Nice to Meet You

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter One

Elli Hampton pulled into the driveway of the little cottage at 904 Elm Street and shut her seven-year-old Ford Fiesta off. She looked up at the small cottage, studying it carefully for several moments, before smiling. The little cottage was rather small, and it needed a little extra loving care right at the moment, but if you looked beyond the peeling paint, the shutter hanging at an angle, and the loose railing on the porch, it was cute. And most important, it was hers.

She hurried to the front door, anxious to get inside and have another look around. It had been almost a month since she took her last tour through the house and made a written offer. She signed the loan papers about an hour ago, and she now held in her hand the much anticipated key to her first house.

She took her time going through it, wandering from room to room, noting the things she liked about each room, and making a mental list of the things that would need a little attention. She saved the half bath downstairs, the two full bathrooms upstairs, and the kitchen for last. After looking at them a little more carefully, she exhaled a huge sigh of relief. They definitely would benefit from some work, but she could live in it while the work was being done. They weren't by any means optimal, but she could make them do for the time being.

With that thought, she hurried back out to her car to get the first load of boxes. Once she had the last box inside, she sat down on one of them and took a few minutes to think about her life thus far and how she'd ended up here. She knew she had to call her oldest brother, Dean, but she wanted to take a few moments to think first, and decide how she wanted to approach the call. He was having a difficult time accepting the fact that she was moving out of his house, their family home, and she understood that. It had been very hard for him to allow her to spread her wings as she'd gotten older.

She understood exactly why he had such a difficult time with it, and the truth was, she'd come to love his protectiveness, knowing how much love there was behind it. He and her other brother, Jim, were both very protective of her, and she loved them both for it, but she was ready to be an adult now. She'd graduated from college and landed her first job, teaching third grade. They were neither one happy that it was an hour from their home town, where they both lived, Dean with his wife, while Jim lived alone, but in his own home. She would have preferred to live slightly closer to them, as well, but this was the closest school that offered the new college graduate a first job, so she took it.

They were both also shocked, and not exactly elated, when she announced she'd bought a house. They weren't against her buying a house, but they both felt they should have been there with her throughout the process. She knew what they really thought was that they should have been able to look at it and approve it first. But it was important to her to prove to them, as well as herself, that she could do this on her own.

Elli's mother had contracted a serious illness while she was pregnant with Elli. She was in the hospital off and on the entire pregnancy. Elli was born six weeks early, via C-Section, the doctors thinking she and her mother would both have a better chance to survive. Tiny little three-pound Elli survived, but unfortunately, her mother didn't. Elli was raised by her father, with lots of help from her two older brothers. All three of them were extremely protective of the small girl, and loved her dearly.

Their father had a construction company, and all three of the kids were involved in the

business during the summers. The boys learned construction from an early age, and by the time they were in high school they were working in a crew, alongside the men. They took Elli along with them to the jobs, and by the time she was old enough to start school, she knew what all the tools they used were called, and retrieved the tools they needed while they worked. They made sure she also had toys to play with and plenty of free time to play with them, but the little girl loved helping her dad and big brothers. The three of them kept a close watch on her.

When their father was tragically killed when he was hit by a drunk driver, her oldest brother, Dean, who was twenty-one at the time, became the guardian for Jim, who was seventeen, and herself, who was eight. Their father's manager at the construction company stepped up and ran the company for them while Dean, who was a senior in college, finished school. Once he graduated, the foreman worked with him until he was ready to step into his dad's shoes, running the company.

Thanks to their father's life insurance policy, along with the insurance money from the drunk driver who killed him, Dean had the money available for Jim and Elli's college. Jim joined Dean in the family construction business after he graduated, and they still took Elli, who was now ready to start high school, with them over the summer. She was still small, at just an inch or two over five feet, but had taken to construction like a duck to water. At her insistence, they gradually allowed her to work with a crew more often.

Now she felt confident that she could bring this house back to its original beauty, but could live in it while she did so. She knew her brothers would insist on helping, and she was okay with that. She would gladly accept their help on the bathrooms and kitchen, so she wouldn't be without their use for long. She could handle the rest of the house on her own, though she knew she would have to convince her brothers of that fact. She smiled, knowing how they would react when she told them that.

Eventually, she took out her phone to call her brother. She had to smile when he answered his phone. "What do you think, squirt; will it work?"

"Like I told you, Dean, I can make about anything work. But this will be fine. It's not all that bad."

"I'll feel better about it when I see it for myself," he growled. "I'm still not happy that you bought it without letting me look at it first, but there's not much I can do about it now."

"That's right, big brother, there isn't. You'll just have to finally accept the fact that I'm an adult now. You tried to keep me a kid forever, but it just didn't work. I grew up on you, and it's time you face that fact." She tried hard not to giggle, knowing he was trying to accept that fact, but struggling.

He growled a little, but relented. "Yeah, maybe. Anyway, if you're sure, Jim and I will bring your bedroom and the rest of the boxes over. See you in an hour and a half or so."

"Thanks, Dean. Love ya."

"Yeah, I love you, too, squirt."

Elli smiled, anxious to show her brothers her house. Their father always paid his children for the work they did once they started helping with the construction company. He also taught them the value of money, insisting they put a portion of it in the bank. Dean did the same after his father's death. Since his father paid for Dean's college and the insurance money paid for Jim and Elli's college, all three of them were fortunate enough to have some money in the bank when they graduated from college.

After landing her first job, Elli went to find a place to rent, but was shocked when she saw what rent was in the area. She looked into homes for sale in the area and decided it made a lot

more sense for her to buy a home. There were a lot of them for sale that she knew would be worth considerably more with a little remodeling, which she also knew she could do. She turned her attention to those homes, picking one that was in a nice neighborhood.

Her little house was the perfect home for her. It was structurally sound, so it wouldn't require any major repairs. It was in a nice neighborhood, which was also very important to her. In fact, hers was the only home in the neighborhood that she saw was in need of repairs. That was perfect. Her neighbors would be happy to see someone buy it and fix it up, as it would improve the value of all the houses. Most importantly to her, though, it would greatly improve the value of her own home. If she didn't like this area or her new job and moved elsewhere, possibly closer to home and her brothers eventually, she would be able to sell it for a nice little profit.

She was sure her brothers would notice and appreciate that fact. She hoped it would help her convince them she'd done okay purchasing it. Regardless of her independent streak, their approval was still important to her.

She went to the kitchen to start cleaning while she waited for her brothers to arrive. She was glad she'd thought to bring some buckets and lots of cleaning supplies with her in her car. She rolled up her sleeves and got busy. By the time her brothers arrived, she'd managed to scrub down the kitchen, including the refrigerator and all the cabinets, the counters, and floor. She'd done the same to the downstairs half bath, one of the full baths upstairs, and was finishing the last one when she heard the truck her brothers used in their business as it pulled into her drive.

She hurried down to greet them. The door flung open just as she got to it and Dean took her in his arms. "Hey, squirt. How about showing us around your house?"

"I'd love to," she enthused. Dean set her back on her feet, only to have Jim take her in his arms. Once he returned her feet to the ground, she moved out of the doorway to invite them in. "As you can tell, this is the kitchen. It needs a bit of a face lift, but for a smaller house, it's really a nice sized room, with lots of cabinets."

"It is a nice size," Dean agreed.

"And with a little work, we can make it real nice," Jim added.

Elli smiled. This was a good start. She showed them the entire house, and turned to see their expressions. "So, that's it. What do you think?"

"That all depends," Dean said. "How much did you pay for it?"

"We negotiated that price quite a bit," she said. "They started out asking \$220,000, but it didn't sell, so they lowered it to \$195,900. We went back and forth, and finally settled on \$158,000."

She was watching their reaction carefully, and saw both men's eyebrows raise. Jim was the first to respond. "I think you did good, Elli. I think you can definitely make some money with it. What do you think, Dean?"

"I think our baby sister's growing up, whether I like it or not." He smiled as he pulled her in against him for a hug. "I think you did real well, squirt. I can't believe you got them down that much."

"Neither could my realtor," she said with a giggle. "I made a list of all the things I'd have to do to it and an approximate cost for each. Of course, I used what I figured we or another contractor would charge to do the work. When you add it up, it's a pretty impressive figure. I told her I don't mind getting people in here to fix it up, but going through all that hassle is worth a little bit, and I'm not going to pay so much for the house that by the time I put all this money into it, I have more in it than I could sell it for. I pointed out that there are several homes on the market that need work, so I don't have to have this one."

Both men were nodding their head in approval. "Way to go, Elli," Jim told her. "I think you did a good job. We can get this place fixed up and it'll be worth considerably more than you paid."

"And be a nice little house for you to live in," Dean added. "It looks like a good neighborhood."

"This is the only house in a three or four block area that looks like it needs repairs," she pointed out proudly.

"We noticed that, too," Jim admitted. "We looked around a lot as we got closer. It looks good."

"Are you sure you want to live in it now, though? The kitchen and baths are pretty old," Dean said.

"They are, but the appliances and everything work, so they'll do for a little while. I thought it might be nice to live in it for a few weeks before I start deciding how I want them. I may want to redesign the kitchen, and the master bathroom, especially."

"If you're sure you're okay with it for a little bit, that makes sense. Once you're living in it you may find something that's not very handy."

"That's what I thought. So, are you guys ready to unload my stuff?"

They'd made their way back to the kitchen while they'd been talking, and he looked over toward the old refrigerator. "This thing looks awfully old. Are you sure it works?"

"I'm sure. I've been cleaning and scrubbing while I've been waiting for you guys. One of the first things I did was scrub this out. Then I put a pitcher of water in the fridge part and filled an ice cube try and put it in the freezer, to make sure it works. I checked an hour later, and it seems to be working fine, which I was glad to see. I wasn't too sure about it, either."

"Well, if it works, Jim and I brought some stuff over you'll want to put in it. We put it in coolers to transport it."

"What did you bring that needs to be in coolers?"

Neither man answered. They went to the truck and returned with a couple good-sized coolers they used for their business in the summer, to be sure their men had plenty of water. She opened the first cooler and found milk, juice, iced tea, lemonade, which she always loved, but neither of them were too fond of, and lots of water. The second one was full of lunch meats, cheese, salads, and condiments.

She had a big smile on her face as she looked up at them. "What; no bread? How can I make sandwiches without bread?"

"Be right back," Jim said as he ran back out to the truck.

She turned to Dean while he was gone. "Thank you, Dean. You guys didn't have to do this, but I sure appreciate it."

Jim came back into the kitchen carrying another box which he sat on the table. She looked inside and saw a loaf of bread, a package of buns, a couple boxes of cereal, and various other grocery items, including quite a few cans of food. Her eyes were wide as she looked up at Jim, who was grinning ear to ear, and then over to Dean, who was also smiling at her. "Thank you both," she said, pulling them both in at once so she could hug them. "You didn't have to do any of this."

"We're aware of that," Dean said.

"Your dad over here was worried about you," Jim said with a chuckle.

Dean laughed. "Oh, and you weren't?"

"I wouldn't call it worried, as much as—" He stumbled for words.

"Concerned?" she suggested.

Jim blushed a little.

"Let's just say we care about you," Dean said with finality. "We care about you and we always will. And what's more, I won't apologize for it. You'll be busy moving and unpacking today, and we didn't want you to have to run out and find a grocery store tonight in order to have something for breakfast in the morning."

"I don't know what I'd do without you two," she said sincerely. "Now, before I get all sappy, or tears start flowing, let's get busy."

Both men nodded and headed to the truck, making sure they took her with them. As they'd done many times in the past, they had her in between them as they walked to the truck. Dean had an arm around her shoulder, and Jim, who was a few inches shorter, at a mere five feet, eleven inches, had an arm around her waist.

They got to the truck and all you could see was boxes. They had obviously put her bed and dresser in first, and finished with the boxes. She was surprised they'd brought this big of a truck, and was even more surprised to see how full it was. All she had was her bedroom furniture, and boxes of clothes and miscellaneous things. She couldn't imagine them taking up this much space. If this truck was this full of boxes, she was glad her new little house had lots of storage. She started taking boxes in, trying to remember if she really had this much stuff.

She knew some of her things had been in boxes for several years and had been stored in the attic, but couldn't remember there being this many. Over the years, their father had given her things that had been their mother's, and she'd wrapped them carefully and stored them in the attic for when she had her own house. One thing she'd been looking forward to was going through them and setting some of them out, now that she had a place to display them. She'd been pretty small when he gave her some of them, and it would be like Christmas, seeing all those things again.

On their third trip back to the truck, Elli picked up a box and stopped. They'd moved enough boxes that she could see beyond them now. "Dean, what did you bring? This isn't just my bedroom furniture."

"Didn't I tell you I'd be bringing that?"

"No," she said, her eyes still stuck on the furniture in the truck. "Why?"

Dean had made his way to her side by that time. "Elli, when you and Jim said you wanted the house to go in my name, I had a hard time with that."

"Dean, Jim and I both wanted that. You took us in and raised us. That was a lot to do when you were only 21, but you did it. The house should be yours."

"I know you said that, and I appreciate it. But it's very important to me that you and he both have something from the house. I have fond memories of seeing Dad working at his big mahogany desk and chair in his office, and so I'd like to keep that. I'd also like to keep the big oak dining room set, because I remember having big family dinners there, especially at holidays. The whole family would be gathered around it then, including Grandma and Grandpa, and aunts and uncles. I'll keep that, in the family home, and we'll meet there and have our big meals together at that table from time to time."

"I like that," she said.

"Jim always liked the bedroom suite Mom and Dad had, which had been Mom's parents' suite originally, so he has that in his house. This furniture was what Mom had in the formal living room. She loved it and used to spend a lot of time in that room. Dad didn't go in it much after Mom died, I think because it reminded him of her. As you got older, you started going in there more and more. You used to read in there a lot, just like Mom did."

"Mom used to read in there?"

"Yep. In the evening, after everything was done, a lot of times Dad and Jim and I would watch something on television. She used to go in there and read instead. As you got old enough to read those mysteries you used to love, you did the same thing. Dad noticed it. He said you were a lot like your mom, and he was glad. He used to worry about taking you to the job sites with us. He didn't set out to teach you his trade, like he did Jim and me, and was worried when you were so interested in it. He was afraid you'd grow up as a tom boy. You did, but he was happy to see you also have a feminine side, just like Mom."

"I didn't know he was worried about that."

"He didn't want to talk to you about it because he said you need to be who you are, not who you think he wants you to be. But he was always happy to see you spending time in that room, which was the most feminine room in the house, or getting all dressed up for special things."

"Thanks for telling me that, Dean. I didn't know."

Jim was there now, as well, and he confirmed what his brother was saying. "He used to love it when you'd ask if you could buy a new dress for something special coming up, like a holiday or a dance. He was extremely proud of the way you took to construction, bragging that you knew more about it than any boy your age, but he loved seeing you be a lady, too. He'd be so proud of you now, Elli."

Those words brought instant tears to her eyes. She tried fighting them back, but it was useless. Both brothers pulled her in for another group hug, knowing how much she hated it when they saw her cry. When she got the tears under control again, she tightened her arms around both of them. "He'd be proud of you two, as well, you know. If he'd be proud of me, it's because of the influence you two had on me."

She looked up after neither one said anything, and felt extremely satisfied when she saw them blinking back moisture in their eyes, as well. She hated getting emotional, though, so she turned the conversation back to where it started. "But it looks like you brought me all the furniture in that room. Your living room is empty now, Dean. Your poor wife has got to be upset."

Dean chuckled. "Actually, Angie's pretty excited about it. When we got married, I came with a fully furnished house. While that was nice financially, I think it's been making it harder for her to feel like it's her home. She's been really good about living in a house that's full of memories to all of us, but I think she'll feel more at home after she gets to decorate a couple rooms herself."

"I never thought of that," Elli said. "She is a very special lady, though. I've thought that for a long time. When she married you, that fully furnished house you brought with you was also furnished with Jim and me. Jim was away at college part of the year, but I was still there. Not many ladies would have agreed to that, and treated me so well. I'm glad she's getting to redo the rooms."

"Me, too," Dean said. "I told her she can pick out whatever she wants for the living room and your bedroom. She can even put down new flooring if she wants. Your bedroom is still going to be a guest bedroom so you can come back and spend the night on holidays or weekends, or if you don't like your job and want to move back home at the end of the school year. I'm not sure what she's going to do with the living room, but I do know she's looking forward to decorating both rooms."

"Good. I wasn't sure I wanted to accept this furniture, but—"

"You'll be disappointing her if you don't. We've talked about it and she feels exactly like me. We got the house and most of the stuff in it. We very much appreciate it, but it's important to both of us that you guys have something from it, too. I'd planned all along on giving you this furniture because of how proud Dad was when you went in there to read, but before I could say

anything, she suggested we give this to you. Jim not only has Mom and Dad's bedroom furniture; he also has the old vintage car he and Dad worked on. We want you to have this. Before you start crying again, though, let's get these boxes in the house so we can get to the furniture."

She looked up at him and he smiled as he handed her a box. She nodded and turned toward the house. They each made two more trips with boxes, before they were ready to unload the furniture. She and Jim were back in the truck, while Dean was still in the house with his last load of boxes. "Grab that end and we'll take the couch in," she told Jim.

"No, this couch is heavy. I don't want you trying to carry it."

"I'm not helpless, Jim."

"I realize that, but you're barely five feet tall, and this couch is heavy. We'll wait for Dean."

"Oh, come on. Dean was going to stop and get a drink and go to the bathroom. There's no need to wait that long."

"That long?" Jim chuckled. "You are about the most impatient lady I've ever laid eyes on. It won't hurt you to wait ten minutes for Dean to get here."

"I can get it," she insisted.

"I can probably get it easier," said a new voice they neither one recognized. They both turned toward it as a man walked around the corner of the truck. "Hi. I'm Spencer Remington, I live next door. Are you guys my new neighbors?"

"I'm not, she is," Jim answered. "I'm Jim Hampton, and this is my sister, Elli. Nice to meet you, Spencer."

"Nice to meet both of you." He turned to Elli. "And welcome to the neighborhood. I heard Jim say he'd wait for Dean. Is he your husband?"

Elli couldn't hold back a laugh. "Jim and Dean are both my brothers. I'm not married."

"Sorry," Spencer said. "But Jim, why don't I help you move this couch in?"

"I'm perfectly capable of moving it," Elli said. She watched her new neighbor look at her, from head to foot, and she rolled her eyes. "Trust me," she said. "I'm not a ninety-eight-pound weakling."

"The ninety-eight pounds sounds about right, but I'm not saying you're a weakling," Spencer said in a friendly manner. "I am saying I'm here, though, and I'm pretty sure it would be easier for me to help Jim with it than you."

She puffed her chest up and had an indignant look on her face. "You don't know anything about me," she started.

Spencer saw Jim shaking his head, and held back a smile, as he calmly walked into the truck, headed toward her at one end of the couch. "No, I don't, but since we're going to be neighbors, I'd like to get to know you."

She harrumphed, and crossed her arms over her chest, obviously not impressed.

He caught Jim's eyes momentarily before turning back to her. "Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself while we take this into the house?" As he said this he calmly picked her up and sat her down on the couch. Her eyes were huge, but he took advantage of her stunned state, hurrying to the end of the couch and picking it up. Jim followed his lead, and the two of them carried the couch down the ramp and out of the truck. They were on their way to the front door when she found her voice.

"What are you doing? Put me down," she yelled.

Dean came running outside to see what she was yelling about. He saw Jim first, who was laughing. Elli was on the couch, holding onto the back of it. His attention was then drawn to the stranger at the other end, as he answered his sister's question. "What am I doing? I'm helping your

brother take your couch into your house. I was hoping you'd tell me a little bit about yourself while we did it."

Dean turned around and hurried back to the front door, holding it open to allow the men to go through. As they started through the door, he looked at the stranger. "I'm Dean Hampton, their brother. I don't know who you are, but I like you already."