
HER HANDYMAN

The Widow Series - Book 2

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-155-2

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

"I'm sorry—we're not open yet, but can I help you, sir?"

She *would* have to meet a gorgeous specimen of masculinity when she looked as if she'd just crawled out of a sewer, but trying to get this place ready for the influx of the unwashed masses that would arrive on Memorial Day didn't much lend itself to wearing the latest fashions—or make up—or jewelry. Her jeans were clean, at least, although they were ten years old and baggy—as was pretty much everything she owned now—and her t-shirt was stained with, well, she knew paint was responsible for the various colors she saw when she looked down—a soft blush pinkening her cheeks—but she wouldn't want to vouch for what any of the other various stains were.

Her wavy red-blond hair was in a messy knot somewhere near the top of her head—or at least it had been when she'd started—just to get it out of her way and keep it out of the same kinds of things that had wreaked havoc on her shirt, and she was sweating. Not in a delicate, feminine way some women managed to achieve, but in such a manner that she knew that there were beads of it on her forehead and pit stains under her arms.

Ah, well. She was never going to be Miss America.

Or *Mrs.* America, even when that had been a legal possibility, if not a physical one.

Her eyes misted over immediately at the thought, almost as she rolled them at herself. Lovely. Now, not only was she sweating in front of one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen—especially in real life—she was going to cry in front of him, too.

Forcibly blinking back those threatening tears, she looked up at him. And up. And then up some more. Dear Lord, he was tall!

Longish, dark curls formed a devilish halo around a truly angelic face that was lightly tanned—enough that his bright blue eyes popped against it. He was clean shaven and strong jawed, with full, enticing lips—*had she really just thought that*—that had not quite curved into a smile but looked as if they often did.

He stuck a ham-sized hand out to her.

"I know you're not. I'm here in response to the ad. My name is Garrett. Garrett Birch."

She shook his hand reflexively, noting that, although it was a firm handshake, he took pains not to crush her hand, which she appreciated. He was obviously strong enough to crush it if he wanted to, even by accident or pure obliviousness, but this man knew his own strength.

"Dina Conte." It might not have been the smartest thing to do—to give her name to a man she knew nothing about—but then again, this was Maine. She liked to fool herself into thinking that, anywhere else, she'd be more security conscious—hopefully.

Frowning, she asked, "To what ad are you referring?"

He grinned, as if he appreciated her precise grammar. "The one on Craigslist that said you needed a handyman, jack of all trades type, to help around here..." She looked genuinely flummoxed at what he was saying.

"Who is Craig and what kind of list does he have that has anything to do with me?"

He could hear the suspicion in her tone, not that he blamed her. He would be sorry to find that this was some kind of joke or something, because it seemed perfect—exactly what he wanted.

"I was here yesterday, and I met someone who said she thought I might be just what you're looking for and suggested I come by today to talk to the owner—"

Dina held up a finger at him. "Pardon the interruption. I just have to yell at someone. Tink! Front and center, and you'd better have a damned good explanation for what I'm hearing from this gentleman!"

A short, slightly rounded, bespectacled young woman with a shock of beautiful maroon and turquoise hair cascading down over one side of her face and shoulder greeted him warmly. "Garrett, I'm glad you came b— "

She didn't get much past that point before the woman he assumed to be her boss grabbed her by the arm and man-handled her into the back room, although that was a futile move, since it was still impossible not to hear the conversation as they were really only about five feet away.

"Why is there a man standing in the office of my motel expecting to apply for a job that I assume he found out about on the Interwebs, since he mentioned something called Craigslist, rather than the ad I put in the *Islander*?"

He could hear the younger woman rolling her eyes at that from where he stood. "Because I did it for you. As I've been telling you since the winter that no one uses a newspaper for want ads anymore. You haven't had one bite since you put it in—and that was February, wasn't it?"

Dina's frown darkened.

"You didn't even attract an eighty-year-old—who are the only ones who read actual newspapers—because they're all online, too! You really need someone around here—preferably a man." She watched her sister's frown morph into a glare at that. "A

man to help you with things that I can't. You shouldn't be doing all of the things you're doing—you're not qualified and you're going to get yourself seriously hurt, eventually. So, I put an ad on Craigslist, and Garrett not only answered, but he did so in person—he came all the way up from Boston. I talked to him a little yesterday and he sounds like he's got all of the qualifications that you need." Her usually high voice drifted down a surprising number of octaves, as if she was trying to sound like Barry White. "And then some, don't you think?"

That glare hadn't receded one bit. "Winking at me! And I do *not* think. I don't know anything about this man!"

"He's right out there, and he brought a resume and references—interview him!" She continued in a whisper that he could still hear without trying, "I googled him. He's some kind of big shot in computers, but he knows his way around construction, too, so he has experience."

Dina snorted. "Then why would he want to come to work here?"

"Who cares? His reasoning is his own problem. Listen. It's less than a month before season, and you know you wanted to open early since the tourons are arriving earlier and earlier every year. There's no way you're going to be able to do that unless all of the problems with the various cabins are fixed. You need a good season this year to keep this place afloat, and that's not going to happen if you keep getting bad reviews on TripAdvisor and Expedia and everywhere else because of things *he* could fix for you." Tink jerked her head in Garrett's direction. "And looking mighty fine while he does it, I might add. He might be able to fix a lot more than just the plumbing in cabin four, if you know what I mean."

"Shhh!"

"OMG, you are so red right now!" Tink giggled.

Dina knew the truth of it. "Go see if the loads need to be

changed, please, before I give in to the urge to commit sororicide."

Tink smooched the air loudly in her direction. "He filled out an application—it's under the desk, so you already have his number...just sayin'."

But before her sister could smack her for her impudence, she wisely departed the premises, headed for the laundry room.

Knowing he couldn't have helped but eavesdrop on their conversation, which only made her flush even brighter, Dina walked the two steps back into the office and found her potential employee already assessing the building with a critical eye.

He was more than tall enough to simply reach up and poke up a ceiling tile and was still doing so when she returned. "Got a leak?"

"Leaks, plural, I'm afraid," Dina answered, looking for the application Tink had said he had filled out and finding it in a folder that was inappropriately—and probably libelously—labeled, "GET YOU SOME OF THIS MAN!"

Tossing that folder in favor of a blank one, she tucked the one page document and accompanying three pages of what she assumed were letters of reference into it, then impulsively grabbed her keys, coming out from behind the desk and heading for the door. "Let's go somewhere else and talk."

She held the door for him, for which he thanked her once he'd stepped out.

Two points for him for having manners or, at least, the appearance thereof.

Dina locked the door behind them and began to walk up the street, but it didn't take long before she was accosted and grabbed up into a bear hug by someone he hoped was a friend who literally lifted her off her feet and swung her around.

"Dini!"

"Put me down, Carter," she requested patiently, and he did,

immediately. "Carter Lonnegan, this is Garrett Birch. Garrett, this is Carter Lonnegan."

Garrett stuck his hand out. "It's nice to meet you, man."

Carter looked at it for a moment, then at Dina, who nodded, and then he shook hands as he'd been taught to do, with boundless enthusiasm. But Carter's challenges didn't seem to faze Garrett in the least, which was more points in his favor, as far as Dina was concerned. "It's n-nice to meet y-you, too!"

"You're feeling better, I take it?"

"Yes, thanks to your CLT..." He paused, knowing that wasn't quite right. "LCT?"

Dina stood there patiently, letting the young man work it out for himself.

"TLC!" he yelled ecstatically when he knew he had it right.

"You got it, man! High five!" He hit her hand fit to knock her down, pushing her back into Garrett, who reached out to steady her. "I'm glad you're feeling well, my friend."

"Thanks to you and your magic chowdah." He leaned down and gave her what sounded like a very sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"You're welcome, buddy. Say hi to Weezie for me."

"Will do. I love you, Dini-beanie!" he confessed loudly as he began to walk away from them.

"Love you, too, Carter-bear."

Three other people—all of whom he was politely introduced to each time—stopped her as they were walking down the street—some giving him the eye he was getting used to being on the receiving end of. He recognized that slightly suspicious Yankee air, that checking you out look that wasn't entirely unfriendly, but distinctly curious, and—he noticed with her—with a slight protective, almost proprietous air.

It got worse when they entered what seemed to be a small coffee shop-slash-bakery. He didn't think there was a table they went by where someone—or all of them—didn't get up and hug her or, at the very least, call out to her by name, and introduc-

tions were, necessarily, dispensed with, or they would never have gotten to actually sit down.

She motioned to him to take a booth at the back, then proceeded to go behind the counter and grab two mugs, as well as all of the usual accoutrements, plus a muffin that was the size of his head. Literally.

"You look hungry," Dina said, by way of explanation as she put it down in front of him.

She was entirely unprepared for how that full-on smile hit her, her entire body contracting, even though there was nothing even remotely sexual in his expression or his behavior. It put her on edge in a way she hadn't been in a very long time. She wasn't *supposed* to feel this way anymore. That part of her life was over.

But, apparently, her genitals had not gotten the memo. She'd almost succeeded in forgetting she owned that part of herself, but now it came roaring back to life at, of course, only the most inconvenient of moments.

Dina watched him tuck into the muffin—the first bite making him groan in a way that could definitely have been interpreted—by her formerly perpetually dirty mind—as extremely sexual.

"Damn, this is wonderful!"

She couldn't help but smile back at him. "You're welcome."

He looked puzzled. "Do you own this place, too?"

"No, but it's my recipe. I gave it to Clair when she opened. It's her bestselling muffin."

"You sold yourself short."

Dina shrugged. "We help each other around here. I went to school with Clair. I was a bridesmaid at her wedding, and her grandmother taught pretty much everyone I know at the schoolhouse on the hill for a hundred years or so—that's how it is in a tiny New England town—especially one on an island as small as we are."

When he'd finished, she bussed the plate to the back, refilled their coffee, then sat down again.

"So...you made a conquest of Tink."

There was that smile again, and it was almost more potent because of the slight blush that accompanied it. "If that's true, please allow me to reassure you that it was entirely unintended, and that it won't go anywhere."

She almost bristled at that. "Why not?"

He laughed at her. "Let's just say that she's a bit...young for my tastes, and leave it at that."

Dina wasn't at all sure what to make of that, so she ignored it.

"Be that as it may, I'm nowhere near as easily impressed. Tell me why I should give you this job."

And he very nearly made her eat her words. If anything, he was overqualified—although not necessarily in the manner Tink had been referring to, although probably that way, too, come to think of it.

"I spent summers—from the time I was less than legal age till the summer before I graduated from college—working construction for my uncle. If you wanted me to, I could build you new cottages from the ground up."

She snorted. "I'd love to take you up on that, but I can't afford it."

Garrett nodded. "Understood. But I have more than enough know-how to fix anything that might need fixing, from electric to plumbing to roofing."

"But you're not licensed to do any of those?" she asked pointedly.

"No, I'm not. But how many of the others who have applied *were* licensed, if I might be impertinent enough to ask?"

"None." They both knew that he had overheard what Tink had said about there having been no applicants at all, but she wasn't about to remind him of that.

On the spur of the moment, Garrett went with his gut—which he had followed frequently and had rarely regretted—and

it said that this woman was intriguing, and he wanted to get to know her better. So, he found himself suggesting, "And, I think there's one other thing about me that might make me more attractive to you than any of your other applicants."

Dina's eyebrow rose. "Oh? And what is that?"

"I don't want anything more from you than room and board. I don't need a paycheck." He could, of course, afford to stay at the most expensive place on the island without batting an eyelash. But certain parts of him—both the more prurient as well as the more intellectual and emotional pieces—were pushing him to try to spend as much time with her as possible.

Now both of her brows were flirting with her hairline.

Room and board had not been one of the things she had counted on offering in regard to compensation, but then, if she hired him, she would be saving herself the twenty-thousand-dollar salary she *had* been offering. Even at his size, she knew it wasn't going to cost her that much to feed him, and it wasn't going to cost her anything at all to let him sleep in one of the upstairs bedrooms of her house, which was one house down from the motel.

Hell, even if she just let him stay at her place until she could find other arrangements somewhere, she'd still be ahead by the time he left at the end of fall, when she intended to close up for the year.

Letting her stay with him wasn't going to cost her anything except her privacy, which she valued very highly. She'd rarely had anyone stay over, even when her husband had been alive and she'd actually had somewhat of a life.

"So...you're independently wealthy at twelve years of age?"

The blush was back, surprising her. "I'm thirty-five, thank you."

"Well, I'm forty-two, which makes you twelve."

He didn't look happy at her response, but decided not to go there—yet. "And, as to the independently wealthy...something

like that. Actually, my family and I used to vacation on the M.D.I.—before I began to work summers for my uncle. As a matter of fact, we stayed right here, every year, in cabin numbers eleven and twelve, and I really loved it." Her face lit up at that, and Garrett realized that he wished he could get her to do that more often. "I've always wanted to live here, and I'm...comfortable enough that I don't *have* to work, but I know myself well enough that I know I need something to do, and I really enjoyed construction. I like doing things with my hands."

Dina closed her eyes against the urge to comment on that line in a manner that would be highly improper, which was something she always had to suppress, considering that she caught every double entendre or innuendo she heard.

"So, when I found the ad, I was kind of casually browsing online for things I might do up here that would let me get my hands dirty again."

"What kind of business are you in now?"

"Well, once I graduated college, I was in the military for a while, then I came out and went into computers—software, actually."

Dina didn't suppress this urge in the least, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Ugh."

"Ugh? What does that mean?"

"I don't do computers."

He looked taken aback—if also slightly amused at that statement, asking with impressive perception, "What does that mean to you?"

"It means that I hired Tink—who is my younger sister—to be my computer guru so that I don't have to deal with the blasted infernal contraptions." That earned her an all too cute crooked grin, which she didn't want to acknowledge that she'd even noticed, flustering her such that she gave him more information than she might have. "My husband used to handle that kind of thing for me."

"Ah. I noticed your rings—they're beautiful."

"Thank you," Dina returned, almost absently rubbing them as was her habit occasionally. "They're rolling rings—we each wore the two rings intertwined, so that we were always together."

"That's a beautiful sentiment."

Garrett watched in horror as those cloudy hazel eyes filled with tears. "It is—until one of you dies."

Two tears spilled down her cheeks, and he didn't hesitate to reach across the table to cover her much smaller hand with his, squeezing gently and continuing to hold it loosely afterwards. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Somehow, she believed it from him, although she had no idea why. She wasn't the type to feel close to anyone quickly—especially not now, and especially not someone like him.

After all, he was still a touron, a Masshole at that.

What's more, he was a stranger.

Despite the fact that she was in the service industry and met new people all day every day all summer long—and now even before and after that as what had been a pretty short season from Memorial to Labor Day had become a much more extended one that ran from early or mid-May and into November, although she wasn't sure she wanted to remain open quite that long — Dina was not what one would call a people person, particularly as regarded her personal life. She'd met her husband young—when they were both in the one small high school on the island—and she'd never looked at another man since.

Well, until today, that was—because she was most definitely looking at this one, as much as she didn't want to admit it to herself.

Dina withdrew her hand, thankful that he didn't try to keep a hold of it, clearing her throat and dashing the tears from her face with no small amount of embarrassment. "No, I'm sorry for crying all over you during a job interview. I'm sure that's listed as a no-no in the boss handbook."

"I do try not to cry when I'm interviewing people, myself," he teased lightly, watching as she visibly closed up—body stiff and tense—and experiencing the strange feeling of wishing that she didn't feel that she had to around him.

"Well, Mr...."

"Birch," he supplied smoothly. "Garrett."

Dina nodded. "As much as I am suspicious of the fact that you seem too good to be true, I'm going to hire you—on a probationary basis—for the next month. Of course, that's contingent on your references checking out."

"Of course."

"I'll be putting you to work doing pretty much some of everything you have listed here as skills. Although I get to the motel about seven or so every morning—especially during season—and sometimes I don't leave until after nine, I'm on call twenty-four-seven, and I'll expect you to mirror that. Lord knows I'm going to need to call on you because someone's toilet is backed up, even if it's two in the morning, or, as you pointed out, there's a leak. I'll want you to do lawn maintenance, too, and a certain amount of landscaping," she pressed.

And he didn't balk. "I've not done that before, but I'm sure I could figure it out."

She eyed him sharply. "If this works out, I might well want you to take over the pool maintenance, also, because the service I pay for is costing me a fortune."

"I'd be glad to. I have several—" he stopped himself, as if he didn't want to brag. "I have some experience with maintaining pools, although I've used a service myself and they are pricey."

Dina stood and offered him her hand. "Welcome aboard."

Garrett smiled and got up, towering over her as he shook her hand firmly. "Thank you."

She held onto his hand a bit longer than normal, which prompted him to tilt his head questioningly at her. "You're not

going to turn out to be a serial killer, are you?" she asked, only half in jest.

"Not yet, anyway." He grinned. "But then, isn't that what a serial killer would say?"

"Shut up. Are you trying to talk me out of hiring you?"

"No, Miss Dina."

She had the sense that he was laughing at her but didn't bother to comment. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just one. Where will I be staying? In one of the cabins?"

Dina snorted, heading for the door. "When I could rent out a blanket on a floor to the tourons for three hundred a night? I don't think so. You'll be staying with me. I live right around the corner from the motel."

He frowned, repeating, "Tourons?"

She gave him a smile he intended to coax from her as often as he could. It was mischievous and sneaky, like she was a child using a dirty word where her parents couldn't hear. "Tourist plus moron. Touron."

He had to chuckle, if chide her a bit while he was doing so. "Paying guests, you mean?"

She stopped short, and—as he nearly ran into her, which would have flattened her against the door she was reaching for—Garrett wondered if she was going to take him to task for scolding her, especially as she turned to shake her finger at him.

"But don't be getting any ideas just because you're living with me—it's only going to be temporary, anyway, until I can find you another place. The Chief of Police was my husband's best friend, and he lives two doors down, and my neighbors on the other side and across from the house are both Staties."

He looked affronted that she would think such a thing, although his outrage didn't quite reach those twinkling eyes of his. "I would never overstep the bounds of propriety in any way at all, Miss Dina. Perish the thought."

Then he reached for and held the door open for her, like the

proper gentleman she had her doubts that he was, letting her precede him.

She wasn't fooled by his tame behavior in the least. Indeed, Dina was wondering just who it was that she'd agreed to take into her house.