

DESIGNED FOR LOVE

by
Erin Dutton



2008

CHAPTER ONE

Jillian Sealy climbed out of her BMW, tugging at her short skirt as it rode up her thigh. She flipped her sunglasses onto her head and dubiously studied the establishment in front of her. The building had definitely seen better days. Avocado green paint had long ago started peeling off the wood siding, and from the grime on the windows, she guessed it had been years since they were washed. The sign above the door read Johnson & Son Construction.

After only two days in Redmond, a small town in east Tennessee, she could almost picture the beefy rednecks who worked inside. She pulled on the hem of her skirt again and glanced down at her white silk blouse and black Tahari jacket to ensure she wasn't revealing too much cleavage. She wasn't in the mood to compete with her breasts for the men's attention.

"Well, let's get this over with," she muttered. As she crossed the gravel lot she cursed the thin layer of dust that settled on her Jimmy Choo sling backs.

When she stepped inside the front door the occupants didn't disappoint her. Three men in jeans and flannel shirts looked her way, and she could practically feel their gaze drop down her body.

“May I help you, ma’am?” The bravest of them took off his ball cap and stepped forward. At least he had manners.

“I’m looking for Mr. Johnson.”

A bald man wearing a chambray shirt with *Johnson & Son* embroidered on the left pocket entered through a door at the right and said, “Well, you’ve found him.”

“I’m Jillian Sealy. We spoke on the phone.”

“Yes, Miss Sealy, come into the office.” He indicated the door he still stood in front of and waited while she entered ahead of him.

“As I told you on the phone, Mr. Johnson, I’ve recently inherited Mary Connor’s house. I intend to fix it up and sell it, and I’ll need a contractor.” She’d been surprised to learn that her great-aunt had left her the house. But it had offered the perfect reason to get out of Cincinnati. She’d barely hesitated before packing up and driving south.

“Please, call me Bud. My sympathies on your loss, ma’am. I did plenty of work for Mrs. Connor over the years. If you hire us, I’ll send my kid’s crew. They’re my best.”

She’d found the listing for Mr. Johnson’s company in Aunt Mary’s address book. Now that she’d met him, she was even more confident she’d made the right call. Bud Johnson struck her as an honest, hardworking man.

Thirty minutes later, after she’d finished outlining her plans for the house, Bud gave her a good-faith estimate.

“I think we’ve got a deal, then,” she said, extending her hand, and he shook it firmly.

“Good. I’ll send Wil over when it’s convenient for you so you can review your plans.”



The next morning Jillian sat in the front-porch swing making notes on her plans for the house. It was turning into a pleasant day, warm with just enough of a breeze to ruffle the leaves of the large sycamore. She made a note to have a tree service prune the sprawling branches so the house would be more visible from the street.

“Miss Sealy?”

Jillian looked up and her breath caught in her throat. The powerfully built woman standing at the bottom of the steps regarded her with eyes the color of light sapphires. Her black hair swept back from her face in thick waves and barely brushed the collar of her denim jacket. Her white T-shirt was tucked into jeans so well worn the denim looked as soft as flannel. Deeply tanned skin stretched over wide cheekbones.

Jillian realized the woman was still waiting for her to speak. “Yes?”

“I’m Wil. You met with my father yesterday. He told me you were expecting me.” Jillian sensed a raw edge in Wil, yet the sensuous alto with a lilting accent seemed oddly gentle.

“Yes.” She recovered a bit of her composure. “Yes. I’m sorry. It’s Johnson and Son—I guess I was thrown.”

“Actually, the original ‘Johnson’ was my grandfather. My father didn’t have any sons, but when he took over he didn’t want to change the name.” Wil shoved her hands in her pocket and the motion tugged her jeans lower, accentuating her narrow hips.

“I’m sorry, I’m being rude. Can I get you anything to drink?” Jillian forced her eyes to Wil’s face.

“No, ma’am.”

Jillian laughed. “Lord, save me from Southern hospitality. Please don’t call me ma’am.”

“Yes, Miss Sealy.”

“It’s Jillian.”

Wil smiled, revealing a small gap between otherwise perfect teeth. “Okay, Jillian.”

“Let’s get started, then,” Jillian said, more abruptly than she’d intended. The gentle way Wil’s low voice caressed her name was distracting and she needed to get back on track. “Would you like a tour while I explain what I have in mind?”

“Sure.”

“Well, for starters, I plan to do some of the smaller projects myself, like replacing the boards on this porch and giving it a fresh coat of paint. So I’ll just need you to handle the larger issues while I’m working on those.” She had decided on projects she could do herself so she could spend more money on the quality touches that would maximize her profit when she sold.

“That’s fine. So we’ll just do what you need us to and then you can finish up your tasks.”

“Actually, I’d planned on doing the work simultaneously.”

“What’s your hurry?”

“If we finish quickly I can get it on the market sooner.”

“My crew isn’t used to working with the homeowner underfoot.”

“Well, then I’ll try not to be *underfoot*.” Jillian’s tone purposely indicated that there would be no argument. “Let’s start in the dining room.”

Aware that she’d just been put in her place, Wil climbed the steps to the front porch that spanned the width of the house. The exterior needed paint, but the buttery yellow shade wouldn’t be Wil’s first choice.

After automatically assessing the outside of the house, Wil turned her attention to her new client. She couldn’t see Jillian’s eyes behind her sunglasses, but finely arched brows had lifted in surprise as she’d first looked at Wil. She couldn’t even guess how much Jillian spent on products to make her

skin look so soft and flawless. Wil didn't see any of the lines that marred her own face.

She glanced at the waistband of Jillian's jeans where her neatly pressed button-down shirt was tucked in, revealing the expected designer label. As her gaze drifted farther down, she wondered if it was the expensive jeans that made Jillian's ass appear so perfect. In just minutes, she'd pegged Jillian as high-maintenance and, though incredibly attractive, probably far too uptight for Wil's liking.

They entered the house and passed through the foyer into the dining room. Wil noted the pocket doors set in the ornately carved woodwork. She tested one, satisfied to feel it glide out smoothly.

"In here, there's just that bit of molding that needs to be fixed."

"That shouldn't be a big deal."

Jillian stepped into the kitchen and turned, causing Wil to stop quickly. At least six inches shorter, Jillian tilted her head back to meet Wil's eyes. "I also need to have the wiring inspected in the entire house. Can you recommend an electrician?"

"We've got a guy we usually use. I can give him a call or I can get you his number." Jillian had removed her sunglasses and Wil could now see that her irises were green, with flecks of gold. Realizing that she was staring into Jillian's eyes, Wil dropped her gaze. But that was a mistake as well, since the three buttons open on Jillian's shirt revealed the curve of her breasts. Wil's stomach clenched and she curled her fingers into her palms to quell the sudden urge to trace them inside the edge of Jillian's shirt.

"If you don't mind, I'll leave that up to you. In here, I want to push that far wall out a bit to open up the space and put in an island." Jillian pivoted away and swept a hand past the wall

in question and then indicated the one next to it. Wil fought to keep her breathing even and was astonished at how unaffected Jillian seemed by a moment that had rocked her. “Here I want to put in a bay window and make a breakfast nook. We’ll add recessed lighting and all new cabinets and countertops, to go with the updated appliances I plan to buy.”

“You’re going to spend most of your money in here,” Wil commented, trying to focus on the details. She pulled a small notebook from her jacket pocket and jotted notes as Jillian spoke.

“Kitchens sell houses,” Jillian responded quickly.

“You sound like a realtor.”

“I am.”

“Really? Local?” Wil was certain she would have run into Jillian before now if she was local. They’d worked with most of the area realtors at one time or another. She guessed Jillian had five or six years on her, putting her in her mid-thirties. Maybe she’d started a second career.

“Cincinnati, but I’ll be here until I sell this house.”

“If you want things done in a hurry, it’s going to be difficult for you to be living here at the same time.”

“Well, the kitchen won’t be a problem since I don’t do a lot of cooking anyway.” Jillian waved off her concern and headed for the living room. “I’ll set myself up in one of the spare rooms since it only needs fresh paint.”

The living room boasted high ceilings with crown molding and large double-hung windows. Wil really did love these old houses. She could tell from Jillian’s attention to detail that she had put a lot of thought into this restoration.

As Jillian led her through the rest of the house, she was overly aware of Wil’s scent, like sandalwood and summer rain. She couldn’t suppress her reaction, but hoped she hid it well. Wil occasionally asked questions, and Jillian was surprised by

how well she already seemed to understand her vision for the house.

In the master bathroom, Jillian said, “Next to the kitchen, I think most of the work will be in here. I want to add a tiled shower stall in the corner, a claw-foot tub, and a new pedestal sink.”

Jillian kept her tone controlled despite the fact that they stood very close in the small room. While Wil continued to jot notes, Jillian stared at her mouth and wondered how it would feel to kiss her, to trace Wil’s thin lips with the tip of her tongue before plunging inside. Would Wil respond with the energy Jillian felt vibrating within her?

When Wil drew her bottom lip between her teeth in concentration, Jillian imagined gently sucking it. She jerked her eyes away, but failed to dispel the image.

“Right, so that’s the tour.” Jillian moved past Wil, carefully avoiding contact. She’d never spent so much time fantasizing about someone she’d just met, and she didn’t think touching Wil, even accidentally, would help her condition. She led Wil back to the living room. In an effort to fill the uncomfortable silence, she kept talking. “Aunt Mary left me the furnishings too. I’ll put most of them in storage while the work is being done. Then, I don’t know, maybe an auction. There are actually some nice pieces here.”

Wil nodded. “I’m sorry for your loss. Were you close?”

“Not at all. I was here briefly five years ago when her husband died. I don’t know why she left me the house. Except that she didn’t have any children of her own.”

“Perhaps she felt a connection with you.”

“I rarely saw her,” Jillian said. It was impossible to feel connected to someone you barely knew. Wasn’t it? Yet here she was feeling as if she would go to bed with this stranger without a second’s hesitation. Shaking her head, she dismissed

the idea. “Given my profession, it’s more likely she knew I would be best equipped to sell the house.”

For a moment Wil looked like she might argue, but instead she headed for the front door.

“My crew is finishing up another job today. You and I should go to the hardware store and order the cabinets and some fixtures. I’ll get a tentative schedule drawn up so you’ll know when you’ll have room to work on your projects. Is it okay if I bring that by tomorrow?”

“I’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

Jillian watched from the porch as Wil walked toward the white Chevy pickup bearing the Johnson & Son logo. When Wil turned around to glance at her before climbing in the truck, Jillian flushed, hoping Wil was too far away to tell that she’d been transfixed by her confident swagger.



Jillian walked out the front door and looked around, marveling at her surroundings. For the time being, she’d landed in Small Town, U.S.A. Aunt Mary’s house was just four tree-lined blocks from the Redmond town square, complete with a drugstore, city hall, hardware store, and a diner, Jillian’s lunch destination. She hadn’t been kidding when she told Wil she didn’t cook, and since she’d arrived only days before, she hadn’t taken time to get even the barest essentials. Wil and her crew would probably be tearing up the kitchen by next week, so Jillian figured there was no reason to stock up when she could take a short walk for some country home cooking.

It was an idyllic early summer day, almost too much so. Sunlight slashed through gaps in the full shade trees overhead, and birds chirped cheerfully. The Mayberry atmosphere in

this town felt surreal in comparison to the constant hum of the city Jillian was used to hearing outside the window of her downtown condo, and she'd been having trouble sleeping.

When she'd first driven into town she'd worried she wouldn't survive for the couple of months it would take to fix up the house. After all, there wasn't a Starbucks for miles. And she doubted she'd be able to get a massage or a decent facial at the one salon in town. From a quick look through the window as she walked past, she could tell nothing had changed inside in close to a decade. The only surprise so far had been the sign in the window at the diner announcing the presence of Wi-Fi.

Everything she'd encountered here felt out of place, including the intensity of her initial attraction to Wil Johnson. To put it bluntly, blue-collar wasn't normally her type. She tended to go for polished and professional. Usually, she dated women that she had things in common with, but it was getting harder and harder to find someone who didn't quickly bore her. After all, you could have only so much intelligent conversation. She got that with her friends. What she wanted was a grand passion. Her reaction to women was often mostly intellectual and practical, nothing like the visceral response to Wil's physicality. She couldn't deny the spread of hot arousal when she'd found herself the subject of that concentrated gaze.

As distracting as it would probably prove to be, having Wil around the house for the next several weeks wouldn't be a hardship. She could certainly think of worse ways to spend her time than watching Wil get sweaty. *What has gotten into me? I've never been so turned on just thinking about someone.*

As she reached the Redmond Diner, Jillian pulled her thoughts away from the attractive contractor. The outside of the building looked like it hadn't had an overhaul in decades.

The painted logo on the front window had long ago faded and begun chipping. When she pushed open the door, the top of the metal frame nudged a small gold bell, announcing her arrival.

“Grab a seat anywhere, honey,” a waitress called from across the room.

Jillian slid into one of the vinyl-upholstered booths near the front window. When she noticed a woman she’d seen in the diner before watching her from the next booth, Jillian forced a smile and reminded herself not to react defensively. The small-town curiosity about newcomers took some getting used to.

The woman smiled back and the lines around her mouth deepened. “Make sure you try the apple pie, dear. It’s wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

The woman appeared about Aunt Mary’s age. Her neatly pressed paisley blouse was too formal for early afternoon at the diner. Jillian wondered if she had another engagement or if she was simply the type who felt one should always dress to impress when in public no matter what her surroundings. Her white hair was neatly set, and Jillian guessed she had a standing appointment at the salon down the street. She tilted her head and studied Jillian over her menu through a pair of bifocals.

“Aren’t you the young lady that’s fixing up Mary Connor’s place?”

“Yes. I’ve been here three days. How did you know already?”

“It’s a small town, word gets around. I’m Rose Beam.”

“Jillian Sealy.”

“Would you like to join me for lunch?” Rose gestured to the vacant side of her booth.

Jillian nodded and slid across the worn red vinyl.

“Mary will really be missed,” Rose said as she handed Jillian her menu.

“Were you friends?”

“For a time. She was a generous woman.” A deep sadness tinged Rose’s voice, then just as quickly it was gone. “I hear you’re a real-estate agent.”

Jillian laughed. “Word really does get around.”

“One of the ladies at bingo heard Bud Johnson talking at the hardware store.”

While Jillian was still trying to picture a bingo-playing granny hanging out at the hardware store, their waitress approached and they both ordered meatloaf sandwiches and apple pie.

Rose waited until the waitress walked away, then leaned forward and said conspiratorially, “I might have need of your services.”

“Well, actually, I’m licensed in Ohio, and since I’m only here for a short time I wasn’t planning to apply for my license here.”

“Oh.” Rose seemed disappointed.

“Are you buying or selling?”

“Selling. I’ve finally given in and agreed to move closer to my daughter in Virginia. My granddaughter and great-grandchildren live there, as well. There isn’t anything left for me here.”

“Well, I’m sure there are several good agents in the area.” She hadn’t seen a real-estate office, but certainly there were others in neighboring towns.

“I shouldn’t have bothered you. You probably have a lot of work to do at Mary’s place.”

Without really knowing why, Jillian wanted to help Rose.

So before she could change her mind, she said, “Maybe I could give you some advice. But I can’t collect a commission, and I won’t be offended if you want to hire someone else.”

“I can’t let you work for free.”

“Well, I can’t take your money.”

Rose seemed to be considering her options and then relented. “You stop by tomorrow and I’ll show you the house. We’ll work something out. Let me just give you the address.”

Rose pulled a pen out of her purse and, as she continued to search, Jillian produced one of her business cards and offered the back of it.

In Cincinnati she wouldn’t have taken the time to help someone sell a house without the promise of a decent commission. Even if she was so inclined, she wouldn’t have had the time. Because a lot of prospective buyers wanted to view property after hours and on weekends, her hours weren’t limited to nine to five. And she’d been even busier lately gearing up to sell units in an upscale condominium complex. It was to be her company’s biggest project thus far.

Losing that account was one of the things that had compelled her to take on Mary’s house.