

# Chapter One

Abby Miller was after peaches, and she was determined to keep going until she got some. It didn't matter that she was a grown woman climbing a peach tree. Her weight caused the tree branch to creak and groan, bending it dangerously low toward the ground. Peaches lay spilled in the grass.

A white cotton T-shirt and cut-off jeans complimented her small figure. It was too hot to wear anything else. Her white kitchen apron had been completely full of fresh fruit, then she'd gone and gotten off-balance. All of her precious peaches joined the over-ripe ones lying below. The hot Alabama sun bore down on her tan arms and she wrapped sticky fingers around a branch trying to remain aloft. The peach tree exacted revenge and scratched her arm, leaving a bright red welt.

Undaunted, she slowly reached up to grasp the branch above. Peach leaves rustled in time with her movements. She had plans to make a peach pie and she was determined to emerge from the tree victorious. The most luscious peach she had ever seen, lay tantalizingly just beyond her fingertips. One, small, tentative, step toward it. The tree creaked and the branch arched lower. Just one more step...Crack! With a sudden jerk, she found herself falling in a flurry of leaves and panic, landing with a thud on the ground.

Abby gazed up as the tree teased her. Its leaves waving in the gentle breeze. She tried to sit up, but a stab of pain grabbed her left shoulder. Tilting her head just a bit, brought a small amount of relief. Everything felt a little woozy. Gingerly, she folded her left arm across her body like a chicken wing. She took her right and held it in place. The position made the pain tolerable, at least for the moment. Absolutely helpless, she lay quietly still.

"Abby," a deep voice called from around the front of the house. "Hey, anybody home?"

Great, the grease monkey from next door. *Do I answer, or wait for someone else?* His face popped up so close to hers she could smell his breath. Auburn eyebrows furrowed in concern. His 'New Orleans Saints,' baseball cap was pulled low. A sharp pop sounded from his

mouth. Abby stared as his tongue worked a piece of gum around. It was double mint. The scent was unmistakable.

He leaned over and got right in her face. “What happened?”

The second problem of her day presented itself in the form of this handsome red neck. They were introduced only a few days ago. She was unloading boxes from the rented moving van, when grease monkey, aka, the next door neighbor, slithered out of his lair from beneath a pick-up truck. Covered head to toe in grease and oil, the muscles of his arms bulged out of a dirty cut-off shirt.

“Hey there, little lady, put those boxes down, they’re way too heavy. I’ll be right out to help you.”

His genial tone was kind, but frankly, Abby didn’t want to be bothered. Little lady! What year was this, 1955? She turned her back on him and took the boxes inside. Just a few minutes later, grease monkey sauntered in her front door. He swiftly took the boxes out of her hands and stood staring at her.

“Where do these go?”

This was unexpected. She considered telling him to get out, but hesitated. She hated to be offensive her very first day in town. *Just be polite.*

“They belong in here. Put them on the floor.”

Grease monkey looked a little sheepish as he set them down. Standing, he stuck out a dirty hand but immediately pulled it back. Grabbing a rag out of his back pocket, he began to wipe.

“Just a sec.”

Sticking his hand back out, he waited expectantly for her to shake. She stared. His hands were heavily muscled and square with thick fingers. The veins stood out on the top and lines of black grease were under his nails. *Maybe he’ll go away if I just go ahead and shake.* She put her small hand in his, expecting him to crush her fingers. His touch was callused but amazingly gentle. He lightly held her palm causing her to look up. *What an interesting eye color. Chocolate, tempered with flecks of light gold.*

The pressure of his fingers slightly increased. It sent a shiver down her spine. She felt like a school girl. “My name’s Abby, Abby Miller,” she blurted. Self-consciously, she removed her hand from his. Her arms went behind her back. Oblivious to the effect her shyness was having on

him, she blinked bright green eyes fringed with long black lashes. Grease monkey's Adam's apple went up and down. A friendly, straight-toothed smile spread slowly across his face. He sported several days' growth of ruddy beard. It went all the way down his neck. She noticed a light furring of hair the same color as his beard, peeking out the top of his shirt.

"Jesse Baker, nice to meet you, Abby." He adjusted the cap on his head causing more auburn curls to peek out.

*Why do I feel so nervous? Is he staring at me?*

"Are you sure you don't want me to put these boxes somewhere else?"

There needed to be a little more space between herself and the grease monkey. She took two steps back. "No, no, they're fine. Right where they are, um, Mr. Baker."

"Please, call me Jesse. I live next door. I was good friends with Mrs. Turner, the lady who used to live here. It's a shame she had to go to a nursing home. I was wondering who would rent her house."

Immediately, her eyes narrowed. So, he wasn't the friendly southerner after all. He was just the nosey next door neighbor. She decided to put an end to the conversation.

"Thank you for your help. It's nice to meet you, but I'm really busy as you can see..." She waved her hand indicating the mess in the living room.

He adjusted the cap on his head and stepped toward the front door. "Young ladies don't have any business lifting heavy boxes." The reprimand was impossible to miss, and the intensity of his gaze made her squirm. "You've got a lot of stuff to move, darlin. I'm going to give a shout out to a couple of friends. We'll have that moving van unloaded in an hour." He promptly turned around and left.

Her nostrils flared. "Of all the nerve..." She locked the front door but could still hear him on his phone obviously talking to his friends. She went back to unpacking boxes. In less than twenty minutes, there was a knock at the door. Sneaking a peek through the blinds, she saw four beefy red necks, including grease monkey, standing on the front porch.

He pounded again then turned around to say something to his buddies. Abby quickly let the blind go and prayed he hadn't seen her. Knock, knock, knock. "That truck ain't gonna unload itself. It'll take you a week. Open the door."

She peeked out again and looked over at the moving van. It would take her a week. She finally relented. They blew in the front door like a summer thunderstorm.

“This is Ed, Earl, and Jim. You stand here and tell us where you want everything.” They disappeared off the porch and hopped into the back of the truck. True to his word, everything was unloaded and in the house within the hour. “Now, you call me if you need anything. Anything at all. Here’s my cell number.” He scribbled on a piece of paper. Abby took a step back. He took a step forward and put the scrap of paper in her hand. “Anything at all.”

She closed the door behind them. Appreciative of the help, she still couldn’t believe how pushy that guy was. Well, she’d heard people in the south were “friendly.” She took a look around and gave a big sigh. There was so much work to be done, yet, she was proud of herself. She’d really gone and done it. Moved away from home without leaving so much as a forwarding address. It still felt a little scary. She thought about grease monkey and his friendly buddies. *Hmmm, should I thank him or yell at him for interfering?* The peach tree out back had plenty of fruit. When she had time, she’d make him a pie as a thank you. That’s how she found herself lying on the ground unable to move.

“Were you climbing that tree?”

“What do you think?” She was hurting so badly she wanted to cry.

He leaned over and placed a hand behind her to help her up. A scream was all he received for his efforts. He quickly withdrew.

“You’ve broken something, darlin.” His eyes searched the peach tree, then her face. “You don’t climb fruit trees, you use a ladder. A fruit tree’s branches can’t hold much weight.” His eyes ran over her. “Although, you’re not much bigger than a minute.” Sitting back on his heels, he continued the observations. “Anybody from the south knows that, but...I guess you’re not from the south.”

“No,” Abby licked her dry lips, “I’m not.” She sniffed. “I just wanted to pick peaches. I was going to make a pie.” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words, “for you.” She was too mad. “How about you leave me alone? I’ll eventually get up.”

“Yeah, it looks like you’ll be getting up...any minute.” He adjusted his cap. “Where does it hurt?”

“I’ll be able to get up in a little while, I said.” She resolutely closed her eyes. He had been cute as a grease monkey. As a cleaned up red neck, he was downright handsome.

“And I said, where does it hurt? You might as well tell me. I’m not about to let you lie out here in the yard.”

One lone tear made its way out of the corner of her eye.

“Aw, shucks. Don’t cry, darlin.”

“My shoulder.” She gritted out between clenched teeth. “It’s killing me, I can’t move my head or my left arm.”

“Can you wiggle your fingers?” She could. “How about your wrist?” It was fine. “Okay, let’s try the elbow.” It seemed to work. “Carefully, try to move your shoulder.”

When Abby gingerly tested it, she cried out in pain. “It hurts, really bad.”

“You’ve broken your collar bone, sweetheart. You’re not going to be able to sit up without help. Just grit your teeth. I’m going to pick you up as easy as I can.”

Abby screamed as Jesse slid his arms beneath her, but once he got her settled against his chest, it didn’t hurt quite so much. He moved in one smooth motion but instead of taking her inside the house, he left through the white gate of her picket fence and went straight to his truck, gently placing her in the front seat.

“Owww.”

“You stay right here, I’ll just be a minute.”

*Just where does he think I’m going to go?* He wasn’t gone long.

“I’m going to use this piece of material to make a sling. You just sit still. It’ll hurt to put it on, but it will stabilize your arm and feel a lot better in the long run.”

“No, no, no, I don’t want you to touch my arm. No, don’t, touch, my, arm.”

“Shhh, I won’t hurt you any more than I have to.” He ignored her protests and continued to ease the sling around her.

“No, no, no.”

He smoothly slid the triangle shaped material under her arm.

“No! Ah, ah, ohhh, ow, ow.” There was no getting away from him. She hurt too much to even try. He tied the sling behind her neck. Her left arm rested in place. Tears ran down her face but the pain had eased just a bit.

“You stay still, little miss. The medical clinic is right down the street.”

Abby thought she preferred young lady, to little miss. What must he think of her? She felt like an idiot. A grown woman falling out of a tree. Oh! But she was mad at herself. *I do not want to depend on this guy.*

They'd only traveled a few blocks when he pulled up in front of a small brick building with a sign that said, 'Ocala Medical Clinic.' He went around the truck and reached in to pick her up.

"I don't know if they take my insurance."

His booming laugh rolled over her. "Darlin, this is Ocala, Alabama. The doctor will just as soon take sweet potatoes as he will insurance." He picked her up and took the stairs two at a time. Someone was coming out of the building at just that moment. They held the door open for him.

"Broken collarbone," he announced, as he sailed right through the waiting room and into the back.

A nurse rushed toward him. "Bring her right in, Jesse, but don't lay her down. She's got to have an x-ray. Just sit here and hold her on your lap till Doctor Middleton gets here." Jesse did as he was told, holding Abby close. They sat in a chair in examination room A. By this time, she didn't care if Godzilla was holding her. She was hurting so badly she bit her lip to keep from crying. He sat as still and solid as a statue.

He bent his head to her ear. "It'll be over soon."

It was only a few minutes before Doctor Middleton came in and directed him to take Abby immediately to the x-ray table. He was as gentle as he could be, and the nurse tried to help, but Abby still screamed in agony when he lay her down.

The doctor tried to be reassuring. "All right, dear, I'll try to hurry." She would have preferred some opiate pain relievers to the compassion. The x-rays were soon done and indeed, Doctor Middleton took pity on her and gave her a wonderful shot of painkiller. She sagged in relief, closed her eyes and dozed.

Strong hands supported her back and shoulder as she sat her up. She heard the nurse say, "Jesse, you wait outside now. I'll call you when we're done." The doctor placed a brace around her to hold things in place. It didn't hurt too horribly. Pain medicine was a true miracle. Jesse came back in and carried her to his truck. The nurse gave him some pillows, and he carefully propped Abby's arm to keep her from shifting on the ride home. The next thing she knew, she was in her bed, it was morning, and she desperately needed to get to the bathroom. Her right hand flailed over to the clock on the bed side table, but she only succeeded in knocking it to the floor. The grease monkey sauntered in.

She couldn't help the squeak of surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"What did you think I would do? Leave you here all by yourself? I didn't know if you had any family nearby or not. I slept on the couch. Bet you need to get up, don't you?"

Abby could have just died. She did not want to be discussing bathroom necessities with this guy. She was also grumpy. Her shoulder was hurting again. "Yes, I need to use the bathroom. Can you help me sit up?"

"Yes, ma'am, I sure can." His smile was very unsettling. "Don't try to move. If the muscle pulls against that collarbone, it will hurt like the dickens. Doc gave me some pain meds for you. I'll fill you full after you get done in the bathroom." He put his arms underneath her back and shoulder and lifted her straight up to a sitting position. She still had the same outfit on as the day before. She was covered, but she still couldn't help turning bright red. This was awful. A complete stranger was in her house taking care of her. It was hard not to feel sorry for herself. Abby gave a sniff, but Jesse acted like he didn't notice. He slowly helped her turn her legs to let them hang over the bed and then helped her to stand.

"I can't believe a broken collarbone gives you all this trouble," she complained.

"Bet you never had a broken bone before have you, little miss? You should have seen me the time I broke both arms jumping on a trampoline. My arms snapped like a twig. My mama had to do everything for me for weeks, and I mean everything. It's awful how the least little break hurts you all over, no matter how small." Jesse then waxed eloquent about the time his cousin David, broke his leg racing go-carts. By the time Jesse was finished with his story, Abby was distracted enough to be in the bathroom. "I'll give you some privacy." With a wink, he disappeared through the bathroom door.

She managed to take care of her needs, but another blush crawled up her face as she thought of the intimate stranger in the next room. *Why in the world did I move below the Mason Dixon line anyway?* She felt so embarrassed she didn't want to leave the bathroom, but she couldn't stay in there all day. Slowly, she made her way to the kitchen and sat down at the table. He acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. His casual tone helped.

"All right, little miss, you need to try and eat a bite before you take these pain pills. What food do you have in the house?" She didn't know why he bothered to ask her a question. He already had his head buried in the refrigerator. "There ain't enough food in here to feed a church mouse."

He started to go through her cabinets when she interrupted. “I’m actually kind of nauseous, Mr. Baker. Can you just get me a cup of coffee and a pain pill?”

He moseyed over to her and leaned over in her face with his hands on his knees. He reached out to brush a strand of hair out of the way. Those big brown eyes of his looked like chocolate drops. He tucked the hair behind her ear.

“Well you see, I can’t do that. Those pain pills will make you throw up for sure if you take ‘em on an empty stomach. That won’t do you any good now will it? How bout I make you some plain toast?” Abby gave a small nod as he put two slices of bread in the toaster. “I see you’re still not willing to call me by my first name. That’s all right. But you might as well call me by the right name if you’re going to be so formal.” He set the toast down on the table and as Abby took a bite, he said, “You can call me sheriff.” He tweaked her nose and went back over to the counter to clean up the toast crumbs. “You’re lucky you don’t belong to me. I tell you one thing, I’d blister your behind good for climbing that tree, once your arm was well, of course.”

If Abby hadn’t been in so much pain, she would have choked. *Blister her behind! The town sheriff! And he lived right next door! Shoot! Talk about the ultimate red neck, bossy, busy body.*

“Just so happens, little lady, you’re in luck. Today’s my day off, so I’ll be able to stay here and take care of you. That is, unless you’ve got someone in town I can call to come help you.”

Abby’s eyes immediately welled up with tears. A big, fat one plopped onto her lap. He walked over and reached up a hand to wipe another tear away with his thumb.

“Shhh, it’s going to be all right, you don’t need to cry. You’re just hurtin and that makes everything seem worse than it is.” She tried to turn away but he reached up and pushed his big paw through her straight blonde hair. Grabbing a tissue, he wiped her nose.

Abby wanted to get rid of him in the worst way. “You’ve really gone out of your way...sheriff. It’s just that, I’m new here in town and...I don’t have anyone to call. As much as I hate to say it, I don’t think I can manage by myself. Maybe I could call the nurse at the doctor’s office and she would know of somebody that could come.”

“Not another word, not another word,” he said as he stood. “It’s my duty as Sheriff to welcome all the newcomers. Especially the ones who fall out of peach trees.” He smiled and



popped a pill in her mouth. “Drink this juice.” She obliged. “Do you want to lay down in the bed or on the couch?”

*Man he was bossy.* “Well, I think I’d like the couch better. I can get up and down easier and maybe I can watch some TV. I just got the cable hooked up.”

“Say no more.” He gently helped her stand and doted over her till she got settled. He hovered over her all day, at least what Abby remembered of the day. She napped on and off between pain pills and commercials. He helped her to bed early, and she slept like a log.