartment from scratch was a gift from heaven. She’d have to thank Aunt Glori for the recommendation.

With the affirmation of her work and the addition of a new client, she made good progress on the agenda for her staff meeting. The monthly get-togethers with her cleaning employees, eleven of them, promoted a sense of team cooperation and gave her a chance to learn of any problems or new ideas. A couple of the women had suggested offering classes that might interest her clients—home organization, keeping children’s toys under control, or a system for keeping track of important papers. Another asked if they might bring a handyman on staff to tackle all those little maintenance tasks clients asked about.

Di was deep into ideas, scribbling them on her notepad, when the phone rang. She picked it up without glancing at the caller’s number. A woman’s high-pitched voice spoke in a rush.

“I need to speak with Diamond, please. It’s an emergency.”

“This is Diamond.” She frowned at the screen that showed Eva’s number. This was definitely not Eva.

“Miss Diamond, something’s wrong with your mother. You need to come right away.”

“Who is this?”

“Lyndee Rae. I’m her cleaning lady.”

A spam call, using Eva’s phone number.

Di’s voice hardened. “My mother doesn’t have a cleaning lady. If you’ve seen her house, you’d know that. Can’t you find something better to do than make prank calls?”

“This isn’t a prank. Don’t hang up. Please.” She sounded desperate. “I got here minutes ago and found Miss Eva slumped over the side of her chair. I can’t wake her up.”

Di hesitated. If this was a hoax, the woman was a good actress. “How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“Lyin’s a sin, ma’am. Please, hurry. I called 911 and they’re sending an ambulance.”

“911?”

“Yes, ma’am. She’s breathing but her pulse is weak. You need to come quick.” She paused, then exhaled what sounded like relief. “A siren. Thank you, Lord. Hurry, Miss Diamond. Your mama needs you.”