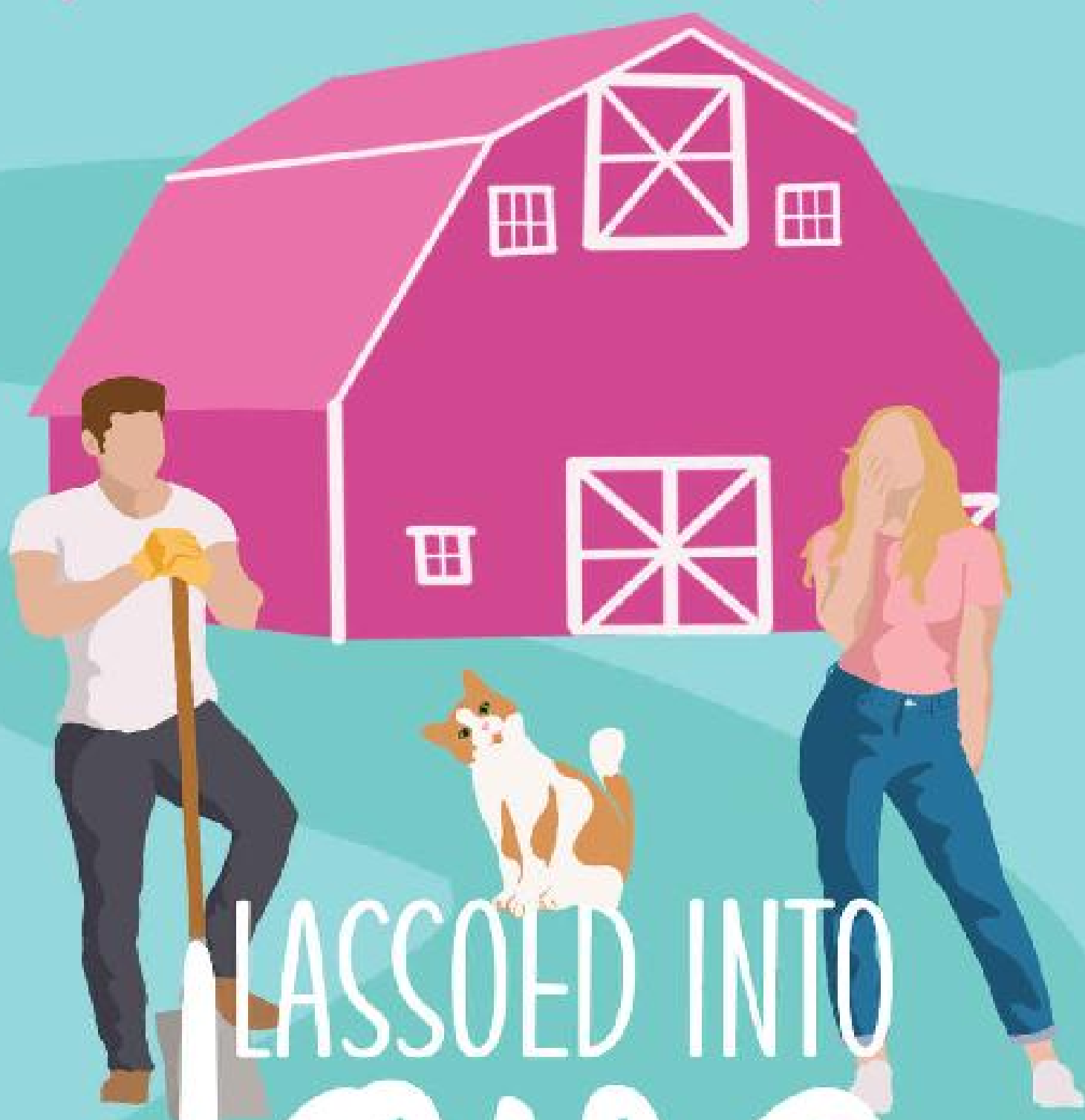


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Rachael Eliker



LASSOED INTO

Love

# Lassoed into Love

A SWEET SMALL-TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

RACHAEL ELIKER

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***Farming is my dream life, but one thing I'm not cultivating?  
Feelings for the handsome new neighbor.***

I am *not* fanning myself because Parker Bingham, the hottest actor in Hollywood, is my new neighbor. If I tell myself that a million times, maybe I'll believe my racing heart isn't because of the smile Parker points too often in my direction.

It's not that I hate Parker. He's mostly clueless—he can barely outsmart a sitting hen, and doesn't know the wrong end of a cow from her nose. I only want to keep my distance so I don't let Parker hurt me.

Not again.

We were best friends once, but now, Parker doesn't even remember me.

It's fine. I'm too busy to care. I've got weeds to pull and goats to milk, plus a new stray cat to care for, so I'll keep my head down and do what I do best. *Work.*

Of course, Parker keeps insisting he offer an extra set of hands. Allowing it means more checks on my to-do list, and has nothing to do with getting a front-row seat to seeing him shirtless.

Okay, it's a teensy, *tiny* perk. One with amazing abs.

Spending time with Parker skirts dangerously close to the edge, a place where he might see past the razor wire defenses I've constructed around my heart. He's tempting, but Parker has forgotten me before. The only thing that might be easier than letting love go is never loving at all.

## Author Newsletter



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*For anyone who's ever felt unseen or overlooked, this story's  
for you.*



## Chapter One



### PARKER

I stood with my back against the kitchen wall and pushed off, counting each step. There was a straight shot from the tiny farmhouse kitchen through to the sitting room that was decorated like the seventies were alive and well. Wood paneling was accented by a wall of floral wallpaper, and there were no less than three macrame plant hangers spilling over with greenery. The plaid couch was the *pièce de résistance* that really brought the room together.

When my nose hit the opposite wall, I'd taken a grand total of fifteen steps, and that was being generous. I could have easily made it in ten if I tried.

I'd had extended stays in hotel suites that were twice the size, *and* had a view of something other than cornfields and cow pastures.

Banging my forehead against the wall hard enough to rattle my brain, I closed my eyes, held my breath, and counted the seconds until my lungs burned. "What am I doing here?"

The modest home was undoubtedly sturdy, but beyond a solid foundation, I struggled to envision how anyone could be content living like this. I didn't like country chic even when it was done right. But it was more than the house. It was the entire lifestyle I'd agreed to. When I'd jumped at a friend's request for help, I wasn't in the right frame of mind, and was looking for a way to escape the hot-faced embarrassment I'd caused myself during a business meeting gone horribly wrong.

That, and because my longtime girlfriend unceremoniously dumped me, and I couldn't stomach the idea of seeing her around the usual places we hung out as a couple, I'd run. If not for the perfect storm that made me want to disappear off the map, there was no way I would have ended up in Button Blossom, Indiana, a town so sparse I might have missed the entire place if I'd sneezed too long while driving.

So much for using the summer to regroup, maybe relax. Step back and assess how I could get back on the horse. My idea of a vacation was sitting by a pool, sipping a drink out of a coconut, where there wasn't a barn in sight. The more I investigated my surroundings, the more certain I was that I'd voluntarily agreed to three months of torture.

If life had taken any other direction, I'd be filming my next blockbuster, probably traveling to an exotic destination so I could be paid handsomely to save the world by bringing down the fictional bad guys. Bonus points if it was on some private white-sand beach peppered with palm trees. Instead, I'd been unceremoniously passed over for the part following an unfortunate mishap with a producer at his daughter's birthday party, leaving me with nothing to do for the first time since I could remember. That's how Clint tricked me into looking after his parents' farm for a few months while *they* traveled. He didn't exactly twist my arm to do it, but he could have been more forthcoming with how remote their place actually was. I was raised in Indiana, and even *I* hadn't heard of Button Blossom.

"This has to be penance for everything horrible I've ever done."

Before I could decide if punching the wall or slumping down to the ground to cry like a baby would be more cathartic, my phone rang.

I pulled it out, knowing who it was before I even answered. "Clint, this isn't—"

"Hold up. I know what you're going to say," Clint interrupted with a voice that boomed like a rottweiler, though

he was as harmless as a blind, toothless lap dog. “You’re already having the time of your life.”

My frustration came through as a laugh. “That is the polar opposite of what I was going to say.”

“Come on, man. This has to be better than crashing on my couch.”

Rolling my eyes hard enough I was in danger of damaging my optic nerve, I ran a hand down the whiskers of my unshaven face. A couple of weeks away from Hollywood, and I was already halfway between hipster and full-blown mountain man. “I see. You conned me into this so you could keep your apartment to yourself.”

“You know that’s not it, man. I have a hard time seeing someone as important as you sleeping on a couch. You’re used to sleeping on silk sheets.”

“Dude, I’ve roughed it before.”

“It doesn’t count if you’re in a movie trailer that’s nicer than ninety percent of the world’s homes, *and* it’s parked on a beach.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Clint may have had a minor point. It was no secret that I had a penchant for beaches, and I supposed it was public knowledge what I slept on. Fans were always wanting to know details like that.

“Besides,” he said, “I told you already that you’re doing my parents a huge favor.”

“If this is such a huge favor, then why aren’t you here, house-sitting for them like a dutiful son?”

Clint scoffed. I was getting under his skin, and even though I knew it was a jerk thing to do, taking my irritations out on him, he was an easy target. “You know I would have done it, but not everyone has a job like you. I can’t step away from everything for months on end without consequences.”

“I’m going to have consequences for disappearing from the public eye. People forget quickly.”

“Right.” Clint laughed outright. “Your rabid, screaming fans will still be there sobbing over your mere presence when you’re done being a man of your word.”

I had to hand it to Clint for knowing where my pressure points were. Staying was the only option, because I’d already committed. Sometimes I thought about strangling my conscience so I’d be an autonomous person, but the little voice in my head disapproved of murder, probably because he was trying to save his own skin.

My stubborn moral compass wasn’t the only reason I was in that tiny farmhouse. I had looked for a place to tuck my tail and run from life when things weren’t going as planned, and I’d found it. It was a place to lie low while I recovered, and Clint’s family farm was the definition of obscure. Almost completely surrounded by trees, the closest neighbor was barely visible across the road. I probably would have had just as many neighbors if I’d relocated to the moon.

“I know.” I moved over to the couch and flopped down, making the springs squeak in protest. “Currently, I’m unemployed and you’re not.”

“Look, I didn’t mean that—”

“I know you didn’t mean anything by it. I guess I’m still a smidgen bitter.”

“About what? Being passed over for a job or about Finley dumping you? Rumor has it that you screwed up on both accounts.”

The dull, pulsing throb at my temples threatened an oncoming headache. “Thank you for reminding me how sucky things have been going lately. Losing out on a job, losing my girlfriend, and now relegated to the backwoods to hide in shame.”

“Isn’t there a saying that bad things happen in threes?” Clint asked. “There’s the silver lining to your situation.”

“Now that you mention it, I feel the warmth of the sun on my face after the stormy clouds of this year already. Thank you. Truly.”

“Look,” Clint laughed at my sarcasm, and if we were talking in person, I would have slugged him in the arm, the way brothers roughed each other up, “I know this isn’t ideal for you, but seriously, my parents are so appreciative. They haven’t been on vacation since I don’t know when. It’s not easy for them to get away from the farm and I know Dad’s been wanting to take Mom on a world tour since they got married. They kind of deserve it at this point in their lives.”

“Maybe they should have spent the money they used for traveling on a home renovation instead,” I mumbled.

“Hey! Don’t knock the farmhouse. It might not look like much, but that’s where I grew up.”

“Sorry. There’s going to be an adjustment period. I’m not used to living in a matchbox that’s older than my great-great-grandma. It’s very quaint, though the styling is... just... *wow*. I don’t think I’ve ever seen green-striped carpet in person before.”

“My parents’ choice of home decor aside, there are some definite positives to living in the country.”

“Oh, yeah? Do you enjoy squawking chickens as your alarm clock or that the air is perfumed with the faint aroma of diesel and manure better?”

“There’s hardly any traffic—”

“Except for trucks and tractors,” I pointed out. “Which drive very, *very* slowly.”

“—you can’t beat the sunrises... Plus, I hear the neighbor is cute.”

“You haven’t met her?”

“I knew her when I was younger, but I haven’t seen her in something like a decade when I flew the coop for college. Even then, she was more like a kid sister than anyone I’d seriously considered dating. Plus, I’m in a happily committed relationship. If I went around looking at other women, Irma would gouge my eyes out with hot poker.”

“Does she hiss and pee circles around you if another woman comes within ten feet?”

“She’s not possessive. She’s...”

“Clingy? Jealous?”

Clint sighed, signaling the end of the topic. “My mom’s the one who mentioned my neighbor. Said she’s an absolute doll.”

“A doll? Is the neighbor a twelve-year-old girl who wears her hair in pigtails?”

“That’s about how old she was when I left, so she’s not a kid anymore. And since when do you turn your nose up at pigtails? On a grown woman, I think they’re cute.”

“Maybe for a country bumpkin. I prefer a little more sophistication.”

“You might think you prefer high-maintenance prima donnas, but you might be surprised how amazing a *normal* woman can be.”

“Like your girlfriend?” A slow grin crept up my face, and it was definitely better we weren’t speaking face to face or he’d be punching me for teasing him about his girlfriend. I wasn’t a featherweight, but Clint had been raised on corn, beef, and years of hard work on the farm. He could have sent me crashing through a wall if he wanted to. A knock on the door paused our conversation. “Hang on.”

Trying to tiptoe to the window so I could push back the gossamer curtains, the floor groaned and creaked under each step. There would definitely not be any pretending I wasn’t home if it was someone I didn’t want to talk to, which today was pretty much everyone. Too bad the Granges didn’t have a dog, or I might’ve dropped to my hands and knees and barked like I’d been raised by a pack of wolves to see if that deterred the visitor.

Leaning close, I looked through a crack in the curtains to the porch. A pretty woman with dark blonde hair swept into a high ponytail wearing a cotton sundress. In one hand, she

clutched what appeared to be a basket of eggs fresh from the henhouse and in the other, she cradled a tiny kitten.

*Weird to bring to a neighbor meet and greet, but okay.*

She knocked again and rocked back onto her feet while the kitten's tail twitched. She had no pigtails, and other than bringing a feline with her, I'd dated women with much stranger habits. Like a girlfriend who wore a vial of blood from her deceased mother on a necklace. I ended it quickly, before she got any ideas and asked if I wanted to donate any bodily fluids for a new pendant. The thought still made me shudder.

I stood up from my hiding spot, grinning to myself, and whispered into the phone, "Clint? I'm going to have to call you back."

"What? Why? Did the cows get out again? My dad swore up and down that he'd fixed the fence so an elephant couldn't escape."

"Relax. I don't see any wandering cows, but that cute neighbor you mentioned? I think she's on the welcoming committee."

I ignored the firestorm of questions from Clint and said goodbye as I stuffed my phone back into my pocket. Running a hand through my hair, it flopped listlessly onto my forehead. I was long overdue for a haircut, but I'd given myself permission to let myself go. Not that I was going to wave farewell to my hard-earned abs, but hair would be easy to tame when I was ready to make a comeback.

Checking my breath, I cringed. I could use a mint, but I shrugged it off. It wasn't like I was going in for a kiss right out of the gate. All I was there to do was graciously accept her gift, and thank her for welcoming me here for the summer with one of my signature grins that had never been known not to win over a woman.

Maybe country living wouldn't be so bad after all.

Smoothing my hands down the front of my button-up shirt, I swung open the door with a smile. The woman met me with

wide brown eyes, and her lower lip caught between her teeth. A gust of wind blew her ponytail across her cheek and as she brushed it away, her dewy, doe eyes narrowed and went straight to something I didn't like. Why did it feel like I'd stepped between a lioness and her cubs by simply opening the door? The kitten she was holding suddenly made more sense, and it was purring in her arm. Or growling. I wasn't a cat person, and wasn't versed in the meaning of their throaty sounds.

"Hello?" I held onto the doorknob in case she pounced and I had to take refuge by slamming it in her face. I'd had to fight off my fair share of crazed fans, but it'd been a long while since I'd been the focus of a woman's ire, especially on first sight. Maybe my charm was already slipping. The thought made a knot form in my shoulders and I made a mental note to contact my publicist to make sure he was keeping my social media up to date so I'd be graciously received when I made a triumphant return. "Can I help you?"

"Sorry. Yes. Um, did the Granges leave already?"

"Yeah. I think they're somewhere over the Atlantic by now."

She shifted. Resting her egg basket on her hip, I kept my gaze locked with hers. There was no way I was going to give her more ammunition for hating me by even *thinking* of admiring her feminine curves, though from what I could tell from my peripheral vision, they were fantastic.

"So, I guess that means you're the one that's taking care of their farm while they're gone?"

"That's right. I'm Parker." I tapped my hand to my chest in a sort of *Me Tarzan, You Jane* gesture. "Parker Bing—"

"I know who you are."

My hand was frozen halfway in an offer to shake hers. I was *definitely* slipping. This kind of reaction to affirming my identity had never happened. Where was the hyperventilation? The shrill screaming? The confession of undying love? The request to autograph body parts?



Without even knowing it, she'd landed a blow that knocked my ego out cold. I regrouped. I might be clawing to get back on my feet, but I wasn't a quitter.

"I take it we're going to be neighbors for the summer? John and Mary Jo didn't leave a very thorough directory of neighbors, so I'm afraid I don't have the pleasure of knowing who you are." Coaxing my courage out of its hiding place, I raised my hand again. "If I'm Parker Bingham, that makes you..."

"Someone who'd never be asked to join the circus."

Shaking my head, I wondered if I'd heard right. The circus? "What?"

Her gaze dropped to my hand, and she gripped her kitten and the eggs closer. They were her excuse not to reciprocate. "I'd shake your hand, but I foresee bad things happening."

I dropped my hand and discreetly wiped my clammy palms across my jeans. Whoever this woman was, she knew how to play hardball and it was making me sweat.

Wondering if I could get her to talk if I changed the subject, I motioned to the basket of eggs she was holding. "Are those a welcome to the country gift?"

That earned me another glare *with* a frown. "No. Your legs look like they work just fine."

"They do. Why wouldn't they—?"

"Then you can walk out back and get your own. The Granges have a chicken coop with hens behind the house, and they lay enough that you'd never be able to eat all of them. So you can march yourself back there and help yourself instead of trying to take my eggs."

"Then what are those eggs for?"

"These are my farmer's market eggs and I'll get top dollar since they're organic, free-range, *and* rare colors."

"Right. They look like they're nice eggs." I would have given anything to rewind the last five minutes so I could stroll out onto the porch, confident, suave, and witty, and take this

conversation in a different direction. One where I didn't feel like an idiot for not knowing what I'd done to tick her off. "Sorry for the assumption. I figured you were being neighborly."

She looked back over her shoulder at the only house that I could see, and using my amazing amateur sleuthing skills, I gathered that's where she lived. "Actually, I stopped by to see if this is the Granges' kitten."

I mentally ran through the instructions the Granges had given me, but couldn't recall anything about a cat. Maybe they'd forgotten? "Honestly? I don't know. It could be."

"They didn't mention anything about her?"

I scratched at a tickle on my scalp. Perspiration was popping out of every pore, and it wasn't because it was hot outside. "I don't think so. Maybe they did, and it slipped my mind. Right now, I'm still trying to keep straight what's a heifer and what's a hen."

I started to laugh, hoping she'd join me, but there was no hint that she was finding my self-deprecating—albeit true—joke funny.

So instead, we stared at each other. I had no idea what was running through her brain, aside from her distaste for me, but that didn't keep me from trying to figure it out.

My sleuthing skills didn't extend to telepathy. At the end of the porch, there was a comfortable-looking swing. Maybe if I got her to sit down and relax, I could ease the tension out of this humiliatingly awkward exchange. I pointed to the porch swing, strolled over to it, and took a seat. Gesturing to the spot next to me, I invited her with my arm draped across the back. I was unabashedly flirting for the first time since Finley had ruined me, but if I was going to be stuck in the middle of nowhere for the next three months, I might as well have fun, and as reserved as my neighbor presented herself, she looked like she knew how to have a good time.

"Why don't you set the kitten down, and we can observe what it does. If it runs back to your place, maybe it's a stray

that wants to stay with you. If it sticks around here, maybe it is the Granges' kitty."

As her eyes flicked to the seat, I caught a twitch at the corners of her mouth as she tried to suppress a smile, which made my blood pump harder. It was working. I wasn't *completely* off my game.

Patting the seat next to me, the swing groaned and unexpectedly dropped an inch. We both looked up as the left chain pulled free, and the swing came crashing down. The next thing I knew, I had tumbled into the daylilies skirting the edge of the porch, wondering if I'd broken myself. I opened my eyes and the full measure of pain registered. Once I processed it, I noticed something else was off.

Something overwhelmingly smelly and moist.

Something the Granges had warned me not to step in, or I'd be sorry. But I hadn't stepped in it.

*No. It can't be. I am not lying in manure.*

Except, not all that deep down, I knew I was.

Sitting up, I inspected my surroundings. My fall had been cushioned by a fresh cowpie that had splattered upon impact. I should have scrambled to my feet, but instead, I closed my eyes, pretended I was on that tropical beach, slurping at the bottom of my coconut drink through a straw, and let the rest of my disgust out in a groan.

Maybe the universe was telling me I'd flirted too hard for my own good.

When I cracked open my eyes again, my nameless neighbor was hovering over me. "Are you okay? That looks like it hurt, the way you went head over feet."

"Nothing more than my ego." Glancing over my shoulder again to the pile of manure I'd squashed, I fought back a gag. Hands down, this was the most disgusting thing that'd ever happened to me. What I wouldn't have given to have a stunt double in my place.

“You probably don’t want to hear that your shirt is stained.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to hear that my very expensive shirt is stained with another creature’s excrement.”

She scrunched her nose. “First rule of living on a farm is that you shouldn’t wear anything that you aren’t okay with being ruined.”

“You’re one to talk.” I looked pointedly at her attire. “You’re wearing a dress. A *white* one.”

“That’s because all my work jeans are drying on the clothesline, and for your information, I’ve had this dress for six years, *and* I found it on a clearance rack. So even as much as I love it, if it got trashed, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

I made a note to burn all the clothes I’d brought with me when I finished my foray into the world of agriculture. “Why is there even manure in their flowers? Do they use it as fertilizer or something? I realize I’m no expert, but that looks rather fresh.”

I got to my feet, and shook my hand to get as much manure off as I could, but immediately regretted it. I hadn’t taken into consideration the trajectory of cow poo. It flew off my hand and splattered the length of my neighbor’s dress. The worst was the speck that made it onto her cheek.

“Oh, crap.”

She blinked, stunned by the manure she’d been pelted with. Releasing the kitten, it landed on its feet, and immediately trotted a safe distance away. *Smart cat*. The eggs weren’t so fortunate. I was going to owe her for her farmer’s market haul, because I don’t think a single one survived the fall. “Please tell me that wasn’t a poorly timed attempt at a pun.”

I would have slapped my forehead if I wasn’t also frozen in place by mortification. “No. Seriously... wow. No, I didn’t mean to do that. The pun or the poop. Here. There’s a glob on your cheek.”

She stiffened and shied away, her lips pursed so tightly they almost disappeared, and her head held high. Even in her current state, she was composed. “I’d rather not. I’d be lying if I said it’s been a pleasure, but I should go. It looks like you have your work cut out for you.”

“No kidding. I’m going to have to hose off outside and bathe in bleach to get all of this off of me.”

“Not that.” Tilting her head to something behind me, I craned my neck to follow her line of sight. A herd of beefy, black cows traipsed through the backyard landscaping. “The cows are out.”

## Chapter Two



MAREN

“Granny?”

The cool, dry air from the house washed over me, and I shivered. I’d hosed off as best I could outside, and though the afternoon would be sweltering, it was still crisp enough that the icy well water sank deep, all the way to my bone marrow it seemed. But the unseasonable chill wasn’t what had me unsettled. I needed to make sure Granny had no intentions of *ever* going to the Granges’ for the foreseeable future. It would take her even less time than the nanosecond it took me to recognize Parker, and then, she’d bring up Camp Hottie, which I’d eagerly attended as a naïve girl, and the heartbreak he had no idea he’d caused. If I was particularly unlucky, she’d probably try something really stupid, and try to fix me up with him.

Thank you, but no. N. O.

Once I got her to promise she wouldn’t step foot on the Granges’ property, I was skipping the stairs two at a time and turning the shower on to scalding. I’d sacrifice the outer layer of my skin to be clean again. Clean of manure and clean of any further niggling thoughts that Parker and his unholy perfection initiated. Yes, he looked even more delectable than the last time I came face to face with him, and yes, I might have briefly drooled over him like I’d been known to do when serving myself a piece of Granny’s homemade strawberry-rhubarb pie, but I would abstain. I was on a Parker diet, and I would not trip up and binge, no matter how tempting he was.

Come to think of it, I was going to have to forbid Granny from going outside. Even something as innocent as collecting the mail would undoubtedly lead her straight to Parker. Their mailbox was right next to ours, and I bet he'd be there eagerly collecting his stacks of fan mail the second Remi, the world's best mail lady, dropped it off.

"Granny? Are you in here?"

My empty egg basket swung from my elbow, and the kitten I'd found in the barn clung to me with her needle-sharp claws. Wherever she'd come from, she was a lover, for sure. Every time she purred, it was like her throat was hooked up to a megaphone.

I tickled under her chin, and it amplified her satisfaction. "You've recovered from that mean man flinging poo at us, huh, girl? You're lucky you didn't get any on you, or you'd be getting a bath today, too. Not that I have time for wrangling a cat. My to-do list is already longer than Santa's naughty and nice list."

Peering at me with her dark blue eyes, half-closed in contented slits, the kitten almost looked like she was grinning. Either she was laughing at me for how quickly I'd gone slack-jawed when Parker opened the door, leaning against the frame and grinning seductively at me like he was posing for a men's cologne ad, or she was giggling with me at the buffoon he'd made of himself. I wasn't oblivious to the thick layer of charm he had tried to lay on me. There are some layers I like thick—peanut butter on homemade bread, Granny's hand-knit sweaters when it was snowing outside, icing on top of a birthday cake. Smarmy attempts to flirt were not one of them, especially from Parker. It was the *second* time he'd spurned me, and instead of being a gentleman, he'd led with his ego. All that machismo might work on women with less self-control, but not me. I had tucked away my heart from Parker eons ago, locking it in an impenetrable safe that he'd never guess the combination to.

The kitten brought me out of my internal tirade against Parker by kneading my shoulder with her paws. She continued to rumble, but she mouthed at my damp clothes, and started

sucking on the fabric. Odd as it was that she was using my dress as a pacifier, nothing animals did surprised me anymore.

“You’re about as screwy as the rest of us out here. You’ll fit right in, I think.” I chuckled, and set the kitten down on the counter, and offered her a small bowl of goat’s milk I’d collected that morning. “Granny? Are you in here or am I shouting to an empty house, while you’re working in the garden before it gets too hot? Or are you watching your shows?”

“Can’t a girl have a minute to get off the couch?” Granny shuffled in from the living room, her eyebrows practically fused together as she scowled at me. “It might surprise you, but I’m not as young and springy as you, Maren.”

“You are when it’s convenient to you.”

“What are you talking about?” She shuffled to the fridge, still stooped as she worked out the kink in her back. Opening it, she took out a pitcher of orange juice.

“Um, like the time you jumped over the back of the couch to get the last of the ice cream? Remember that? Because I do.”

“Nope.” She took a long draw of the juice she’d served herself. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Uh, huh. Next time there’s only one helping of butter brickle left, I won’t show any mercy. I don’t care if you’re elderly.”

Leaning toward me, Granny grinned. “Challenge accepted.” Wrinkling her nose, she sniffed the air, no doubt picking up on the cloud of stink perfuming my clothes. “What is that?”

“You’ve lived on a farm your whole life. I think you know.”

She leaned back and ran her eyes up and down my outfit. “I thought you were going to get the eggs.”

“I was.”



Her fair blue eyes moved to my empty basket. “But you rolled in manure instead?”

“That’s your best guess?”

Granny’s focus flicked to the kitten, who’d finished her milk and was investigating what interesting things we kept on the countertop, namely the breadbox and the butter crock. “You traipsed through manure to get to a cat?”

Drumming my fingernails on the tired formica counter, the kitten’s tail shot up like a ringtail lemur and she came trotting. I wasn’t a cat or dog person, per se—I preferred goats and chickens and cows. Useful animals that pulled their weight around the farm, namely by earning Granny and me a living—but there was something special about holding a baby animal. I smiled as I picked her up and tickled a finger between her ears.

“That’s not how it happened,” I said. “Usually, your speculations are right on the nose. I’m surprised.”

“Okay, walk me through this.” Granny set down her glass and folded her arms. “You went outside to get the eggs, and...”

Taking a deep breath, I decided the less information she knew, the better. Granny’s tongue had a tendency to become slippery when something sounded like good gossip. Parker Bingham, as an across-the-road neighbor, was precisely that. Especially when he was *my* neighbor. “I collected the eggs, found this cutie meowing from behind the feed bins, and wondered if it might have toddled over from the Granges’.”

“Mary Jo had mentioned wanting a new kitten.”

“Exactly. So I went over, and the guy who’s staying there for the summer is a total, clueless city slicker. Long story short, he fell into a cowpie, then flung some at me.”

“He intentionally threw it at you?”

“No. He was trying to shake it off his hand and the trajectory in which it would fly didn’t occur to him.”

Granny’s smile turned mischievous. “Was he handsome?”

“Granny!” I threw my free hand up in exasperation.

There was no way, on pain of death, that I'd *ever* admit that yes, Parker was as achingly handsome as he looked on the covers of those glossy magazines the hair salon had laid out on their waiting table. He'd made my heart thump harder, and if my legs weren't sturdy from all the hard work I did, day in and day out, I might have been inclined to swoon, falling into a chair. I sort of hated him for that. I'd initially met him when he tried to steal my graham cracker on the first day of kindergarten, and I bit him to make him give it back. If we'd just kept our relationship where it was as mortal enemies, I wouldn't be in the predicament I found myself in, but Parker had grown on me the way a honeysuckle vine crept up a towering oak. Little by little, he'd won me over until I wasn't sure how to exist without him. Even as a scrawny, shy kid who was all bony joints and enormous feet, and who had a fondness for engaging in prank wars, always choosing me to be on his team, I couldn't stay away. There was something magnetic between us, and though I wanted to believe there was a similar pull on my end, the last time I saw Parker was when I attended Camp Hottie—one which I specifically had chosen because he was going to be there... he didn't even remember me.

I wanted to shrink under the rug just thinking about the painfully awkward meet and greet I'd attended. Everyone should have the option of erasing all memories from their teenage years. I had already been uncomfortable in my own skin, suspended somewhere between a child and the woman I'd become. When the day had come, as ridiculous as it was, I'd gotten up early, curled my hair using the one electrical outlet I could find at the otherwise primitive campsite, and glossed my lips with my best cherry red lipstick at least five hundred times.

And for what? Abject humiliation.

A cascade of memories welled up and flooded over the sandbags I'd banked against them to keep them relegated to their corner of my consciousness, but as hard as I fought them, it was like holding my puny arms up to change the course of a river. Being rational and in control around Parker had always been impossible. Maybe this time would be different. Before

today, it'd been years since we'd seen each other in person, and like the last time, there hadn't been a single flicker of recognition when he'd opened the door.

Maybe I'd be lucky. Maybe I'd be safe and wouldn't incriminate myself with red cheeks and stuttering giggles.

*Maybe you'll win the lottery, too.*

As bitter as I was about how disappointed I'd been with Parker when he passed over me like I was nothing more than one more sobbing, hopeful girl he encountered by the hundreds every day, I'd still watched every single movie he'd been in, even if it meant enduring Granny's raised eyebrows when she caught me in the act. He was addictive. With a firm jaw that filmed amazingly at all angles, and eyes so vividly blue that they made the coastal waters off a tropical island look like swamp water, he was a gorgeous creature to look at. I may have watched more than a few hours of replay clips that featured countdowns of the best of Parker's rippling muscles in all their glory, because I was as hot-blooded and mortal as the next woman. As shallow as lusting after his sculpted body was, he was just as capable of putting the bad guys in a headlock as he was making me choke up when he was in a film less prone to explosions and fistfights.

*It's only because he's good at acting, Maren. In real life... that Parker you knew is long gone.*

Coming face to face with Parker had thrown me for a loop and was a reminder that watching his movies was a pathetically pale comparison to Real Life Parker, who induced a heart attack with a single grin. He was dangerous, and I was going to have to be on high alert until Mary Jo and John returned.

I'd keep my head down for the summer, avoid the Granges' property at all costs, and hold my breath until I watched Parker drive off into the sunset and out of my life for good.

“Okay,” Granny cackled. “You paused way too long. I'm picturing a guy who's a cross of Elvis and Tom Holland living across the road. Or no, James Dean. Now he was a looker.”

“I’m not even sure what a guy made of that cross would even look like.”

“Well, you’re not being very descriptive. I asked if he’s handsome, and you gave me nothing.”

I dropped my head, needing to recenter myself so I didn’t start a giggling fit that would incriminate me, then brought my eyes up to Granny’s. “Are you being serious right now? *Is the guy who pelted you with cow poop handsome?* Who asks that?”

“I do.”

“You really need to stop watching romance movies. They’ve skewed reality far, *far* into lala land. I wasn’t focused on what he looked like.” *I am officially a liar, but I’ll ask forgiveness later. I was zeroed in on that handsome face the whole time.* “All I did was ask if it was their cat.”

“What’d you do with the eggs?” Granny’s smirk slipped into a frown. “You didn’t throw them at him, did you?”

“Why would you think *that* was the next logical thing I’d do?”

“When you are angry, you are such a hothead. You can barely think straight when something gets under your skin. I could see you throwing them at him for ruining your dress.”

“Then you’d be happy to know that no, I managed to keep my rage all tucked inside and not sling all my eggs at our new neighbor, Tom Presley. Or James Holland, if that sounds better.”

“Elvis Dean has a nice ring to it.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring her aside. “The eggs help pay the bills, and I wouldn’t waste them on that guy.”

“Good.” Granny nodded perfunctorily. “Then where are they?”

“I dropped the basket out of shock, so this morning’s eggs are a loss.” I returned the kitten to the counter and opened the cabinet to see if we had any canned tuna. “Anyway, after all

the excitement of the morning, I've concluded that we're going to have to move."

I tried to deliver my suggestion casually, but my semi-serious joke knocked Granny into the edge of the counter, which she grasped with her strong if bony old hands to keep her balance. Cupping a hand behind her ear, she said, "Come again? I think you said we need to move."

"Correct. That is what I said. At the very least, we should have the house relocated to the other side of the property."

Granny cackled. She knew me better than I knew myself most days, and was calling my bluff. Besides, she'd never consent to leaving. She'd jokingly brought up wanting to be buried on the property, only I didn't think she was kidding. "Over my dead body! My family has lived here for three generations, and I'm not about to uproot because you embarrassed yourself in front of the hot new neighbor."

My jaw unhinged and landed somewhere on the floor. "I never agreed he was hot."

"But you didn't say he was ugly, either. When you leave out details and skirt around a question, that usually means you're too embarrassed to say it like it is. I'm already imagining tall, dark, handsome, and a butt that fits into Levi's like a—"

I desperately waved my hands. "Stop. Please don't finish that. If you need to know, yes, he's an above-average looking man who is sturdy and has many years of life left, but I definitely didn't appraise his rear end in jeans."

"I'm hearing that he's young and handsome and the only reason you didn't see his butt is because he fell and was sitting on it."

"In short, yes."

"And why is it that you hate him?"

If I had access to a magical lamp and a wish-granting genie, I would have made Granny forget everything about our new neighbor, along with erasing my blundering teenage years. She was digging, and it'd only be a matter of time

before I slipped or she inferred something and I blushed, thus confirming her conjecture. Nothing good could come of Parker Bingham being across the road. I was going to have to do everything within my power to keep him away. Maybe a giant wrought-iron gate across the driveway would send the right message.

“I don’t hate him.” I found a packet of tuna, tore it open with my teeth, dumped it into the used milk bowl, and offered it to the kitten. Her purr rumbled like the engine of a muscle car, and as I stroked her spine, she stood up to meet my fingertips. “I guess I don’t like ignorance. Why did the Granges ask *him* of all people to watch their farm?”

“Maybe because he’s always wanted to see what farming is like.”

I snorted. “I highly doubt that a guy like him cares about this lifestyle. Like, at all.”

“Then maybe it’s destiny.”

I choked on my tongue. Destiny? No, no, no. If it was destiny that Parker was here, that would mean mine was tied up with his. “What did I say about romance movies, Granny? They’re fantasy. Nothing about them is real.”

“I beg to differ. I’ve lived long enough to know that everything happens for a reason, and maybe it is the voice of Nicholas Sparks or Jane Austen narrating in my head, but I think it’s time for you to find some happiness.”

“I am happy.”

Granny’s eyes rolled back in her head so far her eyelids fluttered. “You know what I mean. I’m glad that you’re a strong, independent, modern woman who finds contentment running her own small business, but I don’t want you to be so headstrong, standoffish, and isolated that you intentionally scare away any man who comes within a mile of you.”

“I do not intentionally scare away men.” I hated that this topic always made my throat feel scratchy and small, like I was breathing through a straw, and not a smoothie-sized one. More like the drink stirrers that barely had a large enough

opening to suck a molecule of liquid through at a time. “I’m too busy weeding and milking goats and canning to consider dating. Guys don’t come calling because none of them want to sweat and work alongside me for the sake of having the pleasure of my company.”

Granny smiled the same way the resident fox who had a den somewhere in my forest did when it found my flock of chickens scratching in the yard. “Then maybe I ought to invite the new neighbor over to help. Who said weeding can’t be a date?”

## Chapter Three



### PARKER

“Alright, missy. This is just as uncomfortable and awkward for me as it is for you.”

The hen tilted her head and stared at me with her beady eyes, boring them straight into my soul. Before taking up my post at the Granges’, I had no idea an animal that was mostly feathers, a couple of grody, scaly feet, and a relatively small beak could be so intimidating. Frankly, I’d given little thought to chickens beyond knowing that they laid eggs, and I liked them grilled.

Slowly, I eased my hand under her. I tried not to think about how utterly bizarre it was to be sifting through the underbelly of a hen to find eggs. It didn’t help that beneath her was a sauna. Any eggs she was sitting on might already be cooked in the shell by the time I got them out.

The hen with black-as-coal plumage and a soul to match made the same long, low warning sound as she had during my three previous attempts, and before I could withdraw my hand, she pecked my wrist with her sharp beak, twisting my skin for good measure.

“Ow.” I rubbed my wrist. “You got arm hair that time, you She-Devil.”

She tucked her neck into her fluff and continued her unyielding stare as I tried to figure out a solution to my predicament. Most of the other hens laid their eggs and went on their merry way, but not this one. She was determined to



hoard all the eggs that she could, and for all of my coaxing and misdirecting, and even going so far as to compliment her in a cooing baby voice to get her to like me, she wasn't budging.

I thought about calling Clive for some pointers, but could already hear his derisive laugh. Being outsmarted and outmaneuvered by a bird whose brain was the size of a shriveled pea was a secret I'd take to my grave.

As I paced the coop, my thoughts drifted to my neighbor. I should have taken the hint that she wasn't thrilled that I was there—the narrowed eyes and curt words were a billowing red flag, not unlike my current foe who wouldn't give up her eggs. Maybe she'd recently been through a bad breakup—my neighbor, not the hen—and was on a man-hating streak. What I couldn't put my finger on was the *why*. There were very few occasions when I was met with something other than a hearty swoon upon introduction. I'd lost track a long time ago of how many women were particularly committed and jumped into their commitment to me by pledging their willingness to have my child. Thanks, I guess? But no thanks.

As much as reactions like those might stroke my ego, I knew that a great deal of people's infatuation with me stemmed from their obsession with fame. Sure, as a young, healthy, moderately intelligent, and generally nice guy, I was a catch by anyone's standards, but nobody could overlook the fact that I was a recognizable, successful A-list actor with a bank account to match. People that could only see the surface were tying all their hopes and dreams to my fame.

But, not my neighbor. At best, she was indifferent, and that made me itch with curiosity worse than a flea-ridden dog. At worst, I shuddered to think what she might do. If I crossed her, she seemed perfectly capable of lighting my car on fire, and chasing me back to California, swinging a hoe at me the entire way.

As intimidating as she might be, I could appreciate her level-headedness when with me. As I lay in bed the night of my arrival, I replayed the whole exchange; other than being mortified for what I'd done to her, it was refreshing that she didn't pander to my status. Whatever her reasons for not

hyperventilating when we came face to face, I figured the best place to start melting her chilly demeanor was by being friendly. There wasn't any harm in being a good neighbor.

If nothing else, maybe she could give me some pointers for getting stubborn hens off their hoard of eggs.

A trickle of sweat rolled down my forehead and stung as it drove straight for my eye. Using my shirt, I rubbed it away, mopping it over the rest of my face. I had no problem with an Indiana summer, but I forgot how the humidity hung around like an almost invisible blanket that made everything appear hazy. It made my clothes cling to my skin, and no matter how many times I peeled it off, it went right back to sticking. A new tactic to outwit the hen presented itself like a lightbulb turning on in my brain.

Wriggling out of my shirt, I breathed a sigh of relief when my skin picked up on the slightest breeze. Snapping my shirt to get the wrinkles out, I frowned at the mess it was. It'd been one of my favorite vintage Beatles shirts, but after losing a battle to a wild rose bush growing in the middle of a pasture, the thin fabric looked like it'd been sent through a paper shredder. To add insult to injury, I'd also somehow managed to knock the wind out of myself with the shovel I was using to dislodge the rosebush from the soil.

Day four on the farm, and I was already being outdone by a weed and a bird that was eighty percent fluff.

Holding up the shirt, I shook it in front of the hen to distract her. "Here, chickie chickie. Hold still while I throw this over your head. Sorry if it stinks. Birds can't smell, can they?"

"Parker?"

I spun around, wondering if I'd imagined my name being called. Was it my neighbor? If delusions were setting in already, I wouldn't have been surprised. So much of my normal life as a celebrity had become swarms of people. If it wasn't fans, it was makeup artists spritzing me with fake sweat or a herd of camera crew getting takes from all my best angles. Not out here, though. Other than shouting a thank you from

the porch when I caught the mail lady dropping off a package, I hadn't talked to anyone in person for three days.

It was going to be a *very* long summer.

Maybe testing my mental stability would give me another reason to wander across the street to be neighborly.

"Parker? Are you here?"

"Yeah," I called. I breathed deeply, relieved I wasn't hallucinating, and the second chance I was getting with my neighbor made my pulse rev with the same power as when I put my foot on the gas of my favorite Corvette at a green light. This was it. "I'm in the chicken coop."

With only a few seconds to spruce myself up, I put down the basket of eggs I'd already collected, and ran my clean hand through my hair. It still flopped, and though I had collected sweat and dust while messing around the farm, I assumed I didn't look *that* disheveled. Maybe a little rough and tumble, with more scruff on my unshaven face than I'd ever had, and a few bumps and bruises. Not wearing a shirt might be a little redneck, but surely my neighbor wouldn't mind. Of the handful of people in the world who genuinely couldn't tolerate me, no one hated me because I had great abs.

Admittedly, it would be weird if I was caught trying to smother a hen with my sweaty, torn shirt. I *could* have tried to get it back on before my neighbor found me, but having it half on as I struggled to get the damp fabric back over me might make me look even weirder. So, I stuffed my shirt into my waistband. Bare chested it was.

My neighbor stopped in the doorway. If there was such a thing as a bona fide farmer look, she blew it out of the water. Her hair was tied into a braid and she shaded her face with a baseball cap that looked like it'd been her go-to hat for a decade. The knees of her jeans were worn and ripped by use, not artificially distressed like the ones sold in high-end boutiques. Judging by the micro-tears in her shirt, she'd waged a few rosebush battles of her own.

By far, her eyes were her best assets. They were brown, but flecked with shimmering layers of gold. I bet when she smiled, they lit up so brightly, they'd make the sun look like nothing more than a dying flashlight in the sky.

A feeling of déjà vu settled over me. I couldn't place exactly where it stemmed from, but it was a dichotomy of feelings. Comforting, yet electric. Not unlike a first kiss.

Whoa. Why did my mind keep going straight to smooching my neighbor? I didn't even know her name yet.

"Hi." I smiled, toning down the smolder. *Friendly, Parker. You can move up from there.* "How are you on this fine day?"

I stuffed my hands in my pockets to keep from slapping my forehead. Apparently not flirting reduced me to becoming a dork.

Her lips twitched, and I took courage. Perhaps being awkward wasn't a total loss. I could work with her laughing at me.

"I'm good." She knit her fingers together and her gaze moved around the coop, only landing on me briefly before they flitted away again. Either the shirtless thing was working, or I was making her uneasy. Hard to tell. Maybe if I flexed my pecs to make them wave hello to her, it would make her laugh. Or cringe. "You?"

"Can't complain." I glared at the stubborn hen, who was making me question my ability to complete simple tasks. If I had a reason to complain, it was her. "I see you've cleaned up since the last time you were over."

"Yes. I know how to bathe."

My laugh was painful, and I mentally walloped myself for inadvertently insulting her. "Right. I wasn't meaning to imply that, but now that you say that, I can see my implication. Sorry."

"It's fine."

She wafted her hand in the air and shifted on her feet. Her lips pinched and for a breath, her eyes focused on me, like

there was something she wanted to say, but refused to go against her better judgment. It was a slow knife sinking into my gut, wondering what was going through her mind, but being irrevocably locked out.

“I realize our first meeting was less than ideal and it got us off on the wrong foot. Any chance you could forgive me for being an idiot?” I said. “I’m not normally such a spaz.”

“Maybe the universe was conspiring against you.”

“Sure seems like it.” I shoved a hand through my lifeless hair and tossed it out of my eyes when it fell. “Can I try making a better first impression today?”

I knew I was making progress when her lips lifted another degree. It was so close to a smile that I held my breath, waiting to celebrate that victory. “You can try.”

I held out my hand. “We never did have proper introductions. Since we already established who I am, care to tell me what your name is so I don’t have to keep referring to you as *my neighbor*?”

“I’m...” Her gaze roved over my hand, and then to my torso. My pecs trembled, ready to flex if I needed to pull out the big guns. I subdued them. *Not yet, guys*. “Sorry. Um... could you put on a shirt?”

I sucked my cheeks in to keep myself from smiling. This might be an opportunity. “It’s dirty.”

“You can wash it.”

“It’s ripped.” I tugged it out of my waistband and held it up, showing her the tear in the fabric. Bouncing my pecs and flexing my biceps, it made the skin on her face mottle pink. “See?”

She was using every ounce of self-control to ignore everything except the shirt. Her eyes betrayed her, but only for a moment before she tore them away and locked her attention on a trio of hens who were kicking up dust. “I’m sorry for your loss. It’ll have to do for now, though.”

It would have been fun to keep torturing her, but I doubted she'd stand around and take it. Besides, as cocky as I sometimes liked to pretend I was, I liked to think I wasn't so shallow that everything boiled down to my looks. "Tell you what. I'll put on my shirt if you tell me your name."

As a sign of goodwill, I pulled my shirt over my head, wrestled my arms into the sleeves, and extended my hand again. Third time's the charm.

Reluctantly, she placed hers in mine. "Call me Mare..."

"Mare?" She squeezed my hand and firmly pumped once. I doubted she was trying to break my hand, but her kind of strength had come from years of hard work that couldn't be replicated without putting in the hours she had. But that wasn't what almost knocked me off my feet. The jolt of electricity from her touch would be enough to power the hot wire that contained the cows. "Your name is Mare? Isn't that a girl goat or something?"

"No. That's a female horse. Uh, you can just call me... Mary."

"Mary? Like Clint's mom, Mary Jo?"

For whatever reason, she was still dancing around an answer, and her deception was ripening the apples of her cheeks. Shaking her head, she withdrew her hand from mine and wiped it on her jeans, like I'd tricked her into clapping her hand in something repulsive. "How about you just call me M?"

"Em? Like Emily."

"Just M. Like the letter."

"M?" I rocked on my feet and grinned, figuring out a way to call her out for her sidestepping a simple question without being a jerk. It wasn't unreasonable of me to ask a woman's name. "You know, I played a spy in a movie once, and all the characters had code names. I think there's a titillating quality to a person keeping their identity hidden, don't you?"

My eyebrow wiggle was too much, because it earned me another prickly frown. "Look, I'm on a tight schedule. I've got

animals that are waiting to be fed, and they don't like to be kept waiting. Plus the vet is coming out, and I don't want to miss him."

"I can relate. To eating, not the animal doctor." I shifted, sinking my hands even deeper into my pockets. I was behaving like a school-age boy who was testing the waters of what it was like to be around a girl for the first time. "So, *M*, what can I do for you?"

"Remember that kitten I brought over the day you flung cow—"

I held up my hand. "That day is forever burned into my memory. Not my finest hour. As for the kitten, yes, I remember it. White with ruddy, striped splotches?"

"Yeah, that one. I haven't seen her all morning, and it's not typical of her to go missing." She swallowed and if I wasn't imagining things, she was fighting back tears welling in her eyes. Suppressing smiles, pushing back tears... there were a lot of things she was duking it out with internally. "It's never a good thing when an animal doesn't show up at mealtime."

I wanted to metaphorically mount a white horse and be her knight in shining armor, but the Granges didn't have any horses, and I doubted climbing aboard a steer would have the same effect. "Other than the cattle and chickens, I haven't noticed any other animals skulking around."

She deflated, and I was promptly bucked off my imaginary white horse. So much for coming to the rescue.

"If you see her, would you let me know? She's too young to be wandering by herself. Too many things might go wrong."

"Sure. I'll poke around today once I figure out how to get this hen to share the eggs she's sitting on." Pointing at the selfish hen, she squawked, and with lightning speed, pecked my finger. I shook my hand. "That's gonna leave a welt."

A snort from *M* preceded a peal of laughter. Looking at her, she clamped her hand over her mouth, but it was no use. She'd witnessed firsthand how utterly useless I was in the country.

“You’re being outdone by Licorice?”

“Licorice?” I grinned, pleased with the chink I’d found in my neighbor’s defenses. Apparently being emasculated by a grumpy bird passed for entertainment around here. “She has a name?”

“Yeah, they all do. Clint’s mom insists everyone has one. That one’s a Rhode Island Red named Phoenix. The two Silver Laced Wyandottes are Dotty and Marge. And that’s Licorice.”

“I’ve been calling her the Spawn of Satan. Seriously, why is she being so grouchy?”

“She’s broody.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“She wants to hatch chicks, so for all she knows, you’re trying to kidnap her babies.”

“Oh. I guess being pecked half to death is forgivable, huh, girl? I promise, I’m not a bad person. It’s alright.” I held out my hand as a peace offering to the hen. She did her best to rip my finger off before I withdrew. “Should I just leave them under her, then? Isn’t the first rule of nature to not mess with a mama and her babies?”

M shook her head. “The Granges don’t keep a rooster, and I doubt Licorice has had any miraculous conceptions.”

Realization came crashing down on me with the hot-faced flush that accompanied every participant in a middle school sex ed class. No baby daddy, no babies. *Duh*. “Right, right, right. I guess, in my mind, she kept laying eggs because she was pregnant. She’s not, then?”

M shook her head and absently played with the end of her braid. “Her efforts would be in vain, and personally, I hate waste. If you leave those eggs under her, not only will she never hatch the chicks she’s convinced are coming, but you’ll never get to use them. They’ll spoil under her, and there is nothing worse than cleaning up rotten eggs.”

“Okay.” I let out a breath. “I’m committed to getting her to give up her booty, then. I think I saw a set of golf clubs in their



garage. I wonder if I can use a driver to—” The look on M’s face stopped me. “I’m not planning on whacking Licorice off the nest, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. Your mind went straight to golf clubs.”

“Wow. No. I was going to use it to lift her off from a safe distance so I could get at the eggs.” M nodded, her face a melange of wary indecisiveness and barely contained amusement. “I don’t go around whacking animals, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“You’re the one implying it.”

“Do you think something else would work better? Maybe a tennis racket?”

That did her in. Usually, my pride kept me far from being comfortable as the butt of anyone’s joke, but the way it made M laugh, I’d willingly stand under an anvil like Wile E. Coyote to get her to loosen up. Best of all, it was accompanied by a smile that changed her whole countenance.

As predicted, her all-in smile was as amazing as I suspected.

“I could try my shirt again. I didn’t really get an opportunity to test that method before you showed up.”

M’s nose wrinkled, and it was adorable, even though it was aimed at my ineptitude. “What would a shirt do for you? You weren’t trying to strangle her with it, I hope.”

“No! Of course not. I was trying to distract Licorice with it, like a bullfighter whipping around his red cape.” I swished my hands side to side, pantomiming an imaginary bullfighter.

Not my best impression, but I had to hand it to M for not outright laughing again.

She did, however, roll her eyes. Heartily. With a sigh, M strolled to where Licorice had hunkered down, bumped me out of the way with her hip, and grinned at the hen. “Are you giving this fool a hard time?”

Licorice issued a warning cluck, but M wasn't intimidated by her threat. Grabbing Licorice without a wince when she pecked three times in rapid succession, then latched onto M's skin, she lifted the hen up. Laying atop a half dozen eggs was a fluff of white and orange fur.

The kitten M had been looking for opened its sleepy eyes and yawned, probably wondering why a perfectly good nap had ended prematurely. M set Licorice on the ground, and grabbed the cat, clutching it close to her cheek. Tucking my hands in my pockets for safekeeping, my first inclination was to hold my arms out wide to accept a hug from her, too.

"There you are. I was worried about you," M cooed. "What are you doing, you silly kitty? Napping under a hen? You could have done that at my place. I've got two hens sitting on eggs right now."

"Licorice must be more comfortable."

M kissed the top of the kitten's head, and my imagination put me in place of the kitten, being nestled in M's arms while she gently kissed my forehead. Shaking myself out of my own imagination, I wondered if I was truly that desperate. It'd been a hot minute since things had ended with Finley, but if I was so needy for affection that I was fictitiously putting myself in place of a cat to get some attention, then things might be more dire than I'd suspected. I wasn't looking for a rebound. The only goal I had for my life this summer was to figure out a way to get myself back on top.

Then again, a summer fling could be enjoyable. I'd bet my next movie role that my neighbor was a sensational kisser.

Touching my arm, M smiled at me. A real one, directed at me, and not my foolishness. "Thank you. I would have gone crazy if I couldn't find this ridiculous cat. My whole day would have been shot."

My voice was low and husky, just enough to make M lean in to hear. "My pleasure."

She tried her best to conceal it, but the telltale signs of a swoon were all there—the gentle sigh, the softening of her

eyes, the tilt of her head.

Yep. I still had it.

## Chapter Four



### MAREN

“You really don’t have to walk me home,” I said, trying to keep up a good clip to stay ahead. It was useless. For every one of his steps, I had to take two. “Like bathing, I am quite capable.”

“Huh?”

Parker squinted at me, and scrunched his nose so thoroughly, the skin over the bridge wrinkled. I immediately remembered that look. He’d pull it whenever he didn’t understand something. Math. Why our parents were always the last ones in the pickup line. Why other girls he had a momentary crush on weren’t interested in returning his attention.

I would have rather detailed how my uncle’s hair had begun migrating from his head down to his back than discuss the other women in Parker’s life. Even if we were only twelve and marriage was still several years away from being legal for either of us, he might as well have been asking me to propose on his behalf. He always wondered if I’d heard anything through the wild grapevine of gossip that pervaded every middle school in the world. The question turned my stomach because the answer was always yes—he might not have been a movie star yet, but once Parker started growing up, he’d cultivated a natural manliness that had the rest of us flocking to him. Hordes of moths to a flame, and I was standing the closest. My metaphorical wings would have been singed off if I hadn’t moved out to live with Granny.

Even though I'd secretly been one of Parker's pious worshippers, soaking in every opportunity I had with him, I never let that information slip. If that would have gotten back to Parker, I would have undoubtedly been quietly ousted from his already tight circle. I was already so unlike the rest of his friends, namely that I was a girl, that I was already at a huge disadvantage, especially under the constant pressure of his friends reminding him how many cooties girls harbored. That and I sucked at flag football, so to them, they couldn't see my appeal to Parker. But to his credit, he didn't seem to give much credence to what anyone else thought of our relationship.

Being confined to the role of his best friend was infinitely better than being a lovesick admirer who had to helplessly watch his life unfold from the sidelines.

It took some maturing on my part to realize the reason Parker had been so open about other girls around me was because I was his confidant. Even if it killed me to see him flirt with those who wouldn't give chubby, acne-prone, metal-mouthed Maren a second glance, Parker still reserved the best of himself for me. He always had a joke to tell, and I knew he was pleased when he could make me howl with laughter. Even the trademarked smile he reserved for me tripped up my heart every time, and I gladly tumbled into the small dimple by the right of his lips. In my infinitesimal world, it was a superlative blessing, yet often the bitterest curse, to be firmly orbiting in Parker's friendzone.

Nowadays? I didn't care one lick about who Parker thought was cute. It made no difference when Granny mentioned his almost-engagement with the foreign supermodel had been broken off.

*Okay.* She was Canadian, but that had to have added to her allure. Foreign was foreign. Besides, it wasn't like I was waiting on my porch steps, hoping he'd come sweep me off my feet when I heard the news. I mentally high-fived myself for not even binge-Googleing who had been the one to call their relationship quits.

"Back there?" I hitched my thumb over my shoulder toward the Granges' chicken coop. "You said I cleaned up

after our last encounter, and I said—”

“Hey.”

He bumped his shoulder into me. Or maybe more accurately, his bicep into my shoulder. He’d surpassed me in height a long time ago, and with the added inches came marvelous, sinewy muscles that were barely contained by the fabric of his tattered shirt. If he flexed, he risked his shirt tearing clean off, so maybe there was no point in demanding he put it back on again. My disobedient eyes trailed across his shirt and assessed the damage, and from the huge rip in the front, I could still see his taut stomach. *Gah!* Why did my best friend have to be so irresistible?

Did I just think of him as my best friend? *Noooo.* FORMER best friend. A long time ago. *Eons* ago.

Not anymore.

“I’m kidding,” he said.

I recognized that twinkle in his eye, too. He had been relentless in his teasing, like his whole existence equated to one big laugh.

As much as I hated to think how happy I’d been being the moon to Parker’s planet, I recognized Parker hadn’t been *all* bad. After moving away to help Granny, I didn’t have constant access to his jovial and carefree nature. It’d rubbed off on me as a kid, and as an adult, I had almost entirely forgotten what it was like to let my hair down and have fun. Not that I’d grown stale without a reason. It tended to happen as a small business owner where my employees were literally animals who didn’t understand I would have loved to keep nine-to-five work hours once in a while. The constant before-sunrise business meetings, and late night emergencies could be taxing. On top of the work it took to maintain a homestead, I’d set high expectations that my customers wanted repeated every time, without fail. Simply put, loose hair and carefree fun had been sacrificed on the altar of our family farm a long time ago.

“Right.” I grunted. “I know.”

“You’re fun to tease.” Parker tugged the end of my braid and as he dropped his hand, I swore he grazed it across my shoulders on purpose.

I’d been sweating all morning in the garden, but even the smallest touch from Parker made my face erupt in a scorching blush. If summer didn’t hurry up and go away, taking the hot weather and Parker with it, I was in real danger of passing out from heat exhaustion. I couldn’t decide if I was pathetic because something so miniscule as his hand hovering near my back for exactly half a second put me into a tizzy, or if I was like every other woman on the planet, because it was *the* Parker Bingham’s hand that was doing it.

“Have you thought of a name for this big guy?” Parker stole the kitten straight out of my arms, and though I tried to take her back, he held his arm up like the ladder on a fire engine.

“No.” I jumped, flailing my arms. “And for your information, the kitten is a she, not a he.”

“Are you sure?”

Grabbing Parker’s elbow, I lifted my feet and hung on his arm. My baby fat might have disappeared and I might appear petite, but I was stout. *My* muscles had been earned by real life hard work, not in an air-conditioned gym. He groaned and tried to keep his arm in the air, but gravity slowly won out, until I could monkey up far enough that I could retrieve the kitten, making sure *not* to admire how impressively firm his arms were. That was totally irrelevant.

“You’re seriously going to question my ability to tell if an animal is male or female? Of the people here, who has more experience with animals?” Back with me, the kitten snuggled in my arms, and started chewing on my t-shirt, kneading her claws into the fabric. *Yep. You’re still a human pacifier.* “You might have played a veterinarian in a movie, but I’m a lot closer to being one in real life.”

From the corner of my eye, I knew Parker was staring at me with a haughty smirk. *Crap.* I was supposed to be keeping my distance, pretending to be cold and indifferent to his

charms, not constantly falling for his masculine wiles by admitting I'd seen any of his work. I waited for him to say what was on his mind, but he tortured me by keeping his thoughts to himself until I couldn't take it any longer. He was pulling one of his best moves on me—the quiet stare, waiting for the other person to crack.

And I fell for it.

I stopped and squared myself to him. “What?”

“You saw *Love Comes for the Vet*?”

Looking away from him, especially his brawny muscles, and radiant grin, I shrugged, hoping to appear indifferent. “It was on at a party I attended.”

“Seen any of my other ones?”

“You've been in so many of them, it's almost impossible to *not* see you.”

How was I going to keep a low profile so he'd lose interest and move along if I was constantly incriminating myself? Thanking him with a touch that he reciprocated with his signature smolder and growly talk about pleasure—I couldn't be sure what he'd said since my pulse had been firing like cannons in my ears—and now, I was admitting that I'd seen not one, but multiple of his movies. I wanted him to go away so I could try to forget him all over again, yet I was failing. Beyond miserably. *Spectacularly*. I might as well go ahead and confess that once upon a time, I had my bedroom plastered with posters of him as he started getting roles in movies. He was America's golden boy, but I had felt like I had a special claim on him. He'd been *my* best friend since we reconciled in kindergarten after I sank my teeth into him over a snack. At least, we'd been inseparable until our lives had diverged. Me to Granny's farm, and him to Hollywood.

Of course, since attending Camp Hottie and coming home completely and utterly humiliated, I'd spent more hours than I wanted to wondering if I might have been more attached to Parker than he'd ever been to me. The last time I'd seen Parker... *No*. I punted that memory out of my thoughts as soon



as I recognized it creeping back in. I wouldn't relive the humiliation of the day, even in memory.

I was not admitting I'd ever even *heard* of Camp Hottie, and as far as I was concerned, a different Maren Kent had attended, because I wasn't her anymore. The knife Parker had slipped into my back had severed any last hope I'd harbored that we could pick up right where we'd left off.

"So, how'd I do?" Parker asked, catching up to me when I'd turned myself toward home again and started marching. "Was I convincing as a veterinarian?"

"Well, sure. The script writers did enough research that the animal stuff was believable."

"Thank you."

"The romance was contrived though."

I should have known Parker would have made me regret my words with a look. He wouldn't have been nominated for Academy Awards multiple times if he wasn't good at acting. I would have believed the pained expression, with his hand pressed over his heart, if he wasn't also suppressing a laugh. "Ouch."

"The truth hurts."

"It was *supposed* to be one of those sappy romance movies that would bring in a new demographic of fans for me. At least that's what my agent and publicist kept telling me."

"They were probably right, though I gather from your flippant disdain you didn't think it was worth your time."

"It's not the fans—I don't mind if a person would rather see me in a chick flick than a thriller or action movie. Not everyone's built to take the suspense."

"But?"

"How do I put this?" His head tilted back and forth, swirling his thoughts before he said them out loud. How diplomatic. "Romance is an innately contrived genre."

"You shouldn't put down romance movies."

“No? You were the one who just said they were forced and overdone.”

“No, I said *your* movie wasn’t the best. Romance, however, is one of the greatest thrills this world has to offer, and for some reason, people like to pretend like they aren’t interested in falling in love with someone else.”

A shadow passed over Parker’s face, and his megawatt smile was dialed back. “Romance movies are so preposterous.”

“Sure, they might be mushy and absurd, but everything in entertainment is over the top. They’re supposed to be. Books and music and movies are an amplified, introspective look into our humanity.”

“So what was wrong with the romance in *Love Comes for the Vet*? There were six kissing scenes. Any more and the movie wouldn’t have had much of a plot.”

Parker had meant it as a joke, but my stomach flipped like an underdone pancake, and the results weren’t pretty. I didn’t need to be reminded that part of Parker’s job was kissing beautiful women for a living.

I wanted to resist continuing this conversation, but I wouldn’t let Parker think he’d won anything. “There are some things I personally have to have in a love story to make it believable.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

This wasn’t the conversation I’d envisioned myself having when I woke up this morning. All I had planned on doing when I eventually realized my kitten was missing was getting her back with as minimal conversation as possible with Parker. I may have even considered a covert rescue mission, ducking and rolling while the *Mission: Impossible* theme music played in my head. Making Parker refer to me as M only fueled my imagination as a covert spy sent on a daring feline rescue mission.

Wow. I needed some new hobbies. Imagining myself saving a kitten from the handsome, villainous neighbor was a

tad on the loser side.

“The romance... it was all too convenient.” I stared down the gravel driveway as I walked, grateful to have my White Sox cap on to hide my face. “Romance can be glittery and fun, and knock-you-off-your-feet, toe-curling kind of exciting, but that’s not what true love is.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Hardly.” I could have lied, pretending that I was as experienced as he was, but he’d see right through that charade the second he talked to anyone in Button Blossom. As far as most of the older folks were concerned, I was going to die a spinster because I hadn’t had a steady boyfriend since high school. They didn’t understand that it wasn’t that I wasn’t interested. Button Blossom was a small pond to choose another fish out of, and though I’d barely broken into my twenties, the pond was already drying up. “Let’s just say if I had a superpower, it’d be my ability to observe and draw conclusions from the things people don’t say.”

“So, you’re a mad psychologist? Or one of those people who’s cynical about love?”

“Maybe a bit of both.” I mulled over my answer, sifting my fingers through the kitten’s cottony fur. “Romance is what leads to love, but love isn’t always romantic.”

“Whoa.” Parker held his head between his hands. “I’m not sure I can handle how deep this conversation is getting.”

“Shut up.” I hip-checked him, and he stumbled a few steps. “I might not be good at delivering lines like you, but I know what I mean. Love... it’s like having a farm. There are times when it’s all about abundance—green pastures, breathtaking sunsets, so many strawberries that you couldn’t possibly stuff in another bite, no matter how delicious they are. But, there are a lot of times loving someone includes stumbling over a fair share of thistles. If they aren’t rooted out, it’ll grow a foot a day until everything is prickly and sharp. It’s hail and thunder and wind that can make grown trees bow and succumb. There’s slippery mud and barbed wire and weeds that strangle out everything else. So many weeds...”

I expected Parker to laugh at my sloppy analogy, but something in him had shifted. He was subdued as he walked, staring at his work boots that were still so new they didn't even have a crease in the polished leather. I thought about asking if it was something that I'd said that'd turned him off, but I wasn't close to Parker. Not anymore. I didn't have the right to ask him prying questions. I didn't *want* to know his answers. We were supposed to be keeping things superficial so it wouldn't hurt when he left. Then, I'd be able to wave goodbye and watch him drive away without even the slightest pinch in my heart.

"I'm not trying to be a downer," I said, hoping I could backpedal the conversation to safer ground. What did it matter what I thought about love? "It's the way life is for most people. Nothing comes without a lot of hard work."

"That's the truth." Parker nodded and stared off toward my house, giving me a chance to study his profile. The kitten was sucking on my shirt again while her rumbling purr punctuated the silence between us. Wrinkling his nose again, Parker asked, "Is that normal?"

I laughed, pulling the kitten off my clothes and putting her over my shoulder like a baby as I stroked her spine. "It's kind of like having a pacifier. She was weaned too early, either because she got lost or her momma was hurt. If this kitty was with her, she'd probably still be nursing."

"There you go again."

"What?"

"Insisting he's a girl." Parker reached over to pet the kitten, and his fingers invaded my space. I kept my hands away from his, not because I wasn't curious what it might feel like to lace my fingers with his, but because his assessment of my hands wasn't welcome. Lace might not be the right word for my hands. I had calluses and chipped, short nails that hadn't seen a manicurist since my high school senior prom. There was no shame in the hard work I did, but as tough as I pretended to be, I still wanted to feel feminine. Desirable. Not many guys could handle my strength and rough exterior

without being intimidated. “Look at him. Sloppy Joe’s practically growing a mane he’s so strong and fierce.”

The snorting laughter that ripped from my sinuses actually hurt. “Sloppy Joe? That’s what you’ve named her?”

“Him.” Parker winked, and the air temperature jumped up another ten degrees. “It was between Sloppy Joe and Boxcar Bob. Sloppy Joe won out because he kind of reminds me of a cat that hung around my cousin’s house named Sloppy Sylvester. He had these pathetic, droopy whiskers and scraggly fur. Same colors, though.”

“Don’t listen to this guy. He’s crazy.” I hugged the kitten closer to my neck. “You’re not scraggly, and you certainly don’t have to live with a ridiculous name like Sloppy Joe.”

“Not any worse than pretending you’re M.”

His accusation produced the opposite sensation as his crooked smirk, and cold, like a bucket of ice water over my head poured one dribble at a time, seeped through me. “Are you saying that you don’t think I know my own name?”

“I didn’t say that, although I seriously doubt you’re the kind of person who can be contained in a single syllable.”

“I’m M. That’s all you need to know.”

“Is it, though? I know you’re trying to keep me from discovering your name. The really fascinating question is *why?*”

I wanted to stomp my foot and plant my fists on my hips. It wasn’t fair that he could see through my ruse, even as ridiculous as it was. Most people would have accepted my asinine answer and been polite by leaving it alone.

“I’m not hiding anything.” My hands were trembling, and I couldn’t stop licking my lips. I’d fail a polygraph test on the first question if he hooked me up to one. Yes, I *was* lying, and I was terrible at it. “I’m M.”

“I don’t think so.” He stepped closer to me and pinned me with his gaze. In all the time I’d known him growing up, he’d never turned his flirting powers on me, and I very quickly

discovered I was helpless against them. “M is entirely too plain for a pretty girl like you.”

Pretty girl? Parker thought I was pretty? Granted, I’d lost the last of the clingy baby chub, the curl in my hair had finally chilled, and my skin and I had called a truce, but Parker had *definitely* never called me pretty before. I would have remembered that. Clever, responsible, funny, sure, but I’d waited with bated breath ever since I admitted to myself that I had a crush on Parker for him to speak those words.

Hearing them now, my initial reaction was to shove him away and sprint to the safety of my home, locking the doors tightly behind me, and drawing all the blinds. He might not know it, but Parker had already sent my heart through the meat grinder at Camp Hottie. I wouldn’t allow that to happen again, not even if he reaffirmed I was beautiful by shouting it from the rooftops for all of Button Blossom to hear.

Why had I ever begged my parents to let me go to such a shallow, self-sabotaging camp that dangled celebrities in front of desperate teenage girls?

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you.” I sniffed like a hoity-toity woman who drank herbal tea with her equally stuffy friends every afternoon. “That’s what it is. Just M.”

“That’s a letter of the alphabet.”

“Good for you. You know your letters. Also, my name.” I turned my chin up a few notches and bee-lined it for my house.

“I’m calling your bluff.” With a few long strides, Parker cut in front of me. I could have gone off road if the Granges’ driveway didn’t end in a steep ditch that they let grow wild. The poison ivy was poking out, though it would have been worth the risk to get away from Parker and his dang intuitiveness if I didn’t know I’d be itching until Christmas if I got it on me. “Tell you what. I’ll let you name the kitten if you tell me what your real name is.”

“It’s my kitten.”

Tilting his head, Parker grinned. “Is it?”

“I... My name... It’s...”

Remi’s mail Jeep crept out of my driveway and stopped at our mailboxes. The window rolled down, and Remi stuck her head out, letting her wild, dark mane of hair blow in the breeze. She was my first friend when I moved to Button Blossom, and now was closer than my own sister, Beckett. There wasn’t a single person she’d met that she couldn’t instantly make like her. “Hey, Maren, I left a package for you on the front porch. It says it’s fragile, so don’t let Granny kick it inside for you. She breaks more packages than anyone else I know, and I’m not taking the fall for it. It was in one piece when I very carefully set it down.”

Clenching my teeth into a grin, I thanked Remi. There was still a possibility that Parker had temporarily gone deaf and hadn’t heard her shout my name. “It must be a shipment of Mason jars. I have a ton of jam to make before Saturday.”

“Is everything alright?” Remi slowed to a complete stop. Taking off her glasses, Remi eyed Parker. Bless her for not immediately being blinded by his gorgeousness. “Is this guy bothering you?”

*You have no idea.*

“Nope.” I giggled with a slight mania. “He was just helping me find my cat.”

“Aww! You got a kitty? You didn’t say anything about a new baby at your place.”

“It’s a recent development,” I said as my shoulders crept toward my ears. “I’ll let you play with her the next time you’re over.”

“Deal. Hey, I’ve got to go. I’m already behind on my route. See you, Maren.”

*Seriously, Remi? Why don’t you go ahead and write it in permanent marker across my forehead?*

With a wave, Remi was off, leaving me to pretend like she hadn’t inadvertently spilled my secret. My eyes were locked on my house. If I pushed Parker into the ditch, it’d give me enough of a head-start. I could probably run to my house

before he freed himself from the thicket of wild rose thorns. His shirt was already a loss, and he could afford to buy new pants.

Why my brain decided to picture Parker in nothing but his boxers was beyond me. It didn't seem to be getting the message that we did *not* like him.

"Maren, huh?" The smile on Parker's face had morphed again. There was a hint of smugness, a heap of pride, and a ghost of recognition. "Now that, I can believe."

"And what is that?"

"That you're a Maren."

"Congratulations. You've invaded my privacy and gleaned my name."

He ignored my slow clap and was lost somewhere on Memory Lane, which was probably a crumbling street, covered by vines and weeds. I didn't like that my own was pristine for how often I'd thought of Parker, who returned frequently to make sure Memory Lane was maintained. "You know, my best friend growing up was named Maren."

"Oh?" I took off across the road at a speed that would have qualified me for Olympic power-walking. Was that even a thing? In a flash, Parker was right there next to me. "I bet she was a bucket of fun if she was able to put up with the likes of you. Now, if you'll excuse me, farm life waits for no one."

"Maren Kent."

Despite myself, I spun around. Parker was staring at the gold lettering Granny had insisted we stick on the mailbox. I thought it was too gaudy, but she insisted she liked the bling. Right there, for the world to see, in glittering gold lettering, was the question Parker hadn't asked, but was seeking an answer to since Remi had told him my name.

"You're Maren Kent?" Parker whispered.

Maybe I could pretend like I only had the same name as his once-friend. And the same hair color, the same eyes, the same memories.



I swallowed, but there was nothing to go down. I couldn't run with my deception any longer, not like it was ever a well-contrived plan. I was doomed the second he opened the Granges' door. "Yep, that's me."

Waiting for the barrage of questions—the first of which, being another big, fat *why*—Parker closed the gap and wrapped his strong arms around me, doing what even my grumpiest nanny goat couldn't do, and made me feel small.

Kissing the crown of my head, Parker whispered into my ear, "Maren, I've missed you."

## Chapter Five



### PARKER

“Is that... *normal*?”

Usually, I prided myself on my ironclad stomach, but having watched the vet work for the past half an hour, I had to force down my breakfast more than once. When I’d assumed the role of a veterinarian in *Love Comes for the Vet*, everything was staged and sterile, sort of like the romance Maren had turned her nose up at. Any gooey, fleshy sounds were added post-production, and there were definitely no pungent smells. But, there sure were in Maren’s barn. Whenever my brain tried to whisper to me that scents were particulate, I casually blocked my nose by pretending like I was tending an itch.

“Well, no.” Dr. Fox snapped on a fresh pair of gloves and smirked at me over the rims of the magnifying glasses perched on the end of his nose. I completely appreciated the irony of a vet named Dr. Fox, but I was too busy trying to focus on anything other than what he was doing to rib him about it. “But that’s why I’m here.”

Maren rubbed the floppy ears of the goat who Dr. Fox was working on, carefully side-eyeing me. If it would have only been Dr. Fox and I, there was no question I would have puked at the first sign of gross, but with Maren there, judging me, I couldn’t. She was sizing me up. Seeing if I was worthy.

I’d prove to her that I could handle her cold stares and stiffness as well as I could handle stitches and deworming.

“There you go, girl.” Dr. Fox clipped the sutures and tossed all of his specialty tools into a metal bucket filled with an antiseptic solution. He patted the hindquarters of the nanny goat and stood as she looked over her shoulder and bleated at him. “You know the routine, Maren. Keep Becky’s injury clean and dry, and don’t let her get too rowdy.”

“Thanks, Doc. That shouldn’t be a problem. Becky’s one of the calmer of the girls. Motherhood hasn’t made her go crazy like it has some of my other gals.”

Dr. Fox smiled kindly at Maren, and it was ridiculous that jealousy made me want to go all caveman, beating my chest and scaring him away with shrieking war cries. He wasn’t old, but his dark hair was graying at the temples, and the corners of his eyes crinkled more than mine. I guessed he was about ten years senior to me and Maren, and whatever kind of guy Maren liked, a reasonable age gap raised few eyebrows. It wouldn’t be that outlandish if she had a thing for him.

My possessiveness had started brewing when she first called him Doc. It wasn’t like she was referring to him as Doc Foxy and checking out his backside whenever he bent over to dig through his supplies, but the nickname made the collar of my t-shirt feel like a choke-chain that tightened the more I leaned into it. Not that it was any of my business, but the carnal neanderthal in me kept pointing and grunting in single syllables that Doc was a sign of familiarity. I wanted Maren’s attention and her friendship should be bestowed on *me*. Maybe if I drew rudimentary drawings on the wall with dirt, my point would get across.

*Slow down, Parker. You’ve been with Maren for five minutes, and you’re trying to throw her over your shoulder and take her to your cave. You’re being ridiculous. This new Maren would probably rip off your arms and knock some sense into you with them if she knew you were even thinking about being possessive over her.*

Besides instincts making my testosterone surge, Maren wasn’t even mine to claim. At best, we were long-lost friends. At worst, after this summer, I’d leave and never see her again. She’d been trying to hide from me who she was, and it stung

when I'd put two and two together. We'd been friends when she had to move away and sure, we'd eventually lost touch like so many childhood friends do, but that couldn't be the reason she hadn't warmed up to me when I was already melty like grilled cheese right out of the pan the second I found out my déjà vu wasn't contrived.

When I pulled her in for a hug and brushed my lips across her forehead, she hadn't smiled. At first, I thought she'd been grossed out by the state I was in. Dirty. Soaked in sweat in some areas, crusty in what had dried in others, and smelling like a gym sock someone had pulled out of a dumpster. Her face had told a different story. The blood that had been tinting her face varying shades of pink when I'd teased her in the coop had receded, leaving her whiter than an eyewitness to a ghost.

I cracked my whip at the caveman, making sure he was tamed. *Friends first, remember Parker? I can always move up from there.*

Maybe. If my luck turned for the better. It would probably help if I didn't flick any more manure her way. A person would think it would have been an easy goal to achieve, but since living at the Granges' place, the one thing I'd learned was that there were no guarantees, even not getting animal poo on an attractive woman.

I was so screwed.

"Anyone else you want me to look at while I'm here?" Dr. Fox asked.

"Yeah, there is." Maren stretched her neck and looked around the barn, trying to spot her new cat. "Here, kitty, kitty!"

We used to sing to songs on the radio together all the time, but this wasn't the same juvenile mocking that inevitably left us in laughing fits. Maren's call wouldn't even qualify as a song. It was barely a jingle, but the playful, melodic lilt of her voice raised goosebumps on my arms.

Maren checked by the stack of hay, but there was no sign of the cat.

“Suppose he ran back over to the Granges’?” I grinned, and she returned it with a faint smile. “Licorice must have been a cozy place to sleep.”

Since I’d put two and two together, then realized Maren had been purposefully trying to keep me in the dark, I’d gotten the message loud and clear. We *had* been friends, but we’d taken a giant step backward into the realm of acquaintances. Strangers, peppered with a hint of being enemies. Another huge, italicized *WHY?* My jokes fell flat with her, she hadn’t slugged me in the arm when I did something stupid, and I had zero hopes that any of my hugs would be reciprocated, if I even had another opportunity. Something had happened. Whatever it was had turned her away from remembering all the good times we’d had, which meant there would be no picking up right where we left off. I was back to square one—actually square negative-five, give or take—and would have to rethink my strategy if I was going to win my way back into her good graces.

I definitely couldn’t entertain the idea of being anything more to her until we were friends again. Friends to lovers I could do. Enemies straight to star-crossed lovers? I had a hard time swallowing that trope.

Not that I was looking for anything serious. Maren had helped me nurse plenty of bruises I’d gotten on the battlefield of love before, and the gaping wound Finley had inflicted left me in need of attention. Something light and fluffy, a balm to ease the humiliation of being unceremoniously dumped right after losing a movie role I’d been coveting for months. If anyone could cure me, Maren could, but only if I could penetrate her outer defenses. Whenever she’d put them up, she’d made sure they were thick and high and topped with razor wire.

“It’s ninety degrees out here.” Maren peeked at me from under the brim of her baseball cap. “No way she’s sleeping under that hen again. She’d die of heat exhaustion.”

Turning a slow circle, I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Yo, Sloppy Joe! Where are you?”

Trying to whip the lead rope she was holding at my thigh, I danced out of the way before it made contact. Maren's brow knit together in a stern warning, but the sparkle in her eyes betrayed how she truly felt. "Quit calling her Sloppy Joe."

"Why?"

"Because, it's not a fitting name for a prissy, delicate girl like her."

"She was sleeping under a chicken's butt."

That earned me another swing of the lead rope, but that time, Maren didn't miss. "She's not a Sloppy Joe." I opened my mouth, but Maren was quick with her pointer finger, and it had the power to stop me. "And don't you dare say a word about Boxcar Bill."

"Boxcar Bob," I mumbled.

Right on cue, the mischievous kitten came trotting down the aisle, tail straight in the air like it was the orange flag on the back of a go-cart. Maren scooped it up, and handed it over to Dr. Fox. "This little *lady*," Maren looked pointedly at me, "showed up a couple days ago. Not sure where she came from, but I'm guessing she probably needs to get a round of vaccinations and a dose of dewormer."

Dr. Fox took the kitten in his big bear paws and turned her around, checking in her ears, and running his thick fingers over tummy. The kitten swatted at his stethoscope and he chuckled.

"So, she's a girl, right?" Maren was pacing, watching him like she was waiting for the President of the United States to make an important decision that would change the course of history.

Dr. Fox lifted the kitten's tail and nodded. "You're right. You've got a little girl on your hands."

"Yes!" Maren tucked her elbows into her sides, then punched the air in rapid succession. "I *told* you."

I clapped, teasingly mocking her enthusiasm. "Congratulations. You know your animal genitalia better than

I do.”

Maren turned her fists to her hips, and widened her stance. “That just means her name isn’t Sloppy Joe.”

“So she’s Sloppy Josephine.”

“No.”

“She’d be Slo Jo for short.”

“Oh, my goodness, Parker. *No.*”

We were locked in a staring contest where the stakes were both high, yet superfluous. If we were fighting for bragging rights over naming a kitten, I wouldn’t let Maren win easily. I’d gladly sacrifice any small piece of respect that winning would earn me, just so I could use my win to remind her I had some worthwhile qualities. Her eyes narrowed, and I folded my arms, maintaining the façade of cool indifference, like my eyeballs weren’t burning from the risk of evaporating straight out of my sockets.

*Don’t blink. Don’t blink. Don’t blink.*

Apparently, Maren brought out the childish side of me, too.

“Parker, I’m assuming you’re the one who’s helping the Granges at their place while they’re gone?” Dr. Fox was oblivious to our intense competition as he focused on the kitten. “They gave you my number, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. It’s on the fridge.” My traitorous brain broke eye contact with Maren to watch him drip medication from a small tube between the kitten’s shoulder blades. Maren’s smirk was so adorably kissable, I had to look away again for both our safety. She danced in place, swinging her hands in the air again. “You’re full of all sorts of victory dances today.”

“Can’t help it if I’m a winner and if I’m a winner, that makes you...”

She circled her hands, trying to get me to admit defeat. Nope. She might have been right about the cat’s gender, but she hadn’t beaten me. “Determined.”

“How do you two know each other?” Gesturing between us with a loaded syringe, Dr. Fox sat down on a hay bale and scrubbed his fingertips at the base of Slo Jo’s tail to warm her up to him before he inoculated her.

His question froze Maren. “What makes you think we know each other?”

“For one,” Dr. Fox put down the kitten after her shots, who hissed at him and hurried away to the safety of the top of the haystack, “he’s here in your barn. I can’t remember ever seeing anyone other than you or Granny here. Not Remi, not Trixie, even when she’s buying fresh eggs for the diner breakfast rush. Heck, I hardly ever saw your sister, Beckett, out in the barn.”

“That’s not fair.” I held up a pointer finger. “You can’t use people who don’t even live in Button Blossom as an example.”

“Alright. Not that guy you were dating last year who accidentally relieved himself on the electric fence. Pretty sure we could hear him howling in pain all the way at the vet clinic.”

The urge to pound on my own chest and strip down to a loincloth returned. I should have been laughing like Dr. Fox was, and in any other instance, I would have, but another surge of jealousy kept me stoic. Imagining her dating Dr. Fox was a million times more acceptable than knowing she’d dated a moron. Even the city boy I was, *I* knew not to pee on an electric fence. It was part of *How to Relieve Yourself Outdoors 101*.

“He followed me home,” Maren muttered, tossing her head in my direction. “Like a flea on a stray dog.”

“So you don’t know each other?” Dr. Fox gathered his things, and gave Becky one last scratch behind her floppy ears. “I guess I assumed by the way you two talk smack to each other, you knew each other. Pet owners are an odd group to begin with, but I’ve never seen two strangers become embroiled in a staring contest over a cat’s name. That sort of silly seems like it’d be reserved for a friend.”



If Maren didn't need Dr. Fox and his services at her farm, he might want to watch his back. The murderous glint that flashed in Maren's eyes left little to the imagination. If he kept bringing up our past, she might draw and quarter Dr. Fox before he even knew what happened, just so he'd quit asking questions.

"We don't know each other," I said.

Tension eased out of Maren's shoulders, and she nodded like she was going to throw out the alignment in her neck if she wasn't careful. "See? Thank you. We're basically complete strangers. All I know about him is he's intimidated by chickens and, like me, he also can't back down from a challenge."

When she intensified her glare at me, it only magnified my smile. If she kept it up much longer, my insides might supernova and explode all over Maren's barn. She'd probably be angry at me for that mess, too, so I kept any internal detonations inside. Maren's glares did nothing to deter me from my goals. I maintained that she was just as cute as ever when I got her riled up, and her bark was way worse than her bite. I'd know. I wondered if she even remembered sinking her teeth into my hand when I'd tried to lift her graham cracker. And if she still balled her fists at her sides and screamed indignantly when she was *really* perturbed. Now, *that* was memorable.

I could have let my agreement end with my agreement with her, but since Maren was already mad, I threw caution to the wind. I decided to take my chances that she wouldn't strangle me while there were witnesses. Dr. Fox and Becky could corroborate. Slo Jo might not be so forthcoming if I colluded with Dr. Fox, but I bet I could buy her off with a baggie of catnip.

"But," Maren's eyes went wide and her mouth tightened in an unmistakable *Don't-You-Dare* look. *Too bad, darlin'*. If I had a big cowboy hat on, I'd tip it in her direction. *Our secret's about to spill*. "We *knew* each other. We used to be best friends in school."

I held my arm up, circling a hand to invite Maren to tuck herself against me. Stubbornly, she took a step in the opposite direction, not that I was surprised. I laughed, imagining smoke coming out of her ears. It was too easy to provoke her. Sure, teasing Maren was about as safe as jabbing a stick at a hornet's nest like it was a birthday party pinata, but I accepted a long time ago that I wasn't the sort of person who took risks into account when I stumbled across something amusing. Life was too short to be constantly overanalyzing.

"You grew up out here, Parker?" Dr. Fox asked, tossing his trash in the garbage can buzzing with flies outside.

"Nope," I said. "Actually, Maren is a transplant, too. We were both city kids. South of Indianapolis."

"*You* may have been a city kid," Maren interjected, "but I was always a country girl who happened to be stuck in the suburbs."

"Same for me," Dr. Fox hoisted the rest of his things, and stood at the open barn doors, teetering on the edge of the concrete where the doors slid shut. "Nothing wrong with being a transplant from the suburbs, though there's something special about waking up to the tranquil sound of—"

"Dogs barking?" I tapped my finger against my lips, squinting as I thought of every other odd sound that had woken me up at daybreak this week. "Tractors rumbling down the road at two miles an hour? No, my favorite... the screaming goats?"

"Mary Jo and John don't have any goats." Maren folded her arms, and I could feel the animosity radiating off her like exhaust from a car on a triple digit day. I'd pushed my joke too far and was insulting her lifestyle, something she'd grown to love more than the paltry memory of anything good we'd ever had together.

"I can hear yours loud and clear." I grinned, putting all my chips that my charms might smooth things over. "Almost every morning, I shoot out of bed, thinking someone is being chopped to pieces in your barn."

“Maybe that’s exactly what I’m doing.” Maren leaned in close enough so I could see the gold mine in her eyes, and the smattering of freckles on her nose “You never know what your neighbors might be up to, especially out in the middle of nowhere.”

Though she was in her work clothes, she smelled amazing. I couldn’t pick out all the subtle notes that perfumed her, but there was definitely sunshine, flowers, and something tropical... maybe coconut? It had to be her shampoo. In school, her hair always smelled faintly of an island. Whatever it was, it made my head buzz with a pleasant, statically charged cloud. Desire came down in a deluge, flooding me with a fresh wave of attraction. Maren had been a typical, sweet teen girl overpowered by her insecurities when I last saw her, but now? She’d grown into a gorgeous, self-assured, incredible woman.

Murder threats aside.

I swallowed, equal parts scared and enamored by her. Her eyes drifted down to my neck, and I would have ripped my shirt off to give her a better view of what I had to offer if I didn’t think it would make me seem completely shallow. She’d already seen me shirtless today. That was enough for now.

“Wow.” I chuckled. “That’s dark, Maren. Even for you.”

Scoffing, she loosened Becky from the stanchion and moved the goat to a clean stall. “You’ll have to excuse this guy, Doc. He *used* to be normal, but he grew up and became a hot shot actor.”

Dr. Fox pointed at me. “*Love Comes for the Vet?*”

Maren ran a hand down her face, grumbling to herself while I fist bumped Dr. Fox. “You saw it?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was on a date with a woman who suggested it, because, shocker, I’m a veterinarian.”

“What’d you think of it?” My eyes found Maren, who was pretending not to listen as she fussed with Becky’s halter and leadline as she hung it on a hook. “Was the veterinarian stuff accurate?”

“Close enough.” I walked with Dr. Fox toward his truck, and Maren strayed a safe distance. He opened the toolbox in the bed and stuffed his things inside. “And I’m no expert, but the romance was a tad contrived.”

My jaw unhinged and landed somewhere on the ground as Maren gloated at me with a laugh and another dorky victory dance. Climbing inside of his truck, Dr. Fox rolled down his window as he cranked the growling diesel engine to life.

“Thanks, Doc.” Maren waved goodbye. “For everything. You have no idea how much you’ve made my day.”

“You might not be singing that tune when you get the bill,” he said.

Maren’s eyes cut over to me. “Worth it.”

“Is it clear behind me?” Dr. Fox adjusted his rearview mirror. “Running over your kitten would be terrible for P.R.”

Sniggering at his joke, Maren waved him backward. “You’re good.”

“You two kids have yourselves a nice day.” Backing out of his spot, Dr. Fox nodded at both of us. “And Maren? Don’t go murdering your new neighbor. I’d hate to have to testify against you in court. I’ve already heard too much to claim ignorance.”

“What else am I supposed to do with him? He’s worse than a housefly that won’t take the hint, no matter how many times he’s been swatted at.”

Stopping his truck, Dr. Fox mused briefly before patting the door. “Put him to work.”

## Chapter Six



### MAREN

I bumped the knife drawer shut with my hip and turned to slice the pile of lettuce I'd brought in from the garden. I knew I'd regret it, but try as I might to keep focused on not chopping off my own fingers, any quiet time I had inevitably drifted to Parker. Never in my wildest dreams would I imagine that I'd run into him across the road at the Granges'. Of all places, why did it have to be so close? The two weeks that he'd been in Button Blossom had been a unique form of torture, designed specifically to cause maximum torment. Life had orchestrated this all too ideally, and I bemoaned that maybe Parker *was* my fate. At least he was for the next two and a half months.

I blew out a controlled breath, trying to rid myself of all thoughts of Parker. No such luck. Knowing he was across the street at all times was the equivalent of him breathing down my neck.

I hated that I got goosebumps even *thinking* of Parker breathing on my neck. My brain and my body needed to get on the same page, and soon, or I knew I'd do something stupid.

If he would have stayed put, I might have been able to handle knowing Parker was in the vicinity. My life would have continued relatively normally, and other than having to scout things out when I went into town to make sure he wasn't going to ambush me at the gas station or when I couldn't bring myself to cook dinner, and Granny and I ate at the diner, I might have been able to forget about the undeniable tug I felt toward Parker. Not a tug, a yank. Dragged. He was a black

hole, sucking me toward him. If I wasn't careful, I'd end up getting too close, and I wouldn't be able to escape.

I had no idea what happened on the other side of a black hole, but whatever it was, there was no way it was good. If I didn't hold on for dear life, trying to keep safe from Parker's gravitational pull until he went on his merry way, back to Hollywood, I wasn't going to survive. My heart would be crumpled into a little black lump, disappearing forever when he left. And he would leave. If there was one thing I was sure of, it's that there was no way Parker was going to stick around Button Blossom. People like him never did.

Despite my assurances that I didn't need any help, Parker had taken Dr. Fox's advice to heart, and had shown up three times last week, asking if there were any chores on my to-do list. Every time, I'd sent him away with a laugh or a laissez-faire shrug that I had everything under control, even if the truth was that I didn't. Everyday was an uphill battle where I never seemed to gain any ground. I'd weed the garden, then run out of time to clean the chicken coop. I'd replace a rotted fence post, only to have a dead tree fall on it, snapping it like a toothpick, so I'd have to dig another hole *along* with cutting up a tree. If there's a sixth sense that all goats have, it's their ability to locate weaknesses in fencing so they can escape. Nothing like waking up in the morning to goats chowing down on my broccoli.

I wasn't complaining—it was the life I'd chosen—but sometimes, an extra set of hands *would* have been nice. Especially when they were attached to a gorgeous body like Parker's. If I could have looked at him without noticing everything that made him so dang attractive, it would have been a victory. Unlikely as it was, it would have been the epitome of foolishness to pretend like he wasn't attractive. From the thickness of his strong wrists, to the changing shape of his arms as his muscles moved, to noticing that when he shaved, his jawline was so sharp it could cut diamonds, there wasn't a single flaw I could find.

Curse Parker and his devilishly good looks.

The finer toothed the comb I raked over him, the harder it was for me to discover any other flaws, too. He'd been gentlemanly and respectful, even when I wasn't, and it made me wish that sometimes, I could figure out how to stop nursing the hard feelings I'd harbored so I could move on. Have a fresh start. Sure, there was a time when he was my best friend, but he'd also been an unrequited first crush. I'd kept it secret from him—from everybody—only dropping subtle hints that'd be easily denied if he caught on to them. As far as I could tell, he never reciprocated my feelings. Friendship was all he ever wanted from me.

Then, when I found out he was going to be one of the principle celebrities at Camp Hottie, I got it into my hormone-riddled teenage mind that if he saw me, all grown up, that our friendship would be rekindled. Friendship would lead to attraction. Attraction would mount, and come to a head in a raging inferno of passion, where I'd get my happily ever after.

A Cinderella story come to life.

I never claimed that I was level-headed as a teenager. I was all-in when I'd set my sights on something. That was, until Parker had snuffed my flame out without even knowing it was a torch I had burning for him.

Typical. Overlooked, underappreciated, so plain even with gobs of makeup on that he hadn't even looked twice at me.

Tossing my chopped lettuce into a bowl, I laughed softly, though it was tinged with a bitterness that made me want to go brush the taste off my tongue. Whatever I'd been thinking, pining after Parker once upon a time, it had gone all the way of the earth. Dead and buried. *Gone*. There were no more feelings for him. I could finally be neutral to his presence, and since zombies and the undead were things of fiction, that's where everything would stay. No resurrected feelings for Parker allowed.

Then why did I feel a wriggle of hope trying to sprout in my gut every time Parker turned his attention on me now?

“What's got you giggling?” Granny asked as she strode into the kitchen and pulled out two table settings from the

cabinet.

*Crud.*

I'd been trying to keep Granny in the dark, but there had been times she caught me reminiscing about Parker, and letting my silly fantasies play out in my head. All the staring off into the distance and randomly blushing were clues for her, and like a bloodhound on a scent, I knew she wasn't going to leave it alone until she'd chased down an answer. Any resistance I might try to wield against her would eventually die of exhaustion when faced with her dogged determination.

I shrugged, and opened up a bag of dried cranberries, throwing a handful on top of the lettuce. "Nothing in particular."

Granny planted a fist on her side. Like me, she might appear willowy and petite, but she was as tough as nails. "Do you honestly think I was born yesterday? I've seen that look before on a thousand other people. You're not fooling me."

I raised my eyebrows and pinched my lips to keep anything incriminating from falling out. If I didn't look at Granny directly, there was a chance she wouldn't be able to extrapolate anything. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. You're trying to hide what you're thinking, and you of all people should know you can't keep a secret from me."

"Fine." I sighed, stopping what I was doing and risked a glance at Granny. "If you're so intuitive, tell me, what was I giggling about?"

Granny took two steps closer, her eyes squinting like she was reading everything that I was thinking; it was just plastered on my face in small print.

"You're dreaming about that new neighbor of ours."

*Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!*

My heart plummeted and landed with a squishy thud somewhere around my toes. Dang, Granny was good. It was foolish of me to hope she hadn't seen Parker yet, but it wasn't



like I'd chained her in the basement, away from the outside world. Parker was a guy who drew attention. Remi had probed me about him when she came to sip sweet tea and rock on the front porch while I stuck labels on the jam I'd made, admiring how the flowers were going strong since Granny had pulled the weeds out from around the porch. I'd heard whispers about Parker when I went into town, everywhere from the grocery store to the town bank. It wouldn't have surprised me if all the major gossip magazines were tracking his every move, and Button Blossom was inundated with his superfans, hoping they'd catch a glimpse of him while he was sequestering in small town Indiana.

Digging in my heels and denying that Parker wasn't a renewed source of both agitation and pleasure would be like pretending the sky wasn't blue.

"I am *not* thinking about Parker."

"Yes, you are. I'm right. Might as well get it over with and admit it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do, too. The man living at the Granges' for the summer is none other than Parker Bingham, the boy you've had the hots for all these years. You've got that smile."

"That smile? Now I can't even be happy now without it being attributed to a guy I knew ages ago?"

"What's wrong with admitting that he's been on your mind? All I know is that he would have given your grandfather a run for his money if he were still alive, and I was forty years younger."

"You're incorrigible." I sloppily threw a pan of slivered almonds in the oven and brushed off my hands, feeling my traitorous lips pull into the very grin Granny had claimed Parker caused. "I have not been thinking about Parker."

"Yes, you have."

"No, I haven't."

“You’re full-on twitterpated. Like someone smacked you over the head with a two by four. And not that I’m complaining. A pretty young thing like you should be out having fun, not wasting away the best years of your life with little old ladies.”

“You or the goats?”

“Maren,” Granny said in a warning tone.

“It’s a valid question. I thought I wasn’t supposed to call you old. I believe the adjective you last used to describe yourself was spry.”

Granny yanked the towel off the oven door and swatted at my rear end to prove that she was, in fact, still very agile. I jumped out of the way. I’d learned to use everything from ropes to towels better than David could sling a stone at Goliath’s forehead from Granny. The crack of a towel always seemed to drive a lesson home, even if she rarely made contact with my backside. The threat of it was enough to take her seriously. “You are a stinker. Of course I meant me. *I’m* the little old lady. Look at me. I have more wrinkles than a bag of raisins, and my once enviable red hair has been reduced to a poofy white cotton ball attached to my head. I am a human Q-tip.”

“Well, I love your fluff of white hair. Even with it, you’re the epitome of spry.” Granny cracked the towel again and it snapped within inches of my backside. “Hey, watch it! That would have given me a welt.”

“You would have deserved it. It’s one thing to call myself spry. It’s another thing when *you* say it. When a young person uses it to describe the elderly, it becomes patronizing, and frankly, I don’t need your pity.”

“Fine. I’ll refer to you from now on as a little old lady. Do you want to go cane shopping sometime? I saw someone at the last farmer’s market who had some in his wood carving stall. You could get one with a squirrel on top, since you’re such a nut.” I laughed scornfully as Granny wound her towel again, but she was stopped short by the chime of the doorbell. We

stared at each other. I blinked. Then Granny did. “Are you expecting someone?”

Uncharacteristically, Granny relinquished her upperhand, and hung the towel back on the stove. “Why? Are you?”

“Nope.”

I ran my hand over my loose ponytail, windblown and lopsided from working outside. I wasn’t exactly presentable after a full day’s work. A shower would be my reward, but it wasn’t going to happen until well after dinner. There was no such thing as finished, but summer gave me a few extra hours of daylight to work by, and it couldn’t be wasted.

“Wonder who that might be,” Granny said as she fussed with the food I’d already prepared.

I studied Granny as she moved around the kitchen. The doorbell chime had subdued her, and it was uncharacteristic of her to be nonchalant when someone came calling. Even if it was only Remi bringing another package, Granny usually beat me to the door.

“Granny,” I folded my arms and leaned against the edge of the table. I wasn’t going to budge until she was more forthcoming. That meant direct questions. “*Who* did you invite over?”

She hummed and scrubbed the same spot on the countertop, pretending she didn’t hear me.

Striding across the kitchen, I turned her around so she’d have to look at me, and folded my arms again. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t hear me. Did you invite someone over?”

A gleeful twinkle danced in Granny’s eyes. The doorbell rang again, and I glanced in the direction of the front door. “Maybe.”

“Why didn’t you mention something? We’re kind of in the middle of dinner right now.”

It might have been my rumbling stomach talking, but Granny’s deception irked me more than normal. Who showed up at dinnertime? Common courtesy was a staple of Button

Blossom residents, which meant mealtime was sacred. Once I had my dinner in peace, I could handle an interruption.

My thoughts jumped like a frog on lily pads from one possibility to the next, until I landed on the big, fat, obvious conclusion. Who was the one *non*-Button Blossom resident who might not think twice about barging in right when I was about to sit down and put my feet up? A firm rapping on the front door made my blood pressure spike.

“Granny, is that Parker at the front door?”

Shrugging like it was no big deal, Granny confirmed one of the fears I’d been cultivating since Parker had arrived. He was on my front porch. I’d managed to keep him out until now, but now he was banging on my door, trying to break through one of my last lines of defense. If I had a sword and shield, I would have chased him back to John and Mary Jo’s so he’d understand once and for all.

“I can’t believe you.” I massaged my temples, trying to ward off the pinching headache threatening to crack my skull.

“I don’t like the tone of your voice, young lady,” Granny said. “I helped raise you to be neighborly. That means, when someone else helps you out, you repay that kindness. In this case, dinner.”

The world seemed to be spinning the wrong way. Tilted on its axis and wobbling, too. “What did Parker do to help us out? I’ve turned him down every time he’s swung by and asked if I needed help.”

“*You* might have turned him down, but I’m not stupid enough to say no to a strong back.”

I replayed the week in my mind, and any miracles that might have gone unnoticed. “The flowerbeds. I thought that was you who’d weeded them.”

Granny’s smirk was so haughty, I was surprised she didn’t climb up on a pedestal so she could look down at me. “They haven’t looked that nice since your daddy was in diapers.”

“So you convinced Parker to do it for you?”

“For us both.” With a devious smile, Granny chuckled. “It was hard work watching him from the porch swing while I sipped lemonade. I held his for him, of course.”

“Naturally.”

“The TV doesn’t do justice to how blue his eyes are. Who needs to go to Bali when he’s got oceans for irises?”

“I’d still rather have a trip to Bali,” I moaned.

Granny was a pro at ignoring any of my grumpiness. “Would it be wrong to say that I couldn’t help but notice his jeans fit—”

I held up my hand and grimaced. “Please. For the love of all that is good, stop. I don’t need to hear your description of how anyone fits into their jeans, *especially* Parker.”

“Party pooper,” Granny mumbled.

I paced the kitchen, trying to be rational in the face of panic. “Let’s think this through. It *is* possible Remi’s at the door with a package. I told her I’ve been waiting for some specialty glass containers for my liquid soap, because *someone* broke all of the first order. She promised to bring them right away.”

Granny threw her hands up in exasperation. “I *told* you all I did was nudge it in the door. I can’t help they shattered at the slightest touch. If you ask me, I did you a favor.”

I pretended I didn’t hear Granny’s contrived explanation. “Or maybe Trixie’s ringing the doorbell. She said she found a baby squirrel near her house, and Remi told her to pick up some goat milk until Trixie could hand the squirrel off to Remi for rehabilitation.”

“Trixie already came. I gave her a pint of milk already.”

“Fine. The point is, let’s not get too excited, because it might not even *be* Parker.”

“Or maybe it is.”

If Granny could ignore me, I could do the same. “Why don’t you go get the door and I’ll finish up dinner?”

“Why don’t *you* answer the door and *I’ll* finish up dinner?”

I was embroiled in another round of a battle of wills. One I knew I wouldn’t win. Granny didn’t twitch. I sighed. “Fine. Don’t burn the almonds. I’ve been craving that salad all day, and I want it to be perfect.”

Granny tossed back her head and cackled like a hyena who wandered freely in the African savannah. “Unlikely. I’ve been cooking since the dawn of civilization. I don’t burn things.”

“There you go again.”

“What?”

“Reiterating again that you’re elderly.”

I escaped the kitchen as Granny reached for the towel. Taking a beat in the hallway, safely out of Granny’s range, but out of sight of the front door, I couldn’t deny the maniac butterflies that were crowding along my insides. I didn’t want it to be Parker, but Granny was right—if he’d helped us out, we were obligated to keep our promises. If Granny promised him a meal, then he was going to get it. It was an unspoken code among country folks, and even if the anticipation of willingly allowing Parker into my home made my entire frame quiver with nerves, I wouldn’t let him see it. I coached myself, on repeat, that he was just another neighbor. Nobody special, no matter if he came in a package of thick caramel hair, strawberry lips, and muscles that were just the right amount of beefy.

My stomach growled as I padded quietly down the hallway to the front door. All the comparing Parker to edible deliciousness was not helpful. Dinner was what I needed.

Peering at the door as I approached, the tension eased out of my neck, and the butterflies died down. Through the thick crystal pane in the door, there was nothing but sunshine, speckled by the occasional shadows of tree branches bobbing in a gentle breeze. No silhouette of anyone waiting for me to open the door.

No Parker.

“Thank my lucky stars.” I pressed a hand to still my heart, and hurried to the door. If I was quick enough, I might be able to wave my thanks to Remi for bringing me the jars I’d been waiting for.

Swinging the door open, I looked in all the usual spots where Remi left things for me. Finding nothing, I glanced toward the driveway, where Parker was strolling halfway back to his place. From where I stood, he could have been a regular guy, not a celebrity who had half the human population pining over him, my grandmother included. It was a chance to see Parker as I’d known him before he’d become larger than life. Normal. Having to use his two legs to walk him home, just like the rest of us.

I also may or may not have taken note of how fabulous his backside looked in his jeans, as had been suggested by Granny. It wasn’t a crime to see and observe. Indeed, Granny was correct.

But all that aside, he was just Parker. *My* Parker. Like I was his Maren. Or had been. It felt like eons ago that we’d known each other on any sort of intimate terms. When I’d tried to reinstate our relationship during my stay at Camp Hottie, he’d disappointed me. It hadn’t even occurred to me that might be the outcome of seeing him face to face again. Now? I didn’t know if I could handle more despair, especially from him. No amount of pep talks could bind a splintered heart. Only time produced the kind of forgetfulness that allowed me to pretend that I hadn’t been hurt.

Watching him go, I noticed an odd movement under his arm. Squinting to get a better look, I recognized the cat’s tail that twitched like a worm on a hook.

“Hey!” I stood at the end of my porch steps, and cupped my hands around my mouth. “Why are you stealing my cat?”

## Chapter Seven



### MAREN

Parker spun around, and even as far away as he was, his instant smile blasted into me with the power of the sun. I leaned against the column at the edge of the steps as Parker turned and jogged his way back to me. Pretending I was using the column to appear nonchalant, I wondered if I looked like I needed to physically be supported. I'd never thought of a man jogging as particularly alluring, but my brain decided at that moment to shove me into a romance novel. One where a hot guy clutching a kitten was running in slow motion toward me.

*Come to mama.*

I was nearly hugging the column by the time he reached me. It was the only thing preventing a fatal swoon into the flowerbeds below. If that wouldn't feed Parker's insatiable ego, I didn't know what would.

He bounded up the steps and didn't even have the decency to turn down the juice on his smile. "Hey."

Granny's voice preemptively chided me, reminding me that I was expected to be nice. I kept my tone even, but I didn't mince words. "Why are you trying to catnap Slo Jo?"

He wasn't offended. If anything, that only made his smile stretch wider. A craving for something more than food zapped through me. "I see you like the name I chose for her."

Positioning Slo Jo on her back, the kitten laid in his arms like a baby, appreciatively purring as he tickled a finger on her tummy.



“I haven’t had a chance to sit down and think of anything more clever.” I sniffed, accidentally getting a sample of Parker’s heady scent. It was intoxicating and though I wasn’t a drinker, I imagined the effects were the same. I continued to steady myself with the column. Did he have to stand so close?

Secretly, I bemoaned my current state. Of all the days Granny had failed to mention we were having a dinner guest, all I’d done before getting started preparing our meal was wash my hands and splash cool water on my face. There were mud stains on the knees of my jeans and probably sweat marks in my armpits. What kind of love story heroine was as unkempt as I was? Trying to look on the positive side of things, Parker was getting me in all my farming glory. It was a culmination of hard work, love of the land, and a desire to get the best food and supplies I could out to my community. Sweaty and dirty was as real as I could get with someone who knew next to nothing about raising crops and animals. If he didn’t like it, then it’d be another layer of protection against his mischief-making.

“Sure you don’t like the name I chose.” He leaned closer. “It’s catchy, isn’t it?”

“It’s not *that* catchy.”

“Uh-huh.”

I wanted to wipe Parker’s smug smirk off his face. My eyes accidentally dipped to his lips, and my brain took off again, whispering in my ear what it might be like to kiss him. He was probably very accomplished, or at least he appeared to be in all his movies. Not that I’d be evenly matched. Or care that I wasn’t.

“If you must know, I haven’t had the time to think of another name that fits her prima donna personality yet. So, she’s stuck with Slo Jo. For now.”

“You’d seriously change it now? She already knows it’s her name and comes when she’s called. Admit it. You like that she doesn’t have a dumb cat name like Fluffy. It’s clever.”

If there's one thing Parker didn't need, it was having a bigger head than he already had. I'd already given him the satisfaction of not being able to *not* look at his chiseled torso last week when I found him shirtless in the chicken coop. I was almost surprised his head didn't pop right there. Letting him name my cat might cause an atomic detonation on my porch, but there was no point in lying that I had stuck with calling her Slo Jo.

"Clever would be naming her a clever pun, like Catalina Jolie or Jessicat or something." He groaned, shaking his head as he winced at my pathetic attempt to come up with examples. "Oh, stop. Single syllable rhyming is hardly an accomplishment. I'm pretty sure kids learn that in kindergarten."

"Names don't have to be complicated to be memorable."

"Slo Jo will do. But only for now."

"Like you already said." Parker winked at me as I rambled about a cat who probably didn't care *what* we called her. Breathing to slow down my pitter-pattering heart rate again, I wished Parker would keep his unsolicited winks and smiles to himself. They were dangerous, and should be registered as weapons that destroyed women's hearts on a mass scale. "And for your information, I wasn't trying to steal her. I was bringing Slo Jo back. I found her snoozing in one of the flower planters under the front window over at my place."

He handed Slo Jo back, and I accepted her, tearing my focus from his face to the naughty kitten who kept bringing us back together. "Thanks."

Our hands brushed in the exchange, making my skin tingle with tiny fireworks. I liked it. Very much. But that was for me to know, and no one else to find out.

Ever.

"Could I ask you a question?" Parker had one hand stuffed into his pocket and the other, he reached to the column, resting his palm right next to my head. "I think I have a slight problem."

*So do I.* When did I become such a lightweight when it came to being in close proximity to a handsome man? My dating life had never been stellar, but I'd also never felt so powerless with any other guy who'd taken me out to eat, all the way down the road to the diner where Trixie served greasy hamburgers and soggy pie.

“Another one, huh?” My sarcasm hit the mark, and Parker winced. “Sorry. That was supposed to come out as a joke, but it was rude.”

“There's no need to apologize. I know I'm a pretty pathetic farmhand.”

“You'll learn. But even then, life still gets the best of even the most seasoned farmers. So? What's on your mind?”

Parker swiped his hand over the back of his neck, and I had tunnel vision, daydreaming about hanging my arms around his shoulders while he rested his hands on my hips. *No, Maren.*

*N. O.*

*NO. Remember?*

“It's about that hen.”

I had to bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from grinning. What could she possibly have done now?  
“Licorice?”

“Yeah. Do chickens have vendettas?”

My insides were screaming to laugh, but I held it in. Parker was being vulnerable, asking about something he sincerely had no clue about, and though I might not be thrilled that he'd showed up at the Granges' without warning, I also wasn't cruel. Letting someone else know you're ignorant but willing to learn can be a hard place to be in. “I can't say that I think they're capable of such complex thinking, harboring grudges and plotting revenge. What makes you think she has it out for you?”

“Ever since you helped me move her off the nest when she was being broody, I swear I catch her glaring at me. She

squawks like she's cussing at me when I'm just walking by, not paying any attention to her. More than once, she's marched up to the front porch and pooped on the toe of my boots. Plus, whenever I go get the eggs, I'm pretty sure she hears me coming, and runs to get on a pile of eggs, just so she can give me a hard time."

"If I'm understanding you correctly," I rubbed my nose, pretending it itched so I could hide my ill-controlled snort of laughter, "you're still intimidated by Licorice?"

"I think she's got a taste for human blood. If you find me dead in the Granges' house, it was totally Licorice, the devil's mistress."

His ridiculousness was too much and my snort turned to full laughter. He'd set me up for it, and looked pleased that his self-deprecation had worked. "I can't say I've ever heard of anyone being killed by a chicken, but I guess there's always a first."

"The way her beady eyes gleam right as she's about to peel back another layer of my flesh is going to give me nightmares. Seriously. Look at my hand. I'm risking gangrene and severed digits if she keeps at it."

I reached for his hand to study it. Running my thumb over his knuckles, there were a few scabs, probably Licorice's doing. I flipped his hand palm up, feeling my way across the calluses beneath his fingers. It surprised me that he had any. Some were angry and red, like they'd been pushed harder than usual during his stay at the Granges'. There was something pleasing about the fact that he didn't have baby-butt soft hands. I was always sort of creeped out when I held hands with a guy whose hands were smoother than mine.

And then it dawned on me, I was holding Parker's hand.

Parker's hand was in mine.

The teenage girl in me was squealing with delight, while the cynical, present-day me had red flashing lights and obnoxious sirens sounding in my head.

Whatever Parker was to me now, he'd created a rift within me. If I wasn't careful, he'd split me right down the middle.

I froze in the middle of running my fingertips over his rough skin. Peering up at him, his gaze was intense as he watched me assessing his hand, and with one look, my palms were as sweaty as my underarms. It didn't take much to spur my heart to take off faster than a scared jackrabbit, and the sound of rushing blood in my ears drowned out everything else in the world. I shoved his hand back at him and dropped mine to wipe my palms against my jeans. "I think you'll live."

"Thanks for the assessment, Doc Mare-bear."

Another snort escaped before I could clap my hand over my mouth. "Mare-bear? You haven't called me that since what, second grade? Nobody calls me that."

"Get used to it." He wriggled his thick eyebrows, and my body reacted the way he was probably hoping, though I kept my tells locked behind a carefully practiced poker face. Ducking to meet my eyes, he looked like he was on the cusp of telling me a secret only for my ears to hear. I inclined toward him, whether I wanted to or not, closer to the black hole. Closer to danger. "I meant it when I said I missed you."

I reached for the end of my ponytail, and without his hand in mine, kept my fingers busy by knotting them up in my hair. His mere presence had thrown me off kilter, and I both wanted to keep him near while also pushing him away. There was too much at stake, and so much I might win. Another reminder that Parker had more power over me than any person should.

Usually, I was so level-headed. I didn't go falling for guys left and right, but Parker was a perfect storm. A former best friend and my first crush, who'd grown into a hunky man with grit and determination that rivaled my own. If a single glance from Parker was going to turn the butterflies existing in my gastrointestinal tract into energy drink-chugging maniacs, it was impossible not to wonder what one innocent kiss might do.

Not that a kiss was even a remote possibility. It would be entirely too risky to act on my baser instincts, for so many

reasons, not the least of which was that being outside and acting like a complete dork had made a sweat mustache pop out above my upper lip. *Gross. Always keeping it classy, aren't you Mare-bear.*

A slow smile spread on Parker's face and for a second, I wondered if my fantasy had been written all over mine. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I swiped my hand across my lips, hoping my sweat mustache hadn't been obvious, nor my attempts to erase it. "Why?"

"You got that look on your face."

"What look?" I hoped to end all hope, I hadn't gone brain dead while assessing my current predicament. Granny had taken a picture of me once when I was spaced out. My eyes were glazed over, my mouth hung open, I stared at nothing... not a good look for me.

"The one where I'm not sure if you're still here on earth with me, or if you're orbiting in some distant solar system."

"Oh. Right." I chuckled lightly. "I was just... thinking."

"About me?"

I wished I had a towel draped over my shoulder. I would have tamed Parker's ego with the snap of fabric, even if he was doing it to be playful. Even if he was *right*. He couldn't know that the tiniest seed of attraction had rooted itself. There would be no watering or cultivating it, because it needed to die. Summer would end, and Parker would vanish. The end. Goodbye.

"You wish."

"Yeah, I kinda do."

Holy cow. Parker was flirting with me. It wasn't even subtle. He'd put it out there for the whole world to hear, never mind that Slo Jo and I were the only ones present. Perhaps he would have been less forthcoming if there were other people around. Regardless, Parker had sent me on a roller coaster of emotions since catching him with my cat. Dips of sadness for

what could have been gave way to loops of desire, and twists of hope. If I didn't get off this ride, and soon, I might lose more than the meager lunch I'd hurried to snarf down between chores.

I put on the brakes hard. Fantasies aside, the thought of being attracted to Parker terrified me. He was capable of hurting me, because he'd done it before. All that painful history aside, our existences were so very different. Yeah, we might be pretending to do the same thing this summer, but once it ended, Parker would head back to his fabulous life, complete with women who were the epitome of everything graceful and poised. Everything a guy like him would be looking for. Finley was the type of woman he was expected to be attached to. A supermodel who looked like the rest of us *wished* we looked modeling lingerie.

Not that my ambitions lie in modeling underwear, but if I had to prance around mostly naked, I would want as little jiggling as possible, except in the right places. If Parker took me to a red carpet event I'd look like the out-of-place country bumpkin that I was.

The thought of Parker being attached to Finley was a pinprick in the invasive feelings Parker evoked. I should thank him for reminding me we'd never work out. Then why was I slowly deflating, leaving me wanting?

Wanting what, I couldn't put my finger on exactly.

Jumping down from his hands, Slo Jo positioned herself primly on the steps and started grooming herself. If I could be an animal, I might choose to be her. Lithe and bright, inquisitive, and adorable. Plus, completely oblivious to the dumpster fire that was billowing sickly, black smoke and shooting flames as a representation of my life in the current moment.

"Hey," Parker put his hand on my shoulder, and it grounded me, filling me with warmth that blossomed straight from his touch. "Are you okay?"

My tongue was a brick, paralyzed and useless in my mouth. There was nothing to say to him, because I wasn't even

sure how *I* was going to navigate our relationship. We weren't exactly back at our genesis, but we couldn't pick up right where we'd left off either.

"You know what always makes me feel better?" He held out his arms and my heart slammed into a brick wall, stopping with a lurch. "A hug."

If this was how he was going to act all during dinner—thoughtful and caring. Doing that flirty thing again—I might not survive. I slapped together a quick game plan to keep my mouth stuffed so full of salad during dinner that I couldn't possibly say anything that could be misconstrued as returning his attention. Granny was more than capable of carrying the conversation for the rest of us. As for any more invitations to hug? I'd put the table between us to keep us apart.

That was all well and good for the future, but right then and there, the gravitational pull of his outstretched arms was excruciating. I was tipping into his barrel chest, wondering if hugging that many muscles would be rock hard, or soft and squishy, like being wrapped up in a stress ball. I never found out. On the cusp of giving in, the smoke detector wailed from inside and Granny burst out of the front door, coughing and waving her hand in front of her face as the bitter odor of burned almonds followed her.

"Sorry." Granny patted her chest and coughed loudly. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything, but I got a little busy in the kitchen and didn't realize I burned the almonds black."

"Are you alright?" I grabbed the handle and got to work pumping the door open and shut to fan out the smoke.

"Nothing that a nice picnic dinner and open windows won't clear up." Granny stood from where she'd been leaned over, her hands bracing her arms against her knees. "Hello, Parker. Glad you took us up on our offer."

I leaned over to whisper behind the back of my hand. "*Your* offer."

"No," Granny wagged a finger at me. "I distinctly remember that you had weeding the flowerbeds written down



on your whiteboard to-do list, and since Parker did it for you, I offered him dinner on both our behalf. Trust me, dear. I don't forget about things."

"Yet you laughed me to scorn when I told you not to burn anything."

"I don't forget about *important* things," Granny amended. "Besides, I said I got too busy. Maybe it's my elderly, infirm brain that pooped out on me." Granny stuck out her tongue at me as I laughed. Age hadn't necessarily made her forgetful, but it definitely had made her sassier. "You are staying for dinner, aren't you, Parker?"

Parker's eyes slid over to mine and I felt a buzz of connection. I was a fish on a hook and he was holding the reel that had the power to drag me in. "I don't want to impose."

Granny harrumphed. "Having a handsome neighbor who knows how to work hard over for dinner is never an imposition. Come in, Parker. We haven't had a chance to have a proper chat since you helped us weed the flowers. So, tell me what's new with you."

## Chapter Eight



### MAREN

If it was possible to have cheek cramps from smiling so hard, my muscles were threatening a revolution. I was walking at the end of the procession to the kitchen, where no one could see just how hard my face was working at letting all my good feelings spill out before I had to lock them away. It would be dangerous for Granny *or* Parker to see me with so little restraint. It was leverage they'd be able to use against me, and I wasn't totally sure that either of their motives wasn't at least a little bit nefarious. But, if I was caught beaming like the rays of sun right as the intense light brimmed over the horizon, I'd blame it on something else.

I was smiling at Granny's antics, not Parker. I was smiling at Slo Jo, who swatted at my hair as I carried her inside, not Parker.

*Since when did you become so afraid of telling it like it is, Maren?*

*Fine.* So I was smiling a teensy bit over Parker, too. It had been kind of cute watching him snap to attention as Granny ordered him inside. She was anything but subtle, and sometimes, it was good to have to endure some old-fashioned bluntness.

Halfway to the kitchen, listening like a fly on the wall as Parker and Granny bantered back and forth, I pulled both lips between my teeth to extinguish my smile because frankly, my face hurt from so much exercise.

“You’re sure I’m not a bother?” he asked.

The question was directed at Granny, but Parker’s attention found its way back to me. I smiled pleasantly, as I turned away to straighten one of the family heirloom photos scattered in the entryway corridor. Granny was going to have to take the lead.

Wait.

Maybe I’d regret letting her shepherd Parker and me. She might lead us into the Valley of Attraction, through the Waters of Flirtation, among the Meadow of Budding Love, and up to the Cliff of Insanity, where she’d push us off, hoping things worked out for the best.

“Nope.” Granny herded Parker the rest of the way through the hallway. “Maren always cooks like she’s going to feed an entire lineup of sumo wrestlers and between you and me, I’m sick of leftovers.”

I threw a hand in the air and slapped it down on my thigh. “Since when? You told me you *liked* leftovers. Then you didn’t have to cook every meal.”

“A girl needs a break from the monotony once in a while. The in and out, day to day, drudgery of life can be easily spiced up, with, oh, I don’t know... having lobster for dinner.” Granny’s look was meant to slice right into me, and her innuendo wasn’t even close to subtle. I was going to have to rethink my status on her being so forthright. In her mind, Parker was the buttered lobster, and he was here to knock me out of the rut I’d carved right through my life. I didn’t even know how to proceed with an argument with Granny. Throwing sassy remarks back and forth about a buttered crustacean would completely bewilder Parker. If I was lucky, he might turn and run.

I had an opportunity for an out, but cold feet kept me from pursuing it. I shouldn’t have cared if he thought I was quirky, but my introversion wanted to keep me safe. Bland, I could do. Standoffish.... Yep. But off my rocker? There was a piece of me who still cared whether I had Parker’s good opinion.

Granny turned her attention to him. “Parker, you look like you’re going to fall asleep on your feet. You’re in luck that dinner is mostly ready.”

“Except for the almonds,” I muttered.

Granny ignored me, though I kept an eye on the towel draped over the oven, just in case. “You earned yourself a hearty meal for taking care of Maren and me.”

Holding up a finger, I mentioned, “Uh, I didn’t ask to be taken care of. I had things under control.”

“Maren,” Granny tsked. “The man pulled out enough weeds to outweigh a county fair hog. Neither of us had them under control. So, we’re going to feed him a nice meal, he’s going to enjoy some playful ribbing, then we’ll send him on his way back to the Granges’, where he may or may not zonk out on the couch before he makes it upstairs to the guest bedroom.”

“I guess there’s no point in denying it. I’m wiped.” Parker rubbed a hand down his face, and I could hear the scrape of his stubble across his palms. How on earth could a *sound* be sexy? “I’d planned on this summer being relaxing. Instead, it’s been like being on a movie set, but not having done any of the pre-production training. Is it that obvious that I’m exhausted?”

“Yep. Those bags under your eyes are the size of Santa’s sack at Christmas,” Granny said, striding her way to the kitchen. “When is the last time you had a decent meal?”

“Does peanut butter and jelly count?” Parker chuckled low, and I also added that to my list of new favorite sounds.

I wrinkled my nose and badgered him. “If you’re under ten years old.”

“In that case, it’s been a while,” Parker admitted sheepishly. “I’m not used to having to cook for myself.”

“Then you’re in luck. You don’t have to cook a thing tonight. I may need you to lug plates out for us.” Granny pointed in the direction of the guest bath and shooed Parker out of the kitchen. “You go wash up while Maren and I finish what I promise will be the best meal that you’ve ever had.”

Parker's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "You're not afraid that I might have eaten at other places that have claimed the same thing? I know a lot of five-star chefs who might disagree with you."

My pride took over and I raised my chin, not that it was going to make me even close to his eye level. It was the stance that counted. There weren't a lot of things I bragged about, but I didn't blow smoke about our homegrown food. "A meal doesn't have to be fancy to be delicious. And we have one advantage most big city chefs could never replicate."

"Oh, yeah?" Parker took a step back toward me, and I swallowed. Our atoms must have been bumping against each other, because it felt like an embrace from Parker without him even touching me. "And what's that?"

"Freshness," I said, my voice cracking. Darting away from him, I retreated to the kitchen island for safety. With it between us, I wouldn't accidentally stumble into his arms and wrap my arms around his waist. "I'd like to see a restaurant that feeds you food that was plucked out of a garden twenty minutes before it's on your plate and you're eating it."

Parker grinned at me. We were both hopelessly competitive. Perhaps I should have been more humble about the meal we were about to serve him, except my self-conceit was raring to go. The food I'd prepared wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but I wasn't kidding when I'd claimed fresh food was always better. Had he ever had a strawberry ripened by the sun and popped straight off the vine? Or made an entire salad from vegetables harvested only a hundred feet out his back door? Doubtful.

"You're on, Maren." Parker pointed at me. "You and Granny against every restaurant and chef I've ever had the pleasure of sitting at."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" I bounced from foot to foot, holding my fists against my face and jabbing the air like a boxer warming up before a big fight. It was an out-of-body experience watching myself behave so commercially. That same self-conceit that had me bragging seconds earlier had her

hands in her pockets, whistling and walking away without making eye contact, pretending she didn't know me. "I'm ready."

Parker laughed, and though I'd given him a reason to mock me for pretending I was the Muhammed Ali of home-cooked meals, it was a sound full of warmth. He got my awkward attempt at humor. "Good, because I'm taking mental inventory and recalling every one of my favorite meals. There was a particularly good flan I had in Barcelona. Just thinking about the rich, caramel-y taste is making my mouth water."

He ran his tongue between the seams of his lips to add emphasis, and my attention made a beeline for his mouth. How a gesture so quick and simple could throw my entire body into a spiral, blushing and sucking the strength out of my knees, I couldn't say. It had been entirely too long since I'd decently kissed a man, and that's exactly where my thoughts landed me. Right in enemy territory, envisioning myself in Parker's arms, lips pressed to his, hands fervently tangled in his thick, lush hair.

The snap of Granny's towel rescued me. "Go wash up." Parker danced out of the way, narrowly missing the worst of her woven cotton weapon. "Your fancypants flan has nothing on Maren's sugar cream pie."

Filling the hallway with laughter, Parker disappeared, giving me a chance to rescue myself from the vision that was as dangerous as petting a king cobra. Glancing at Granny, I opened my mouth to thank her, but thought better of it. She didn't need any more ammo than I'd already given her, and judging by the intuitive twinkle in her dang eye, and the way she dropped her chin so she could look at me over the thin silver frame of her glasses, she already knew exactly what'd been going through my head.

"No pressure on dinner," Granny said, reaching for another plate from the cabinet. "Cockiness isn't your usual M. O."

"Me? Um, you were also bragging."

"I was acting as your wingman. Er, wing-granny."

Bracing myself against the butcher block island, I giggled and shook my head at her ridiculousness. “I don’t think that’s the right use of the term.”

“Sure it is. You’re flirting with Parker, I’m facilitating it.” Granny went to the drawer where the cloth napkins were and produced three that matched the tablecloth she’d already pulled out. Apparently we were going for fancy since we had a guest. Usually, when we ate outside, we balanced our plates on our laps, with our feet up on the porch railing. “I hope you added the right amount of cinnamon to the sugar cream pie. You sometimes go so heavy on it, it makes my throat feel raw.”

There was no point in arguing with Granny. Either Parker would overhear, or he’d walk back in on our conversation, which would undoubtedly still be centered on him, so I locked up every denial I wanted to throw at Granny and saved it for later. Silence was the only defense I had to get her to hush up.

Pouring all my attention back into preparing dinner, I hurried around the kitchen to make sure everything was as amazing as my amateur skills allowed. Through the walls, I could hear the faint sound of the bathroom faucet singing, accompanied by Parker’s low humming as he washed his hands. His voice alone gave a dimension to our home that I hadn’t truly recognized we were missing. There had been no men living in this home in years, and while I got on splendidly with Granny, Parker’s baritone voice was a reminder of what it was like to live among family.

Gramps had passed away right before I moved in with my sister, Beckett, and our parents to help Granny keep up with the place. We’d lived as a multigenerational family for about eight years, but the second my parents were confident that I was old enough to run the farm with Granny, who swore up and down we’d have to kill her to get her to leave, they’d retired to Florida. Beckett traded helping at the Button Blossom farmer’s market for a fancy university degree in pediatrics, and was in the middle of medical school with no intention of coming back to the quiet town where she’d grown up.

My throat swelled shut. No one I wanted to stay ever did.

“Guess we’d better see the damage.” I tentatively cracked open the oven, nearly gagging as an acrid black cloud of smoke billowed out. “You definitely burned the almonds, Granny.”

Granny smirked. “It was worth the sacrifice.”

Midway sliding my hand into an oven mitt, I side-eyed her. She was looking entirely too giddy as she folded the napkins into a complex origami shape. Ducks, I think? I suppose it’d be appropriate, since a mallard pair were raising their young in the pond, and we’d be able to hear their quacks.

“It’s a good thing I came out when I did,” she said.

My insides took a nasty swoop. I didn’t like where this was headed. “What do you mean?”

“You would let a man like Parker walk away if it weren’t for a little help.”

Snatching the pan of smoldering almonds out of the oven, I ran them outside and dumped them on the compost pile. Back inside, I put the pan in the sink and filled it with soapy water, while my mind was still trying to process what Granny’s endgame was. “You intentionally let the almonds burn, so... what? You wanted to come outside so I wouldn’t scare off Parker?”

“Basically. You needed a nudge.”

“Yes. Thank the heavens that my nosey grandmother knows how to be pushy.” I glanced uneasily over my shoulder, making sure Parker wasn’t standing behind me. I lowered my tone to be safe. “I’m going to remind you that I don’t need your help. I’m a big girl and can let a guy know I’m interested if I want.”

“Ha! Sure you can. I heard you out there on the porch. It was painful.”

“You seriously sacrificed perfectly good almonds so that you could come to my rescue?” I hissed. “If there’s one thing you know about me, it’s that I *hate* waste.”



Granny defiantly tilted up her chin. “It was for a worthy cause.”

“You know what they say about worthy causes.”

Granny and I both spun around to find Parker striding toward us. He stopped in the doorway, giving me another opportunity to appreciate the breadth of his shoulders. I wasn’t sure how much he’d heard, but he looked oblivious enough.

*Phew.*

“No.” I swallowed, my tongue tacky and sticking to the roof of my mouth, either because Parker made me nervous, or because every time I looked at him, it was a reminder how achingly handsome he’d grown up to be. It was hard to decide which was the culprit. “What do they say?”

“That it leaves you better than you were before,” he answered.

“Oh, this worthy cause would definitely leave Maren better off.” Granny smiled so every one of her silver fillings showed, accented by a wink so conspicuous, Parker would have been able to see it from across the street at the Granges’.

When Granny got a cockamamie scheme into her head, I’d learned that the best thing to do was ignore her. I pulled out another baking sheet to redo the almonds, and risked a look at Granny that made it clear I didn’t want her to utter another syllable. If she was going to embarrass me, I wouldn’t be above threatening a nursing home.

For me, not her. Some days, I was twenty-something going on ninety-five.

“We’re almost ready,” Granny hooked her arm through his and dragged him into the kitchen. “I hope you like marinated pork chops, mashed sweet potatoes, cranberry and almond salad, whole wheat and rosemary dinner rolls, foraged ramp butter, and pie.”

“Does the sun rise in the east?” Granny released Parker to stir the freshly squeezed strawberry lemonade, and he leaned against the countertop, facing me as I worked.

Freshly washed, I got the brunt of his incredible scent. How was it possible that soap had made Parker smell even more divine?

Clean hands was enough to push me closer to the edge where I wouldn't be able to recover if I slipped. Down the Cliff of Insanity I go, happily falling head over heels.

I stole a glance up at Parker. "That's where I saw it coming up this morning."

"Then, yes." He took the lemonade, and held three cups in his free hand, a reminder how much bigger his hands were than mine. "Where do you want me to put these?"

"Out back, on the picnic table. But remember, I only promised you a good dinner," I said. "If you're not happy with the service, that's on you."

"Please." Parker feigned sass with a roll of his gorgeous eyes. "I might be totally clueless when it comes to vindictive chickens and cows who could make Houdini look like he had butterfingers, but you know my mom made sure I knew how to help at dinner."

"And we appreciate it." Granny stacked the plates, silverware, and the fowl-shaped napkins, and poked Parker along, moving him like a nippy cattle dog. "You see that gazebo? Over there by the pond? That's where we're headed." Sending Parker on his way, Granny stalled until he was far enough that she could duck back into the kitchen without being heard. "I'm going to buy you a couple of minutes."

"Thanks. I'm almost done, but the pork chops are going to need those couple of minutes on the grill."

"That's not what I meant." Granny shook her head, pitying me for not having inherited her skills for intuition. Seriously, hers sometimes bordered on telepathy. "Run upstairs and change out of those sloppy clothes. And good grief, haven't you heard of deodorant?"

Dying of embarrassment would have been a luxury. Wondering if my odor was as noticeable as I had suspected, Granny confirmed it. I knew how uniquely rancid I could

smell after hours of sweating while working land, so I graciously accepted Granny's help.

Sprinting to my room, I skipped the stairs two at a time. Ripping my shirt off, I grabbed a flowy cotton blouse that went well with anything, including the last pair of semi-clean ripped work jeans I was wearing. I coated my underarms with deodorant, and spritzed myself with a drugstore bottle of perfume I only ever used for church before ripping a brush through my hair. I winced as it snagged on a tangle, but I kept going. Looking halfway decent was worth the bald spot. Checking my appearance in the mirror, I frowned. It wasn't that I was ugly, but there was definitely a homeliness to me. A coat of mascara would have gone a long way, but Parker had already seen me barefaced and it hadn't fazed him, so I'd keep my head high and be a strong, modern woman who didn't need to hide behind makeup to feel confident.

Except maybe for some lip gloss.

I found an ancient tube of gloss hidden between my socks and smeared it on, trying not to gag. Watermelon flavored? More like rotten fruit peels. But, it offered a touch of refinement, so I didn't wipe it off with the back of my hand. Satisfied my efforts were an improvement, I dashed back to the stairs. The timer on the oven for the almonds was beeping, and I wasn't going to let them burn again. Stumbling, I slid down the last four steps like I was at the playground, heaving myself down a tornado slide. I might have broken my tailbone, except I was padded enough on my backside, thanks to my ability to bake and consume more pies than one woman probably should.

Parker peeked in from the back door. "Did you hear something?"

"It's an old house." I rescued the almonds from the oven in the nick of time. "Sometimes it groans and creaks, almost like it's trying to talk."

I focused on finishing the salad, but could feel his eyes meandering over me. "You look nice."

With one appreciative gaze, Parker made me feel like I could walk the Paris runway. I bet his ex, Finley, had, and probably in nothing more than a bra, panties, and heels higher than I'd ever dared try on. The comparison killed my high, and I was reminded that Parker and I came from very different lives. I picked up Slo Jo, and schooled my smile so Parker didn't suspect I was in any way desperate for his compliments. "I figured it would be rude for me to eat in my grubby work clothes."

"Maren, you'd look good if you were wearing a burlap sack."

*Gah!* Was it impossible for the man to turn down the charm? Maybe I *should* have stayed in my work clothes. It would have been another line of defense against him. A shield to keep me safe. A billowing cloud of stink, and clothes crusted with mud. Whatever this was between us, it was all temporary. It wouldn't last. There was already an end date on him staying in Button Blossom, so there was no point entertaining the idea of giving in to him.

I fussed with the dishes, as Parker peered out the window to where Granny was rearranging the chairs in the gazebo, probably trying to maximize my proximity to Parker. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Another question about poultry?"

"Nope. This one involves you."

*Uh oh.* "Sure. I'm an open book." *I may have ripped out some of the pages, and redacted others.*

"It's more about your grandma, I guess."

"What has Granny done now?" I groaned, covering my eyes with a hand, while my heart turned to a lead weight that strained the connective tissue that kept it in my diaphragm. "I'm going to apologize right now for her behavior. I think she's reached the age where any filter she used to have has disintegrated and stuff literally falls out of her mouth."

"It's fine. I don't think it was inappropriate."

“You don’t have to shield me. I’ve heard many horrifying things from her.”

Parker’s eyes dropped to the floor. “That’s just it. Like I said, it was about you, but I don’t know if it’s something you want her saying.”

“Oh.” A nervous, giggling sound fluttered out. “If I had to guess, she brought up my dating life.”

“She said you’re single and ready to mingle.”

I groaned, louder and with more agony. Granny... that woman. “I suppose the cat’s out of the bag. If you didn’t already know my deep, dark secret, I’m single.”

“I believe Granny described it as painfully, utterly, and absolutely unattached.”

Petting Slo Jo was therapeutic. It calmed my now raging heartbeat and eased my clenched jaw. “She means well, but when she fixates on things, she has a very narrow vision for how she wants things to be. It’s often done regardless of what anyone else thinks.”

“Can’t live with her. Can’t live without her.”

Laughing together, it eased the last of my frustration at Granny out of me. Parker had an in to tease me, especially since his dating life had been the polar opposite of mine, never going out into public without someone beautiful next to him, but he appeared unaffected by Granny’s assessment of me. For the first time since he’d strolled back into my life, I truly caught a glimpse of what our friendship had been.

I was simply Maren.

*His Maren.*

## Chapter Nine



### PARKER

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think you’ve proven me wrong.” I leaned back in my chair and stretched my arms, locking my fingers behind my head. Maren arched an eyebrow at my acknowledgement of her win, and I was gladly a conquered man. “I’m about two mouthfuls of pie away from having to loosen my belt.”

I held Maren’s gaze as long as I could, but she dropped her attention to her silverware, nudging them until her fork and knife were aligned. “I’m glad you’re man enough to admit when you’ve... What’s the word? Oh. Right. *Lost*.”

She’d been wafting between coy and assertive all evening, and while it could have given me emotional whiplash, it hadn’t been her intention. I had made it past the gates, and had been invited into her home, but Maren hadn’t found her footing with me there, disrupting the balance she’d been living with since everyone else had flown the coop, as Maren had referred to the departure of her parents to Florida, and Beckett, her younger sister, to medical school in Boston. The second I stepped foot in the door, I had taken on the part of the elephant. Not only had I heard them whispering about me in the kitchen, they had balanced their relationship teeter-totter, then I had crashed down on it, upsetting the equilibrium they had maintained for years.

Maren might have been right about her delicious, yet unassuming cooking, but I had a few victories of my own. There were no cold stares or clamming up as we talked,

mostly listening to Granny tell us stories from her life. It was proof that Maren's frozen heart was thawing. It might not have been as fast as I wanted, especially when the impatient side of my brain reminded me I would be gone at the end of summer, but every melting drip was a sign of progress.

Granny cackled. "There's still half a pie left. You want any more?"

"I'd better not." Unfolding my legs, my foot grazed one of Maren's legs. She jumped like a mouse was crawling up her pants, but when she glanced under the table and saw it was just me, she settled into her chair, keeping the slightest connection between us. Even through her jeans and mine, it was enough to drive me wild. "I don't want to go back to California weighing two hundred pounds more than I should. Can you imagine the heyday the paparazzi would have?"

In a snap, the entire mood of the table shifted. Why had I brought up my impending departure? We all knew it was happening, but my future was tainting the pleasantness of now. All I'd wanted was a nice dinner—I hadn't been kidding about the peanut butter and jelly—and a chance to prove to Maren I was capable of being a decent human being. She seemed to have had her doubts, especially when I'd first arrived.

"I'd better clean up." Maren stood up, scooting out her seat as she piled up our dishes. "The sun's going down."

"Do you turn into a pumpkin after dark?" My joke missed its mark, and other than a tiny sympathy smile, Maren didn't react.

Taking the bulk of the table settings in with her, she hurried to the house. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her, wondering if the rift between us was permanent. Being pummeled with a wadded up linen napkin, straight to the temple, snapped me out of it. "What's going on under that thick head of hair of yours?"

I took Granny's napkin off my shoulder and folded it up, placing it next to mine. "I... nothing."

“What is it with you youngsters? I might have to wear bifocals now, but I’m not blind. You’re pining after Maren so hard it might give you a brain aneurysm. That would be a real bummer, wouldn’t it? Parting this mortal life before you get a chance to resuscitate things with Maren?”

“Not ideal, no.” Blowing out a breath, I wondered how much I should divulge to Granny. Maren was right that Granny meant well, but she didn’t seem capable of keeping a secret to save her life. Anything I said would be fair game for repeating to Maren, so I had to tread this area as carefully as traversing a minefield. One where an explosion might hurt Maren as much as it wounded me.

“So?” Granny adjusted her glasses on her nose. “What’s bothering you?”

“I’m trying to figure out...” An analogy would have been dumb and condescending to Granny, but being direct and honest might come back to bite me when I was least expecting it. I imagined it’d hurt the way Licorice could tear me apart, piece by piece. “I’m trying to figure out why Maren doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.”

“I didn’t say hate. I said she doesn’t *like* me.”

“Dislike and hate sometimes intermingle.”

“So does love and hate. They overlap a surprising amount.”

“Touché.”

I sighed again, but it didn’t do much to ease the tightness in my chest. “As far as my memory serves, we parted on decent terms. What happened between then and now that has her holding back?”

“Ah.” Granny stood and began clearing the table, so I followed suit. “You noticed.”

“Noticed? It’s like a thorn in my foot that I can’t get out. Every step I take toward resolving things with Maren shoves



the thorn deeper, no matter what I try to do to get it out. I'll be hobbling before long."

"Metaphorically, of course." Granny started for the kitchen, and I trailed behind.

"Right."

At the back door, Maren breezed through, tying her hair up into a bun. "I'm going to feed the animals and put them away before it's too dark."

"We'll do the dishes," Granny said.

"I'll believe that when I see it," Maren said with a huffing laugh. "I'm betting I'll find you on the porch, passed out from a food coma. Both of you."

Facing forward, Maren trotted toward the barn with Slo Jo hot on her heels. From the pastures surrounding the barn, a melange of barnyard animals brayed and baa-ed and clucked at her approach.

"Such a little sass," Granny said, smirking at her granddaughter. "Just let me put the rest of this pork away, and I'll wrap up the pie for you. Meet me at the wicker chairs. I'll bring out some ice water to help lubricate that gigantic meal."

"I don't mind helping clean up."

Granny cut me off with her hand. "If there's one thing I've learned in all my years, it's that dirty dishes rarely get up and run off. It'd be a miracle if they did. They'll be waiting whenever I'm good and ready to clean them up, but right now, I've earned some more time off my feet. It's been a long day, and I want a break. So, sit."

I made the mistake of trying to argue, but she drove her point home by chasing me off with a serving fork. Strolling around the house to a porch alcove, I found the wicker chairs overlooking the back of the Kent property. The house was settled at a higher elevation than the pastures and fields around it, and was surrounded by a thick fringe of trees. It was a beautiful piece of earth, though the highlight of the place was rushing to get everyone else taken care of. In the fading sunset, Maren radiated with a glow that had nothing to do with light.

She flitted in and out of the barn, hauling buckets and dumping grain that hit the metal bunkers like pounding rain. A herd of goats stampeded in from the pasture, and in one swift movement, Maren hopped over the fence and jogged to shut the gate. Becky bleated from her paddock where she was still isolated for recovery, and when Maren reached her, she squatted down. Maren hadn't said as much, but the look on her face as she rubbed Becky's oversized ears, I suspected Becky was Maren's favorite goat.

As my thoughts stirred, lazy and tired in the humid summer evening, I wondered if the attraction I had for Maren even had a miniscule chance of success. If it was a summer fling, would it be worth the guilt when I had to leave? Or if my life completely turned on its end and I decided to extend my stay, would Maren want me there? Indecision was a terrible place to be, especially when there was no right or wrong answer.

An icy splash of water on my head snapped me into the present.

"Whoops." Granny appeared from behind, setting a pitcher and two empty glasses on the table between the chairs. "Wasn't watching where I was going and sloshed the water. Did I do any damage?"

The cold seeped along my scalp, but it was a welcome relief from the heat. An Indiana summer was nothing to sneeze at, but Maren had an equally volcanic effect whenever she was close. Every time, my senses dysfunctioned. My skin was too tight, I could hear every sigh from her lips, her gaze and fringe of dark lashes was enough to bring me to my knees. Other women I'd dated had been accomplished, beautiful, and quick-witted, but with Maren, I would have gladly worshiped at her feet.

"I'll live." I sopped up the worst of the spill with my t-shirt.

"Good." Pouring three glasses of water, Granny handed one to me, and I gladly accepted. Slowly lowering herself into

the chair next to me, she lifted her feet onto a footrest, and exhaled heartily. “That’s better.”

The sun had disappeared behind the tops of the trees, muting the sky with the remaining light. Lazy flashes of light blinked on and off as fireflies emerged, and a cool breeze swept away the worst of the humidity. It wasn’t a white-sand beach, but it was as relaxing as any I’d visited.

Taking a sip, I worked up the courage to continue the conversation with Granny. She’d already broached the subject, and I needed answers, or I was going to have another fitful night of sleep.

“You’re still being tormented by Maren up here, aren’t you?” Granny tapped her forehead.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Granny knew exactly what was on my mind. As an actor, I’d made it a goal to master controlling what people perceived about me, but in small-town America, where hardly anyone suspected who I was, and even less, cared, I must have let my guard down. Not keeping up pretenses ached as much as it was a relief, like after putting down the weights after burning out my biceps in multiple weights. It was scary to not be sure of who I was, and even scarier to want someone else to help me figure it out.

Rejection from Maren was more personal than she knew.

“Yeah,” I said somberly. “She’s still in there.”

Granny set down her water, and flicked the droplets off her fingers. “I’m guessing you’re wondering why she’s resisted your charms since the moment you arrived.”

My eyes wandered over to Maren, who was closing the chicken coop while holding the eggs she collected in her shirt. A warmth spread in my chest, watching her work. I wanted what we’d had together before life had to be cruel and tear us apart. To feel safe and grounded. I’d taken it for granted as a kid, and I tried not to be too hard on myself for it, but Maren had been a safety net. I could be myself around her, and if I’d have had my way, she would have trailed with me to

Hollywood. Being disingenuous as I put on airs for the people around me was not only exhausting, it was destructive.

“How’d you guess?” I swirled my cup, and the ice cubes hit the side, tinkling like a windchime in the breeze.

“You look at her the way she looks at you when you think no one’s looking.”

Hope swelled in my chest, but I kept it contained. Nothing was going to happen between us unless I figured out actionable ways to get Maren to trust me. I wasn’t interested in a quickie relationship that would leave us both hollow when it ended. I wasn’t springing for marriage, either. Something in between. Time where we could explore all the possibilities of what it would be to be a couple without eroding at the basis of our friendship.

Hopefully with lots of making out. Resisting Maren’s kissable lips had required me to max out on self-restraint. That part of waiting and letting Maren work through her hesitation at her own pace had sucked. Big time.

I sifted a hand through my hair and sat back, putting my feet up next to Granny’s. “Do you know what her hang-up about me might be? I’ve been wracking my brain about what I might have done, and the only thing she might hold a grudge about is when I dipped the end of her braid in glue so she couldn’t take it out when she got home, but she insisted she’d forgiven me.”

“Because she got even with you by drawing a mustache and eyebrows on you with permanent marker when you fell asleep in English class.”

“*Pink* permanent marker.”

Granny chuckled, folding her arms. “I remember her telling me about that. The temper on that girl could make the Devil think twice about doing anything rascally.”

“So is that what’s holding her up? She’s mad at something I did? I mean, I’m not perfect, but I don’t think I’m worse than the Devil.” I attempted a laugh, and Granny patronizingly patted my hand.

“She’s definitely mad.”

“Any idea why?”

“You let her down. Big time.”

## Chapter Ten



### PARKER

That piqued my attention. Not exactly something I wanted to hear, but information was a step forward. “Okay, I can springboard off of that. I did really botch my first day here. Wait, I know what it is. Did she ever get the manure stains out of her dress?”

“Nothing that a little elbow grease and a couple days on the clothesline in full sun didn’t take care of.” Granny rested her head against the chair and closed her eyes. “Think back farther than that.”

“I’ve tried, but there’s a huge gap between middle school and now. When she moved, I was devastated. I kind of buried the memory of her to cope with the hardship of losing my best friend, but when she rang the doorbell at the Granges’, she knew who I was right away. Her shock went right to a glare, like I’d purposefully run over Slo Jo’s mother on purpose.”

Granny’s laugh intensified. “I know the look. Maren wears her heart on her sleeve, especially when it comes to her animals and the life she’s chosen to lead. An exposed heart means she’s more likely to get hurt. Sure, she has more calluses than a blacksmith, and can deadlift more hay bales than most men, but she’s more delicate than she seems.”

The basket of wave petunias fluttered in the breeze, and a buzzing hummingbird darted in and out, filling up on nectar. “Like a flower.”

“No, Parker. Like a bomb. Mishandle her and lose her trust, and she’s likely to explode, taking you out with her.”

“I believe it.”

Granny pushed with her feet to get her chair rocking. “Do you remember Camp Hottie?”

I wasn’t predisposed to blush too often, but thinking about Camp Hottie was a memory that was guaranteed to make my cheeks burn so hot, people could roast marshmallows over my face. Yeah, it was *that* embarrassing. “I kind of pretend like it didn’t happen. Not the highlight of my life by any means, and thinking about it now, it was a smarmy money grab from my manager before I fired him. Wait. How did you know I was there?”

“Because Maren went, too.”

“She did?”

“It was the only thing on her Christmas list that year, and though we all thought it was more than a tad ridiculous that there was a camp where teenage girls could go to meet their celebrity idols, and lose their voices going all squeally, it was fun to spoil her. You should have seen her when she opened the box we had it wrapped in.”

I imagined Maren shrieking with excitement, and I wondered if it had been for me or someone else who’d been invited to come. “Why didn’t I see her there? Did she go home early from camp?”

“Nope. She was there the whole time.”

“What happened, then?”

“Like I said, you disappointed her.”

I couldn’t imagine a cow kicking me in the stomach being more crippling. “How? I would have remembered seeing my childhood best friend there.”

“Apparently you didn’t.”

I scraped through my memories, but couldn’t recall ever seeing Maren at Camp Hottie. I would have remembered her

tempting smile, and the shine in her eyes.

Wouldn't I?

“It took Maren a couple of months to open up to me about it. She lied through her teeth to her parents, pretending like she'd had the time of her life, but she couldn't fool me.”

“When was it?” The ice in my veins was a sharp contrast to my still-smoldering cheeks.

“It was the day of the meet and greet, she'd gotten up at four in the morning to shower and dry her hair so she could curl it. Can you believe she took a curling iron and eyeliner with her to camp? Ridiculous, if you ask me. When it came time for you to grace the camp with your shining presence, she made sure she was toward the front of the line. She got closer and closer... said she was so nervous and excited she was afraid she'd throw up all over you. But, when you put your arm around her and posed for the photo, you didn't even recognize her. It crushed her that you didn't know who she was.”

I imagined Maren's disappointment was nothing less than an avalanche of crashing boulders. She'd been right there, tucked up next to me, and I'd been too oblivious to notice Maren had found her way back to me. It was the ultimate snub. I hadn't asked her name—probably hadn't even looked at her as I kept making sure to give the photographer all the best poses. There were so many things I hadn't done right. No wonder Maren's grudge was embedded deep in her soul.

“Oh, wow. I'm a terrible person.”

“I wouldn't go that far,” Granny placed her weathered hand over mine. “I'm sure there were a lot of pretty girls in line batting their eyes at you.”

“I guess. I was relatively new to being that level of famous, and the whole experience was overwhelming, but... it was *Maren*. We spent every summer at each other's houses, playing pirates and eating our weight in popsicles. She was the only one who could get me to do my homework in school, and



didn't laugh at me when I said I wanted to be an actor. How'd I miss her?"

"Like you said, it was probably overwhelming. Plus, she'd gone through some pretty big alterations in the years since she'd moved out here."

Still clutching the eggs in her shirt, Maren was dragging a hose to the garden. A lot was different about her, but I could see the overlay of the girl I once knew when I took the time to see her. The cute girl had become a gorgeous woman, but at her heart, she was the same Maren. *My* Maren. The Maren who had completed me when I wasn't even sure who I was.

Granny listed Maren's transformations on her fingers. "Braces, several visits to the dermatologist, outgrowing her baby chub, growing a half a foot taller... *I* might not have recognized her if I hadn't seen her for a few years."

"Yeah, but I didn't do it to her once. I was given the opportunity again when she came to the Granges' the day I arrived, but I didn't suspect her then, either. I failed both times."

"That is true," Granny nodded sagely. I half-heartedly laughed, appreciating that she didn't mince words. "There's only so many times a person can be overlooked without feeling unimportant. To be fair though, at the Granges', she didn't want you to find out. That was stinky of her to do."

Leaning forward in my seat, I dropped my head into my hands, gripping onto my hair as I cursed myself for ever making Maren feel less than the amazing person she was. If it wasn't for my egocentric approach to my existence, I might have had a fairytale reunion with her. I couldn't say where it would have led, but I bet Maren would have hugged me on the Granges' porch the next time we met.

"Don't beat yourself up, though," Granny said. "It ain't easy navigating around other people's emotions. Feelings are tricky and frankly, they're fickle. Plus, if there's one thing everyone should learn when scrutinizing their past, it's that there's no reason to regret what happened unless you don't learn from it."

I released my hold on my hair and scrubbed my hands down my face. It was all making sense. Maren's distrust was rooted in an experience that had hurt her. I might not have meant to overlook her, but if our roles had been reversed, I would have been equally devastated.

"I'm going to make this right, so Maren knows I'm offering her an olive branch for how shallow of a guy I was."

"Part of it is on Maren, too. I've been telling her for years that she can't expect perfection from you just because you appear larger than life. Movie stars aren't flawless, either."

I heard Granny, but my mind was already racing with possible ways to win over Maren. "I want to know her ambitions, her dreams, what her favorite snack is, what she does for fun, the plans she has for this—"

"Slow your roll, Parker." Granny waved her hands like she was trying to stop a stampeding herd of cattle. "That's going beyond an olive branch. That's the whole dang tree. And besides, I wouldn't tell you the answer to all of those questions."

"You wouldn't?" I sagged into my chair. "Why?"

"I wouldn't rob you of the opportunity to get to know each other again. Friendship isn't created by a speedy question and answer session. You'll have to ask Maren. Watch her, figure out what she needs by observation. I tell you, nothing ever made me feel more special than when my husband saw and did. It showed he was paying attention to me, even in the mundane day-to-day tasks."

That clue was like finding a light switch as I stumbled in the dark. I knew what I needed to do to earn Maren's trust. I wanted to prove I wasn't the shallow, vain hot-shot that I'd been painted as. I'd show Maren that I was a decent guy, and to do that, I needed to allow her to slow down enough to see. I needed to take some of the load off her shoulders.

I guzzled my water, reinvigorated by the fresh direction Granny had given me. "If you don't mind, I'm going inside."

"What for?"

I grinned, ready to do the first thing to expedite thawing Maren's heart. "I have some dishes to wash."

## Chapter Eleven



### MAREN

“Granny! Where’s my towel?” I swiped the water out of my eyes and tried to listen over the sound of the bathroom fan sucking out the moist air. “*Grannnnny?!?*”

Nothing.

I sighed, pushing aside the shower curtain, and surveyed the bathroom. Granny had gone on one of her cleaning sprees, procuring every towel she could find, hoisting it off to the laundry. Other than the toilet paper, I couldn’t see a single piece of fabric to dry off with. Usually, I was more meticulous in getting myself ready to bathe, but I’d been in such a hurry to jump in after spending a majority of the day cleaning the goat pen, followed by scraping the bedding out of the chicken coop, that I’d dove into the shower. The joy of washing off the grime and sweat of the day had fizzled without the conclusion of a soft towel to pat myself dry with.

Stepping out of the shower, water pooled under my feet. As quickly as I dared to avoid slipping on the tile, I padded to the door and cracked it open. “Granny? Where are all the towels?”

I held my breath, listening for her answer, but the house was still. Then it hit me—it was Thursday, and everybody in Button Blossom knew that Thursday afternoons, Granny met up with the same group of women she’d been playing cards with for the past three and a half decades. I had my doubts that they actually played cards all that much, but if Granny told me

she was off to gossip with the friends she'd known since she was in cloth diapers, she knew I'd frown and chastise her for being so petty. Not that it would stop her. I'd get an *Oh, Maren*, and Granny would breeze out the door without a second thought.

I banged my forehead against the solid oak door, running through scenarios of what I could do to remedy my situation, when a post-it note that had been slapped on the door fluttered to the ground. Bending over to see what it said, water dripped from my hair as I read it aloud:

“I washed a load of towels and they're out on the line. P.S. Might want to bring them in before it rains.”

Another heavy sigh made my shoulders sag. Walking to the nearest window, I peered around the curtains in the direction of the clothesline, and sure enough, every towel we owned was out on the line. Overhead, foreboding clouds were piling up. It might have been a while since I'd had time to tackle the laundry in earnest, but she could have left a measly washcloth inside.

The cool air of the house gave me goosebumps as I padded down the hallway. Grabbing the railing and with one foot up on the stairs, ready to skip two steps at a time up to my bedroom, I heard the unmistakable sound of fat, juicy raindrops hitting the roof. *Crap*. If there was one thing I hated, it was having to rewash laundry. Summer thunderstorms could be fierce and fast moving, sending down sheets of rain and wind strong enough to blow our towels clear into the next county. Laundry had never been a favorite chore of mine, and I wasn't about to waste time doing it twice.

All I needed to do was take a quick jaunt into the yard, and I'd have the safety of the towels to hide behind, not that there was anyone outside looking. Grandpa used to joke that he could walk around outside in nothing but his boots, because he'd intentionally built the house far enough off the road that it was secluded. I knew for a fact the Granges' could see the peak of our roof, and the thought of Parker catching me stark naked made my heart jump into my nose.

But, I wasn't going on the roof, and the rain was already picking up the pace. In ninety seconds, give or take, I could unpin the towels and rescue them before the roiling black clouds commenced dumping the rain that was otherwise welcome to water my pastures and garden.

It might not have been my most cleverly concocted plan, but I was nothing if not committed when I made a decision.

At the back door, I stuck my head out again, listening for any other signs of life. Truthfully, it wouldn't be my first stark naked stroll to the clothesline. I'd relished the thrill of living on the edge before, but with Parker being across the street, it heightened my senses.

Rain ricocheted off the house, the birds sang their delight at a mid-afternoon bath, but otherwise, I was utterly alone. Bonus, the clothesline was in the back of the house, should I hear anyone approach. I was safe to rescue the towels, then I'd get dressed.

There was something freeing about being out in nature the way I entered the world, but I still moved at a good clip. Just because my goats couldn't talk didn't mean they weren't passing judgment on me, and just because Parker wasn't anywhere to be seen didn't mean I was safe. Fifteen yards from the clothesline, an ear splitting crack of thunder that made me jump out of my bare skin shattered the air. It rumbled angrily, vibrating through my bones, and fading to a quiet growl. I hurried faster to the towels as the sound continued. It should have died out, but the low grumble was unnaturally sustained. If anything, it was getting *louder*.

My already flustered heart slammed on the brakes, and my joints turned to steel. I was in the most vulnerable spot in the yard—halfway between the safety of the towels that taunted me as they billowed in the wind, and back inside where I could wrestle my damp body into clothes. I wanted to move, to make a decision, but my baser instincts had me stuck in the fear zone between fight or flight.

Maybe I wasn't as decisive as I'd given myself credit for.

The noise that had piggybacked on the sound of thunder was an engine. A diesel one...

... that was pattering up my driveway.

Forcing myself to wake up, I sprinted for the cover of a clump of hydrangea bushes, diving behind them as the cab of the vehicle peeked over the ridge of my driveway. Diving behind the bushes, I landed hard in the dust, already praying on the way down that it wasn't Parker coming for a social call. Any other day, I'd be able to navigate him and the foreign territory we found ourselves in. We weren't quite friends yet, but we weren't truly enemies. But, hunched behind a row of bushes that were barely taller than me when I curled myself in the fetal position, I was uniquely unqualified to deal with anyone.

I kept my head low and peeked through the leaves, trying to see who was taking their sweet time coming to my house. Remi didn't drive a diesel, and it was too early for Granny to be coming home, unless gossip was particularly slow this week—if only I'd be so lucky it was her instead of *anyone* else. I wouldn't hold my breath that my sister, Beckett, had decided to visit, since she hadn't been back since starting med school, and my parents always called to arrange coming to town before arriving. Frankly, I'd take an unsuspecting feed salesman. Eventually, a stranger would leave when I didn't answer the door, and unless he was unscrupulous, he wouldn't go snooping around.

Slower than molasses in a wintertime freeze, a tractor came into view, and one I recognized. The pit in my stomach confirmed who I suspected it was. That tractor, older than Granny's grandmother, was none other than the Granges', and in the cab, was none other than Parker. He looked as pleased as all the eight-year-olds who were told they were old enough to drive their family tractors for the first time down to the hayfield. I totally understood the appeal of machines. They were a great equalizer among people of different strengths and sizes, and though I could run everything from skid loaders to zero-turn mowers, right then was not the ideal time for Parker to come show off that he'd mastered the diesel.

Hugging myself low to the ground, I crossed my fingers and toes, hoping to keep this from being any more humiliating than it already was. If I laid as still as a newborn fawn at the edge of a meadow, maybe Parker would turn a lazy circle in my yard, and go back home.

Deep down, I knew luck wasn't on my side. I wasn't going to get out of this situation unscathed.

Worse, unseen.

I really should have given Parker my number so he could text me instead of coming over every time he had a question. I'd thought about it the night he'd come to dinner, and while Granny was snoozing on the back porch, like I suspected she would be, I found Parker inside, drying my dishes by hand, and putting them away. The gesture was so touching, that I had been tempted to offer him something in return. If I was normal, a hug, my phone number, strictly for calling for questions about Licorice, or even a *Thanks* would have been acceptable. I ended up giving him a fist bump, complete with the exploding jazz hand as I pulled away.

I would have gladly transported back to that embarrassment, if it'd get me out of the here and now.

Easing the tractor to a slow stop, Parker killed the engine and hopped off. Of course he did. In my panic, I'd inadvertently put myself in his path to the back porch. To be polite, most visitors still came to our front door. I had laid out a welcome mat, and kept the area swept and tidy. But for those who knew me best, they were given a pass to come to the back. From there, they'd either find me working in the kitchen, or would be able to spot me as I hustled around the property. Parker hadn't been given explicit access, by me, but I guessed Granny probably had taken the liberty.

That meant Parker would follow the cobblestone path leading right past the hydrangea, and unless my panicked wish to shrink to the size of a bug came true, there was no way he wasn't going to spot me.

I was doomed. *Doomed.*



Pinching my eyes shut, my remaining senses were enhanced as he approached. I heard every miniscule pebble crushed under his boots as he walked. My skin registered every raindrop that splattered on my back. The smell of earth being stirred up by the wind and rain epitomized summer.

Counting Parker's steps, I quickly weighed my options. Panic overwhelmed me, and I shouted, "Stop!"

Not a second too soon.

To Parker's credit, he didn't take another step. "Maren?" Keeping behind the protection of the leaves, Parker was too close for comfort. Slo Jo was cradled in his arm. She must have wandered over to his place again. *Stinker*. If she didn't learn to stay put, she was looking at becoming an inside cat. Parker scanned the yard, squinting when he didn't immediately see me. "Where are you?"

My heart cracked against my sternum so hard I was surprised it didn't plop out on the ground in front of me. "I'm here. I'm just in a... uh..."

Parker's gaze continued to cut around the yard, confused why he could hear me but not see me. If the earth could crack open and swallow me whole, that would've been greatly appreciated. "Maren? Are you hiding? You know you were never a match for me when we played hide and seek."

I chewed my lip. Of course Parker would turn this into a game the second I admitted I was hiding. For all the movies he'd been in that painted him as a broody, serious adult, the man was still very much a boy at heart.

I took a breath, trying to calm my speeding pulse and quivering voice. "I'm hiding out of necessity."

"Necessity?" Through the leaves, I could see Parker scrunch his nose as his mouth hitched into a crooked grin. *Oh, no*. That look was a melange of confusion and piqued interest. Most dangerously, mischief. "Is there something you don't want me to see?"

*Yes, Parker. Big time.*

“Uh, would you mind coming back another time?” Parker’s head whipped in my direction. He’d honed in on me. Taking a step toward the bushes, I screamed. I was not a girly girl, but that shriek sure made me sound like one. “Not another step, on penalty of death.”

“Why?” Putting his hands on his trim waist, Parker’s grin only grew. Though he thought this was enjoyable for him, it was life and death to me. Not so much my mortal existence as it was for my self-esteem and dignity. “I can see the top of your head behind that bush.”

Accepting defeat, I poked just enough of my head over the top of the foliage so I could pin Parker in place with a stare. “Yes, you found me. But like I said, the problem is, I don’t *want* you to see me.”

“What—?”

“I’m naked, okay?”

## Chapter Twelve



### MAREN

Blurting my predicament was the best plan I could come up with. Like ripping off a bandage. I had always loathed that metaphor. Pain from a ripped-off bandage was pain, no matter if it happened fast or slow. Even though Parker only had a clear view of my eyes up, he undoubtedly could see the blush that boiled my skin up to my scalp.

“You’re naked?” he repeated slowly, like his brain was lagging. Not like I could blame him. A grown woman, hiding behind a flowering bush, without a stitch of clothing was not normal.

“That’s what I said.”

“And you’re behind a bush?”

“Obviously.”

His lips stretched into a devious smile that made my insides twist into a tangled knot. “Does that make you like Eve?”

Despite myself, I laughed. It was a nervous, tittering giggle, but he’d managed to put a lighthearted spin on a mortifying situation. That was like the Parker I remembered. It’d been a good long while since I’d been able to laugh when something went wrong, and though Parker would never, ever let me live this down as long as we both breathed, it was cathartic to see the situation for what it was—utterly ridiculous. “Guess that would make you the snake then.”

With another sputtering laugh, we were both on a roll. Parker covered his eyes with his hand, but I could see the rims of his ears burning red. I didn't want to imagine what was probably racing through his thoughts, but it wouldn't be hard to guess. Nude lady friend hiding behind a bush? That lent to all sorts of potential scenarios, innocent, and otherwise.

"So, how are we going to extract ourselves from this situation?" Parker asked. "Or rather, *you*? Because, as you can see, I remembered to get dressed today."

"Oh, hush, you." I would have thrown a warning pebble at him, but the less movement from me, the better. "I was showering after I finished some particularly stinky chores and didn't notice Granny had washed all our towels."

Glancing over his shoulder, Parker nodded. "So I'm standing between you and the clothesline."

"Exactly."

Scrubbing a hand over his cheeks, Parker glanced at the towels, but instead of his eyes finding their way back to me, he stared out at the animals grazing on the pastures. It was seemingly insignificant, but I appreciated him giving me more privacy by not staring directly at me. I was exposed, and even meeting his gorgeous blue eyes would have made me squirm.

"How about I grab you a towel and toss it to you?" he offered.

"Okay." I licked my dry lips, though it was useless. My body was on the fritz, and my mouth was drier than the Sahara. "But hurry. This rain isn't going to keep turning off and on. I want to get the towels in before they get soaked."

Parker's laugh was throaty. "You're in the buff *outside*, with a gentleman caller, and you're concerned about your towels?"

That was it. I grabbed a small stone from near my feet and risked chucking it at him. It hit him on the thigh. "Quit giving me a hard time. Either get me a towel, or go home."

Tipping his head back as he renewed his laughter, Parker strolled to the clothesline without even an inkling that he was

in a hurry. Fingering several of the towels, he selected a gray cotton towel that was one of my favorites. It was worn in enough to be softer than Slo Jo's tummy, but still looked fresh and new.

He sauntered back toward me, stopping far enough away that he wasn't in any real danger of seeing anything. "Ready? I'm going to throw it to you."

"As long as you close your eyes."

"On pain of death," Parker set down Slo Jo so he could clamp his free hand over his eyes, "I will protect your honor, my lady."

Wadding the towel into a ball, he heaved it at me. It would have been an easy catch if I wasn't being conservative in letting it fall to the ground so I could go fetch it. It landed in the grass a few feet away, and after double-checking that Parker was being a man of his word, I sprinted for the towel. Snapping it open to get the debris off of it, I wrapped myself in the towel, tucking in the ends so tightly it might cut off the blood flow to my brain.

"Thanks," I said, already heading for the door. "I'm going to go inside to get dressed."

Parker had put both of his hands over his eyes, and was turned backward. The respect he afforded me in a humiliating situation when he could have teased and given me a hard time warmed my heart. My mortification wasn't a joke when it came down to it.

"Take your time. I won't melt in the rain."

I nodded, realizing how stupid it was to give nonverbal cues since he couldn't see me. The whole situation had tripped me up, and it was going to take some serious resetting to regain my usual calm.

My house had never looked so inviting. Picking up a jog, my bare feet slapped along the cobblestones. I had such a serious case of tunnel vision that I didn't notice Slo Jo had decided to join me. She was probably hoping for a treat when

she raced to catch up, and darted between my ankles to get ahead.

If I didn't know better, I'd think she'd intentionally cheated.

My fall was spectacular and I went down *hard*. The pain in my knee as it slammed into the unforgiving cobblestones was followed by the searing burn of skin being scraped off my palm. As I lay on the ground, doing an inventory of my injuries, I laughed humorlessly internally. Thank goodness my towel had stayed in place. There were silver linings to everything. A groan gurgled out of me, and I put my head down on the cobblestone. Tonight was definitely going to be a full pint of ice cream kind of evening.

“Maren!” Strong hands flipped me over and sat me up. “Are you alright?”

Parker hoisted me up and propped me atop his knee, his hands capable of wrapping halfway around my bare arms to keep me steady. Though my knee was throbbing and I was pretty sure my hand was bleeding all over my favorite towel, I clutched the fabric together to keep the wind from billowing anywhere it wasn't welcome. All the points of contact with Parker zipped with electricity and it overwhelmed any pain I did have.

“I tripped.”

“I gathered.”

Slo Jo jumped onto my lap. She didn't look the least bit penitent. If anything, she was impatient as she meowed and twisted her head, probably wondering why she wasn't already stuffing her face with the homemade cat food I'd stocked in the fridge.

“That cat is going to be the death of me,” I brushed Slo Jo off my lap. It was hard to be angry at a baby, no matter the species, but I wasn't in the mood for cuddling with her. “I don't know what is going on in her head, but I never thought a kitten would get the best of me.”

Ignoring the part of me that wanted to curl up into Parker and let him carry me inside, I pressed my hand against his chest. *Hello, rock hard pecs.* I could have stayed there, counting the increasingly fast beat of his heart, but I pushed harder. He got the message and set me on my feet, taking a step back for good measure. Parker's restraint failed momentarily, and his eyes flicked down to my towel, making his Adam's apple bob. This was the stuff of romantic comedy movies, not real life.

"Slo Jo is something, for sure," Parker took another step back, "and call me crazy, but I swear she keeps coming over so I have to return her. If I believed animals were capable of scheming, I'd almost think she's trying to get us to be together."

## Chapter Thirteen



### MAREN

Gnarls formed in both of my shoulders from walking so stiffly. I tried to discreetly loosen the tension, but it was the kind of tangle that wasn't going to be released without a serious massage.

*I bet Parker gives great massages.*

Closing my eyes for the briefest moment, I indulged a fantasy of what it might be like to slouch against him on the couch while he kneaded my muscles. Five minutes with Parker's hands on my shoulders and I guaranteed I'd be sighing from relaxation.

*Hold up.* My eyes snapped open. Why was *that* where my mind sped to? Tense shoulders did not necessarily equal wanting Parker to touch me. It wasn't like I was so uptight that I didn't notice how firm of a grip he had when he scooped me off the ground when I'd biffed it wearing a towel and *only* a towel, but that was the reason I *didn't* want to think about his hands. Hands plus touching equaled burning embarrassment because it reminded me that I'd been caught in my birthday suit outside the four walls of my home.

It was simple math.

Today needed to go away. But no. The bizarre dream that was my life kept chugging along, and as I floated through it in a fog, Parker followed me into the barn, walking too closely.

With the way the day was going, and with the mountain of resolve I thought I had piled between Parker and me, a football



field would be too close.

“Thanks for folding the towels,” I said over my shoulder, trying to feign casualness. I found that if I pretended like I didn’t care, it made embarrassing things go away faster. “You really didn’t need to do that.”

“Happy to help. It would have been a shame to have them dry on the line, only to get wet again in that rainstorm.”

“That was something, wasn’t it? In like a lion, out like a lamb.”

“Sort of reminds me of you.”

I whipped around so quickly my ponytail slapped my face. “Are you insinuating something?”

Parker smirked like he was Peter Pan luring Wendy out her bedroom window. “Not like I’m saying something that isn’t public knowledge.”

“And what’s that?”

“That you’re a firecracker.”

Parker’s smile stretched, and the harder I tried to keep my gaze from dipping down to his mouth, the more my eyes watered. Either I was going to look like I was crying, or I’d give him the satisfaction of ogling his undeniably sultry lips.

It wasn’t like the state of his lips wasn’t public knowledge, too. Sure, I’d never kissed Parker Bingham, but I didn’t need to. He’d proven time and time again in basically every movie he’d ever starred in that he was an adept kisser. What should have comforted me sent my stomach into a freefall. Finley, the ambassador for bras and panties, was the kind of woman who knew all about how good Parker was at making out. Fuddy duddy, clumsy homebodies like me need not apply, because the line behind Finley of all the otherworldly women who were ready to pucker up for Parker, and look as good as him on a magazine cover, would run from Button Blossom to the moon.

And yet, my brain still couldn’t maintain its composure, and I looked at his lips. Just a peek, but enough that Parker

caught me with my hand in the cookie jar. Looking at his mouth was as good as a confession that kissing him was very much a trending topic in the reel of my ongoing thoughts.

I turned around and marched down the aisle of my pole barn, hoping to conceal the worst of my beet red face. Frankly, a neon sign with a flashing arrow suspended above my head telling the whole world that I was gaga for Parker, even while I tried desperately to deny it, would have been equally as condemning.

I had been trying for years to keep that secret safe, but I was tearing at the seams, and with every kind act, Parker took a step closer with the seam rippers.

“You really don’t need to stick around,” I said. “I didn’t plan on having any extra help today, so I wasn’t prepared to do anything that I can’t do myself.”

Parker either didn’t hear or didn’t care as he continued to track behind me. The hairs on my arms stood at attention. Even when I wasn’t looking directly at him, my body was aware he was nearby. *He’s got the gravitational pull of a black hole, remember? A dangerous one.* Except, the warning sirens and flashing red lights weren’t going off. My sense of self-preservation must be malfunctioning.

“Did you and Granny build this?” he asked.

“Nah. It’s over a hundred years old, and was built with the original homestead. I have been working hard to give it a facelift, though.”

“I can tell you’ve put in a lot of work. Aren’t rustic barn weddings all the rage right now? You should rent out the place. I bet you could make a pretty penny from a venue like this.”

He chose the worst place to stop and admire the hand-hewn beams some homesteader had undoubtedly sweat buckets to carve. As Parker tucked his hands into his pockets, a barn swallow chick leaned over the edge of its nest, and dropped a fresh poo right on the end of Parker’s nose. I couldn’t have timed a prank like that better if I’d tried.

I laughed, but Parker was too stunned to do much of anything. Looking up at the glob of mud and feathers where the chicks were staring inquisitively at us, horror tainted his expression. He pointed to his nose. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yup. And can you imagine that happening to a bride as she walked down the aisle? I mean, I could see myself getting hitched in here, but not every woman is cut out for a bonafide country wedding like this.”

“Point taken.” Parker accepted the paper towel I ripped off the roll from my goat milking supplies. “Although, there are definitely some brides who might deserve a bird turd on their shoulder.”

I started to laugh, but Finley emerged at the top of my thoughts like a poison ivy rash that wouldn’t go away. Granny had kept me up-to-date on all the gossip she’d read about Parker, whether I wanted to hear it or not, including how close he and Finley were to getting engaged. I pretended like I didn’t care, but if Parker would have married, it would have been the final nail in the coffin, sealing any small iota of hope I’d kept alive that somehow, someday, Parker and I would revive things. Maybe even take them on to the next level.

Yes, it was a girlish fantasy that made almost no sense in reality. I wasn’t in competition with Finley, because we didn’t exist in the same universe, and in all the years I’d known Parker, he’d never once indicated he’d thought of me the way I daydreamed about him.

Ironically, once Parker *had* been plunked back into my sphere of existence, I had been an Ice Queen, making him work for every inch he wanted from me. During the nights when I was exhausted, yet restless, I’d analyzed to death every motive and each conversation. I hadn’t been kind to Parker, and though he’d hurt me in a relatively superficial way, I’d used it as a license to hurt him in return.

He wasn’t perfect, but a guy who folds towels, snuggles kittens, drives tractors, and can handle Granny was a rare man.

Why was I being difficult, again?

“So,” Parker clapped his hands, rubbing them vigorously, “I’m ready to get to work. Where is your fancy chicken coop going to be?”

“Down there.” I pointed. “Last stall on the left.”

“Where it looks like a home improvement store exploded?”

“Shut up.” I shoved Parker, snickering as he caught himself on the rail of Becky’s stall door. “When I’m working on something, I’m not always the tidiest, but everything will get put away when I’m done.”

“Uh, huh. I saw your laundry room. I think today marks the first day that you’ve been able to see the top of your washer and dryer since before you graduated high school.”

“Parker!” I backhanded him, but knew realistically, he was probably right.

After I’d slunk inside, holding my towel against me for dear life, I sprinted to my room to yank on some clean clothes, trying to brush off the worst of the mud and grass. When I returned, sweeping my damp hair into a sloppy tangle on the crown of my head, I’d found Parker with a neat stack of towels, and working his way through every single sock in the basket I’d designated for them, trying to find their match. He already had another load of laundry started, and I was pretty sure he’d swept the mud room, but I nearly tackled him when he reached for another pile of clothes I’d stacked next to the sink. It was super thoughtful of him to see a need, but I drew the line at him handling my underwear and bras.

They weren’t the kind of frilly, lacy things Finley made look like a good idea for the rest of us women to buy. Whenever I gave in and bought a set, it was always a disappointment. Things like that were scratchy, and meant to be seen, not lived-in. So, I stuck to what I liked best. Plain briefs with sports bras, which were a morose sort of representation of how I lived. Sturdy, practical, no nonsense.

My attempts to shoo Parker out of my mudroom were half hearted at best, and he’d insisted he stick around because he

was bored. Other than practicing driving the Granges' tractor so he could use it to mow their property faster, the only other to-do item on his list was to return Slo Jo to my care.

Besides, the truth was—the verifiable, unfiltered one in my head, that I hadn't been able to say out loud, *especially* to Parker—was that I liked having him around.

Slo Jo had definitely been doing some meddling.

For the number of times Parker had to transport my kitten back to my house, I was beginning to believe that he might be right. She was a naughty, scheming kitten that might be in cahoots with Granny, trying to set Parker and me up.

If there was an awkward delay in the conversation because I was busy reliving the most embarrassing moments of the day, Parker didn't point it out. Rapping his knuckles on the top can of a stack of paint, he asked, "Are you painting the coop, too?"

"I don't know. I was thinking of putting a mural of a giant mother hen on one wall, so they'd feel safe and loved, and maybe motivational quotes on the opposite side, so they can read them while laying eggs."

"Serious?"

"Do you think if I put in a tiny foot soak for them it would be too much?" The bewildered look on Parker's face was priceless, and I couldn't keep a straight face. "I'm kidding, Parker. I love my flock more than most, but if I don't get to go to spas for facials and deep tissue massages, then neither do they."

"Ha ha," he said flatly. "You've sufficiently reminded me how little I still know about farming."

"Thank you. I'll be here all week." I bowed deeply, flourishing my hand to be extra snooty. "The paint is to freshen up the fence out front. It's sad to say it out loud, but the thing is, I bought it months ago. I just can't bring myself to get around to it."

"Why not?"

“There’s always something more important to do, and if there’s one thing I hate, it’s painting fences.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“I’d rather scrape out a dirty pigpen using only my fingernails than paint a fence. So yeah. It’s that bad.”

Parker grinned, and my heart stampeded. It was the leader of a herd of wild mustangs running wild and free in the mountain foothills. *Geeze*. Granny was right—I needed to get out more. All it took for me to swoon was for a guy to grin at me.

*Not just any guy. Parker.*

His eyes narrowed, meandering over my face. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious or joking again.”

I attached the staple gun to the air compressor hose. Keeping busy was another evasion I used to addressing things head on. I found it particularly effective. “You’ve obviously never painted a fence before.”

“I can’t say I have, but this summer has definitely been a season of firsts, some of which I don’t like, and some of which I like very, very much. Driving a tractor? Definitely like. Licorice, the she-devil hen? Worse than filming on a boat in the ocean.”

I snorted. “Who doesn’t like boating in the ocean?”

“People like me, who get seasick.”

He snagged me with a look and a matching grin, and there I was, holding a staple gun, swimming in his sea-blue eyes. I wondered where I fit in his broad spectrum of likes and dislikes. A grown woman might have confronted him to clear the air. *I* kicked on the compressor, drowning out any possibility of conversation to be safe. If he was at my house to pass the time because it’s the best he could do in Button Blossom, it might make me cry. Topping his list as his number one like would be fantastic, but also probably make me run scared, afraid I wouldn’t be able to live up to his expectations. Still, if he had lukewarm feelings about me, I wouldn’t feel much better at being on either extreme.

*He comes over almost every day now, Maren. He's not doing it because he enjoys folding your towels.*

The air compressor chugged loudly as it pressurized, giving me time to mull over the thoughts that were screaming for attention in my head. Subduing them by promising I'd untangle them in bed that night, I mimed to Parker my vision for the coop. I was converting an unused stall for the chickens that would be wrapped in metal fencing so impenetrable, a mouse wouldn't be able to sneak in to steal the feed. He helped me measure and cut the hardware cloth, and with two ladders I'd drug out of the tool shed set into position, Parker held one end of the wire against the rafters while I put in a row of staples on the other.

Once I'd reached as far as I could, I handed over the staple gun. Parker looked warily at me. "I've never used a staple gun before."

"I can tell you'll be a natural." I shook it at him, insistent he at least give it a try. "Go ahead."

"I'm not going to shoot myself in the leg?"

"Not unless you're holding it against your thigh when you pull the trigger. I know you're a pretty face, but I'm going to give you enough credit not to do that."

Parker glanced up at the ceiling, still unsure of himself. "What if I mess up? I don't want my work to look amateur."

"So then you mess up. What better place to learn than a barn? No one's going to care if I have a crooked staple in my ceiling and if they do, it's their problem for looking so closely."

"Alright, but if you hear any complaints from your hens, I'm going to say I told you so."

"My hens are very forgiving." I said. "Nothing like Licorice."

"*Nobody* is like Licorice. No directors, no co-stars, no late night gossip show hosts, no spurned exes—*nobody*—has ever made me feel the way Licorice does."

“Maybe her rancor toward you is a sign of endearment?”

“The same way keying someone’s car might be.”

I clung to the ladder as I laughed. Parker’s grin stretched ear to ear as he reached for the staple gun and took it from me. His fingers brushed against mine, and I had to tighten my grip on the rung to keep from melting into a lovesick puddle of goo somewhere below. It was becoming more of a challenge not to lean into Parker when we touched. What harm would there be in twining my fingers together with his to see if our hands were a good fit? Or stepping in for a hug, should he offer another?

A broken heart.

That’s what would await me in a few weeks’ time. Everybody knows that’s how summer flings end. It has its own trope in books and movies. Parker had even starred in a few flicks that gave me noodle knees as I clasped my hands next to my face, swooning at the achingly romantic plot, but no matter how many happy endings he’d created, that still wasn’t real life.

*Or maybe you won’t earn a broken heart, but a whole one, should Parker choose to stay.*

I blinked, my face frozen with a crooked smile, and glassy, distant eyes. There were too many unknown variables about Parker to make up my mind either way.

“Alright, here goes nothing.” Squinting as he pulled the trigger, Parker closed his eyes as the staple was ejected with a loud pop. Peeking through his lashes to see if he’d done it, a broad smile of achievement overtook his uncertainty. “I don’t know why it’s surprising, but staple guns are extremely satisfying.”

“My personal favorite is the sledgehammer.”

Parker reached his long arms down to the other end of the hardware cloth and popped another staple in. “Is it as therapeutic as it sounds?”

“Especially right after a significant other breaks up with you. By the end of the day, I’d barely be able to remember the



guy's name."

"Huh." Parker grunted. "Have you had to use it often?"

I avoided looking at Parker so I wouldn't have to see his look of pity. That kind of sympathy always made me feel like a total loser. People couldn't help it when they found out how allergic I was to serious relationships. "More often than I care to admit. But, maybe it's just as well. I kind of lost faith in men and dating after a string of subpar relationships. I might've thrown out my back with how frequently I had to use it some years."

Despite my attempt to joke about my depressing love life, Parker didn't laugh. "I'm sorry you've been hurt, Maren."

I brushed him off with a wave of my hand. "Granny told you all about my pathetic past already, remember?"

"She said you were single and ready to mingle. That doesn't make you pathetic."

"It feels pretty synonymous," I mumbled.

Hanging the staple gun over the top rung of his ladder by the hose, Parker leaned on his elbow, removing his cap to ruffle his hair. He'd gotten it cut recently. I wondered if he'd gone into Button Blossom to the tiny barber shop on Main Street, or if he'd taken a trip up to Indy for one of the salons that catered to people of Parker's caliber.

Returning his hat to his head, the gleam in his eyes had dimmed. He had something heavy to say, and it was going to happen, even if the compressor kicked back on and Parker had to shout it at me. "I think this is as good a time as any to apologize."

"For what?"

"For the huge jerk I've been to you."

My eyes shifted. "What are you talking about?"

"Camp Hottie."

I tried to maintain my composure, but I sank, hiding my face against my arm. My bones were rubber, and my muscles

lost all strength. “Granny told you, didn’t she? I swore her to secrecy years ago, and she agreed. Clearly she’s forgotten that we were never to speak of that experience again.”

“I’m glad she broke her vow of silence. Without her, I don’t think I ever would have realized that I’d snubbed you while you were there.”

Along with my bones and muscles, the rest of me became useless. My tongue was sluggish, and my throat was thick. I wasn’t going to cry. I wouldn’t let myself. I hated remembering the fool I’d been.

“It’s no big deal,” I said, wanting to believe my lie. “We hadn’t seen each other in a couple of years. How would you have known it was me?”

“I don’t need you to make excuses on my behalf. Sure, it might have taken me a second to realize my best friend had come all the way to Camp Hottie to see me, but if I would have asked your name, or where you were from... basically treated you like a human being rather than another jubilant minion that would worship me forever in exchange for an autograph, I would have known it was you.”

“I appreciate that.” I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

“So, you forgive me?”

“Only if you can forgive me, too.”

“For what?”

I barked a laugh, and Becky cocked her head at me, reminding me with a look to tone it down. Or give her more grain. She was a goat with a bottomless pit for a digestive tract. “For being a miserable excuse for a neighbor.”

“I can’t say I noticed.”

“Quit being so nice about it. I lied about my name, I evaded you when you’d come visit, I was a grump when you were invited here for dinner. That’s not who I am.”

“I know, you might be pretty good at acting,” he smirked, “but I pride myself on studying people, and you didn’t fool me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nervous sweat prickled along my hairline and I itched at it. “I’m calling your bluff. I could have won one of those shiny gold statues for how prickly I was with you.”

“Maybe, but your barbed defense couldn’t completely hide your sweet, softer, compassionate side. Plus, I caught you checking me out. More than once.”

My jaw tripped down the ladder and landed on the barn floor. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing wrong with admiring a thing of beauty.” Parker playfully struck a pose, and out of habit, I took a mental snapshot to admire later. “I’ve been doing the same thing with you.”

If someone asked me my name right then, I wouldn’t have been able to tell them. Parker had been openly flirting since day one, but this conversation was taking it to the next level. Not in a slow, struggling climb. No, we were headed there in a rocket ship.

My breathing was short and erratic. He’d implied he’d checked me out. He’d suggested he found me beautiful.

*What was my name again?*

“Give me back my staple gun.” I held out my hand expectantly.

As I’d noted, if there was one thing I knew how to do well, it was to run scared.

He kept my gun, and his eyes softened. No more joking, no more distracting me with his charms. “I’m sorry, Maren. I genuinely am. Camp Hottie might’ve been an insignificant blip in the entirety of our lives, but I can’t help but think how different things might’ve been if I hadn’t overlooked you.”

I swallowed the softball in my esophagus. “I’m sorry, too. Forgive me?”

He reached for my hand, and it took every molecule of bravery that I could muster to bridge the gap. When my fingers moved between his, and our palms rested against one

another, it confirmed what I'd suspected—I could die happy with my hand in his.

The usual devious glint that burned in his gaze had taken on a different hue—*desire*. As much as I wanted to tug him over to my ladder and explore his mouth with my own, we were at the starting line of a very daunting marathon. No one sprints from the very beginning and is able to last long.

I tucked my own longing safely in the folds of my heart, promising I'd coax it out when the time was right. Friends first, built on trust and respect. That was our warmup. There would be plenty of time to define the relationship.

“It sounds like we're good.” Shyly, I tucked an errant lock of hair behind my ear. “Thanks for the therapy session. I never would have thought a barn would be a place to root pain out of the past, but I guess it's a fitting setting for someone like me, who practically lives outside on her farm.”

“Anytime, Maren.” Parker squeezed my hand, and it fueled my heart for another acceleration. “I'm not going anywhere.”

## Chapter Fourteen



### PARKER

“Whoops.” A bag of cheese puffs dropped from Maren’s arms as she pushed open the screen door.

Kicking it along, she stumbled outside to the back porch. I rose from my chair to offer help, setting Slo Jo in my spot. Dividing the goods between our arms was clumsy at best, but we managed to hoist the food to the table and chairs where I’d sat with Granny when she’d set me straight. That conversation inserted the giant missing puzzle piece I hadn’t been able to figure out myself. With it, I had a whole new understanding of the modern day Maren that I’d spent the last eight hours with.

“Thanks,” Maren said as she arranged a hodgepodge of food. Granny was right about another thing—Maren was an over-feeder. Even if I hadn’t eaten for a week, we weren’t going to make a dent in the buffet she’d brought out. “I think that’s everything.”

“You sure? It looks kind of sparse.”

Maren made a face at me as she ruffled my hair. I dodged away, though not because I didn’t like it. The feel of her fingertips on my scalp was enough to make me want to kick my foot like a dog who’d earned a belly scratch.

Maren plopped down in the seat next to me, and put her feet up. The soles still had a ring of dirt around them from streaking in her own yard earlier in the day, but despite how busy she was, I noticed she still found time to paint her nails a happy shade of coral pink.

That was Maren—a dichotomy of contradictions. Clean, but not afraid to get her hands dirty. Unassuming, yet surprising. A small-scale farmer who raised more varieties of food than I had in my fridge at any given moment, who also liked cheese puffs.

“This is one of my favorite dinners.” Maren sucked the cheese powder off her thumb.

I helped myself to the celery sticks, and dunked it into the dip. “Raid the pantry?”

“Granny calls it a crap snack dinner.”

“Ah.” I tipped my head back to down the celery in one bite. “I’m guessing it’s named for the junk you’re eating.”

“Want some?”

She tipped the crinkly bag of artificial cheese and fried corn in my direction, but I pretended to gag. “Pass.”

“What?” She popped another one in her mouth, arching an eyebrow at me. “Are you afraid your abs of steel are going to turn to jelly if you eat a handful of gross cheese puffs?”

“You noticed my abs, huh?”

She rolled her eyes, but I tallied another point on my scoreboard when her cheeks turned pink. “They’re kind of hard to miss.”

“Thanks.” I moved on to the carrot sticks. Maren had told me they were straight from her garden and though they’d be even sweeter after the first frost, they were delicious enough on their own, without the need for dip. “I think. That was meant to be a compliment, wasn’t it? ‘Cause today, you’ve made me feel more naïve than I have in a long time.”

“Look, I don’t think you need me to reassure you that you have an impressive body. There are oodles of other women who’ve already confirmed your suspicions.”

“I don’t need oodles of other women. Your opinion matters to me more than a nameless stranger.”

Maren smiled, but it didn't quite crinkle the corners of her eyes like it did when she was saturated with happiness. There was something on her mind, and though I greedily wanted to know what it was, my mantra remained—patience was key to the long game I hoped to win.

Our easy conversation ebbed, and I stacked my feet on the footrest next to Maren's. Slo Jo's purr was like a drum roll against the silence. She played with my shoelace and we both laughed as she rolled on her back and got herself twisted up. Maren and I had finished the coop enough that Maren herded her chickens into it for the night, and once the animals had been fed, watered, and locked up, Maren had asked me to stay for dinner. She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she waited for my answer, and if I were any less of a man, I would have taken her in my arms and kissed her until the sun came up the next morning.

Not that I didn't *want* to, but I wanted Maren to know she was safe with me. Respected.

Loved.

*Loved?*

Labeling the emotion that had been growing since Maren stood on my front porch in her white, clearance rack dress, looking more stunning than anyone I'd ever seen on the red carpet, wasn't a surprise. I'd suspected Maren was someone special to me since we were kids. Immaturity and inexperience made me mistake it as mere friendship. No, what I felt for Maren was so much more profound than wanting only to joke with her, and treat her like one of the guys.

No doubt, Maren could not only keep up, but surpass any guy I knew, while still maintaining her delicacy.

Delicate like a bomb.

Another beautiful contradiction.

"This is really something, what you've got out here," I murmured, risking a glance at Maren.

Her face was highlighted by the golden hues of the setting sun. Shifting her hair to one side of her shoulder, she smirked

at me. “It is. I’m lucky to have it.”

In another life, I would have never suspected that watching a sunset, from a place few people even knew about, would give me so much contentment. I’d sought happiness in front of the camera, and while some of the fame was fun, the legions of people who ficklely swore allegiance one minute, were the same who dropped me when the next shiny thing came along. It was a poor substitute for true human connection. As Maren warmed to me, she showed me what it was truly like to belong.

I laughed to myself, remembering how depressing my first day had been at the Granges’. I was in a swirling toilet bowl of emotions, caused by everything from Finley breaking up with me to being turned down for a movie role I was sure I had in the bag. Maren had provided the escape velocity I’d needed to quit pitying myself, and get back to living my life.

“Are you happy with how things have turned out?” Picking up a bowl of raspberries that Maren and Granny had picked that morning, I could have scooped them into my mouth by the handful. They were that sweet and delectable.

*Like Maren.*

Dang. I might as well get down on my knee and offer her an engagement band if I was going to keep waxing so poetic.

Maren crumpled shut her cheese puffs and set them on the ground, reaching for her glass of water. She guzzled half of it before coming up for a breath. “I don’t understand your question.”

“Like, is this how you envisioned running your farm? From what I can glean, you’ve inherited this place as it is. It’s a lot of work maintaining it, let alone changing anything about it.”

Drawing her lips into a tight line, I worried that I might have offended her. It wouldn’t be unlike me to stuff my foot in my mouth. “I... it’s... Well, it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing? How could something like a business plan be embarrassing?”



“Because,” she sighed, “sometimes, having grandiose plans means there’s more room to fail. Lots of people like to stand on the sidelines and mock.”

“Okay. That was the vaguest answer ever.” Maren grabbed at the first thing she could reach and chucked it at me. A pickle bounced off my chest and landed in my lap. “Thanks.” I crunched into it. “This is a bread and butter pickle?”

Maren nodded. “Granny’s recipe. She says it’s a secret family heirloom, but everyone in Bachelor Button has a copy of it, probably under a magnet on their fridge.”

“Best pickle I ever had.” I dried my fingers on my jeans since I already smelled like vinegar. “Tell you what. If I share something really embarrassing with you, then will you trust me enough to share something that makes you anxious with me?”

“Maybe. It depends on how good your secret is.”

“Okay.” Putting my feet down, I brushed crumbs off my lap and grabbed another pickle from the serving tray. Noshing it down in a couple of bites, I couldn’t believe that I was going to tell Maren the thing that humiliated me most in recent history, and that was saying something. Who hadn’t done their fair share of stupid stuff in life? Having access to lots of money and accompanying vices, I’d been tempted more than once to do something that was followed by a swift kick in the butt by shame. “You want to know the reason I ended up in Button Blossom, Indiana?”

Maren flinched like she’d sat on a tack. That’d caught her attention. “I can’t say I haven’t helped but wonder.”

“I’m sure a lot of people have. I keep getting looks when I run errands in town, but nobody’s said anything yet about who I am, and I’m not going to confirm their suspicions. I’m enjoying the anonymity too much.”

“Remi knows. She suspected from the first time she saw you.”

“If she told anyone, they’re keeping pretty hush hush about it. Usually, I have to skulk around with dark sunglasses and the

lapels of a trench coat pulled up.”

“Remi’s big on a person’s right to live without interference.”

“I like our mail lady a whole lot more now.”

Maren put her feet down next to mine, close enough that our knees were touching. Flicking her wrist, Maren hurried me along. “You’re getting off track. Back to the story.”

“Right. Okay. So, it started when a big time producer invited me to his daughter’s sixth birthday party. He wanted to discuss business, and was thinking of casting me in one of the new superhero movies. However, he didn’t want to suffer the wrath of his wife for not being present for his daughter.”

“Makes sense.”

“I’m wondering how I can get more into the role. In the movie, the superhero finds out he’s a father, and it alters his mission in life. Since I don’t have any kids, I thought I’d get some practice in with the producer’s daughter.”

With her eyes alight, a small snort escaped Maren before she clamped her hand over her mouth. “Sorry. The anticipation is killing me.”

“The party was around Christmastime. I rented a Santa costume, and had my manager fill the sack with toys to pass out to all the kids at the party. Nothing super special, except for the birthday girl.”

“What’d you get her?”

“A pony.”

Maren groaned. “A pony? You never, *ever* get someone a pony without first asking the parents.”

“That’s not even the worst part. I show up, my publicist is there recording the whole thing so we can use the footage on social media later. It wasn’t two seconds into my arrival at their pool party that I realized I totally screwed up.”

“How?”

I glanced at my hand. Maren had gripped it between hers like it was the only thing keeping her from floating away. It took her a beat to realize why the story had paused, and as she mumbled an apology and let go, I clasped my hand tighter around hers. I could pretend like it was for moral support, but the plain, simple truth was that I really, really liked holding her hand.

“I was the second Santa at the party,” I said.

“You... oh, no. Did you ruin Christmas for her by spoiling the magic that Santa isn't real?”

“It gets worse. *So much worse.*”

Maren jiggled my hand and scooted to the edge of her seat. I could have slid my hand around the back of her neck and persuaded her into a kiss. *Not yet, man.* We still had some foundations to build before we explored our relationship from the standpoint of a kiss. “So? What happened next?”

“The first Santa got so ticked off that he totally lost it. He came at me with his fists flying, and I guess I reacted out of instinct. I haven't put in years of training in martial arts and boxing for movie roles without learning a thing or two.”

“So you genuinely *have* action hero muscles?”

I flexed again for her, and was rewarded with a flustered giggle. “The original Santa had nothing on me. I ended up flipping him into a pool. The neighborhood security team came to break up the party, the producer's daughter was so devastated she was still wailing when I left, and after the pony ate most of the birthday cake, it escaped and trampled the neighbor's landscaping before leading the cops on a highway chase until they could catch it.”

If there was a way that day could have been more humiliating, I don't know how. The whole thing was a culmination of my inability to let another person have all the attention. Not getting the job had knocked me down a few notches, and it'd hurt. I'd run to Button Blossom to lick my wounds, never imagining that I'd end up changing the course

of my life by finding Maren at a time when I was sure being alone was the answer.

“I gather the producer didn’t think you were a good fit for the movie,” Maren said softly. She traced her nails along the ridges of my knuckles, and every nerve ending stood at attention, dutifully saluting Maren.

“Right after that, Finley dumped me, so I guess I wasn’t a good fit for her either.”

Maren winced at the mention of my ex. “Granny mentioned it. Sorry.”

For the first time since I’d lived that horrific day, I hadn’t downplayed any of it. It was what it was, and I might even be able to find it a little bit funny.

“I’m sure it was disappointing that you didn’t get the job, but sometimes those forks in the road turn out to be for the best,” Maren said. “You seem happy here.”

I let her assessment roll like a marble in my brain. I *was* happy. It had been too long since I had time to exist without rushing off to the next promotion or was pushed to film such long hours that I could barely keep my eyes open. Small town life wasn’t glamorous, but what I’d traded in non-stop running on the hamster wheel of Hollywood, I’d gotten back tenfold in tranquility.

I had to give credit to Maren. She was the reason I’d had any desire to stay in Button Blossom. Otherwise, I would have split the second I was free from my obligations to Clint and his parents. Now? I could see myself lingering beyond what I’d promised.

A lot longer.

Maybe as long as Maren wanted me to stay.

## Chapter Fifteen



### PARKER

A sputtering laugh tumbled out of Maren, and she covered her face with her hands. “I’m sorry. I’m trying to picture you in a Santa suit, having a fistfight with another Santa. Did you stuff your belly with pillows? There’s no way Santa’s as ripped as you.”

“By that time, the other guy had already shredded most of my costume, so...”

A fresh peal of laughter hit Maren, and I joined her until my stomach threatened to cramp. When neither of us could breathe, I laid back in my chair, exhausted from the effort and relieved it was out in the open.

“That’s my embarrassing moment of the decade.” I flipped my hand over and reciprocated the thumb rub on Maren’s knuckles. “Now it’s your turn. Fess up.”

Color drained Maren’s healthy glow from her face, and her eyes became saucers. “No matter what, you can’t repeat to anyone what I’m about to tell you. I especially don’t want you laughing.”

I mimed zipping my lips. “Your secret will never be uttered to another soul as long as I draw breath. I can’t guarantee laughing if it is ridiculous. I mean, what if you tell me your lifelong dream is opening a clown college in your barn?”

Playfully slapping at my shoulder, it eased Maren out of her fear-induced anxiety. “Okay. Alright.” She brushed her

kinky hair behind her ear, and huffed a tense breath. “If I were to do things my way, it’d be a lot of work, but I think it’d be worth it. I want to share what I have with others. There are lots of people who have no idea where their food comes from, and as good as they can get it in the grocery store, there’s no comparing food that’s ripe and eaten within hours of being harvested.”

She was rambling and while I was catching bits and pieces of her vision, there were still a lot of holes. “I’m getting where you’re going with this, but not seeing the whole picture. Are you wanting to open a restaurant?”

“No. Yes. *Arg.*” Shooting out of her seat, Maren pressed a hand to her forehead and started pacing the porch. “I want this farm to be a hub for people of all sorts to come and enjoy everything that I’ve taken for granted since I was a kid. The part of the property that I’m able to farm on my own, the way I want, is a fraction of what Granny deeded to me.”

“How many acres are we talking?”

“Almost three hundred,” she said. “I lease half of it out to a nearby farmer to help pay the bills, but I can’t stomach the thought of never seeing it used the way I envision it.”

She picked up Slo Jo and held her close, like the cat was a security blanket that was helping her verbalize the fears she’d been clinging onto.

“Are you talking about agricultural tourism?”

“Yes! I want to expand the orchard, have acres of berries, and provide the county with every color of vegetable imaginable. I want people to come out and pick baskets full of food so they can take it home to feed their families. I’d love to have a restaurant that features the best dishes a chef can create from food grown right here. If people were short on time, I could build a fruit stand where they could stop in to grab what they needed without having to trudge into the field to get it. And a pumpkin patch! There’s nothing like roving outside, looking for a pumpkin when the fall weather is crisp and fresh. I want people to experience what it’s like to be in a garden

that's in such harmony, they're reminded how incredible Mother Earth is."

"You want to recreate the Garden of Eden, huh?"

"Well, I've already established I'm willing to be Eve, haven't I?"

I laughed at Maren's sass, and loved her passion for the project she'd been dreaming of, but there was nothing laughable about her ambitions. They were motivated by her love of the land, and her willingness to share her bounty with her community.

"Why was that so hard to admit?" I smirked at her, hoping it eased any remaining consternation out of her. "That's a totally noble pursuit."

My question took the wind out of her sails. "It isn't so much that I don't think it would be a worthwhile goal that's discouraging. It's that I don't have a way to make it happen."

"What do you mean? You've got the land."

"And that's a huge, monstrous step in the right direction, but it isn't at all close to crossing the finish line. Do you know how much capital it takes to get a venture like that up and running? How many tractors and skid loaders and miles of fencing? And that's not even the sheer hours of manpower that it'd take. I am literally operating at maximum capacity, and all I'm able to do is maintain the small slice that I already have established. *That's* what's ridiculous about my dream. It's too big for one person. It's bigger than me."

Stopping at the railing, Maren balanced Slo Jo on it, and leaned on her elbows, next to the kitten. She stared into the distance, and I could imagine the bittersweet feeling of her dream setting like the sun below the horizon. It was there, but unreachable, and the longer she had to wait for it to come to fruition, the dimmer it became.

Another unexpected burst of light exploded in my mind. It was just a spark, but it was enough to ignite a trail of ideas that led to a solution to Maren's predicament. "I know how we could make it happen."

It didn't escape my notice that I'd inserted myself into Maren's problem. *We*. It wasn't my farm. It wasn't my vision. But I wanted it to be.

"You can't smile your way to a quick fix for this one." As if to demonstrate, Maren turned around and offered a weak smile. "Some things are beyond the reach of even your charisma."

"It makes you feel better, doesn't it?" I contrasted her wobbly grin with the one that had earned me coveted magazine spreads. But in this case, it wasn't meant for flash and showiness. It was all for Maren.

"Didn't anyone tell you that if you smile like that, your face will get stuck?"

I pumped my eyebrows for added effect. "But if it makes you happy, then it'll be worth it."

"Making sure I'm happy is hardly a solution to anything."

"But it doesn't hurt."

"Fine. No, it doesn't, but for the record, I'm not *unhappy* with things. I just wish I could... I don't know... do *more*."

"That's what I want to help with. There are so few people who want to genuinely help others and share what bounty they have, but your ambitions are so pure, and I think you of all people deserve to have things work out in your favor."

Maren jiggled her leg, keeping her eyes hidden from me with her fringe of dark lashes. "Yeah, but how? Being a good person is no guarantee that there will be an equal reward."

"I think sometimes you forget that I'm an A-list celebrity." Running my hand over the back of my neck, I shrugged when she narrowed her eyes at me. "Not bragging. Just stating facts."

"Okay, Mr. Hot Shot Movie Man, how are *you* going to get my farm to the next level?"

I slid back in my chair and put my feet up once more. Locking my fingers behind the back of my head, I smirked. "I'm going to be your first investor."



“Investor?”

“Yep. I’m going to give you capital to get your farm up and running. I’ll also be here for hours on end to help you with the day to day tasks.”

“You can’t do that.” Maren shrank into herself. “I can’t let you do that.”

I swallowed. I had anticipated her hesitation. Maybe more than she disliked wasting, Maren was so stubborn when it came to accepting help. Stubborn wasn’t the right word. Conscientious. She was hyper-aware that other people had things to do. Wasting another person’s time bordered on criminal.

“Of course you can. You might have to teach me the difference between weeds and what I’m supposed to be harvesting, but I’m a quick study.” I tilted my head side to side, joking in a self-deprecating sort of way. “Fairly quick, anyway.”

“I can’t let you spend your money on my farm. On me.”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t. Don’t you know how much it would cost?”

She resumed prowling the deck, and I stood up, intentionally blocking her way. “Maren. Again,” I tapped my chest, “movie star, remember? I could buy a hundred farms like yours and hardly feel the pinch.”

“Now you *are* bragging.”

“Only to get you to see things my way.”

The wrestle in Maren’s mind was playing out on her face. She nibbled her lip, her eyes flashed from my face, back to the last of the sunlight cooling along the periwinkle sky, and she shifted from one foot to the other. She didn’t take anything lightly, and wouldn’t dive in unless she was convinced it was a viable possibility.

Finally, she huffed. She was agitated, not wanting to give in, but recognized my offer for what it was—the opportunity

of a lifetime. I was just excited I was going to get a front row seat to see it happening.

“How would I ever repay you?”

“I don’t expect you to eat packaged ramen and canned beans so you can pinch pennies to pay me back. Please, Maren. Just this one time. Accept my help.”

I counted the seconds until a calm came over her, followed by a tidal wave of happiness. “I can’t believe this might actually happen.”

“Correction—it *will* happen.”

She squealed, shaking her fists over her head as she danced. “Thank you, Parker. I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I’ll repay you. I promise I will.”

Standing on her tiptoes, she grabbed fistfuls of my shirt and pulled me down onto her lips. The kiss was so fast, it wouldn’t have registered if it didn’t completely reshape my world. I was hot and cold. A tornado circling in slow motion. I would have fallen on my butt if Maren wasn’t still clinging to me, holding me with her strength.

When my brain recovered from the glitch she’d initiated, I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her closer. “I think you just made us even.”

## Chapter Sixteen



### PARKER

“What do you think? Should I go for it?” Slo Jo eyed me through half-slits as she lounged on the yard, twitching her tail. I knew I was talking to a cat, which at any other time of my life, might have seemed crazy, but conversing with animals had become normal. Maren had taught me that they listened without judgment, which meant I could blather on about Maren until I was blue in the face, and none of them would care. When Slo Jo stretched and rolled onto her back, attacking my hand with her tiny needle claws and sliver-sharp teeth, I chuckled. “You don’t have any advice either way regarding what I should do about Maren, do you?”

It was only eight in the morning, and already, sweat dripped from my forehead and into my eyes. It stung, and all I had was my shirt to wipe it away. There were a million things I would have rather been doing, namely being over at Maren’s, trying to position myself for another kiss, no matter how brief, but I had committed to waiting behind the sprawling lilac bush for however long it took. As dumb as it was to be spying on cows, there was a reason for my madcap scheme.

The same herd of year-old heifers that had unceremoniously dropped the cow patty I had landed in when I fell off the porch swing had gotten out again. I had been lucky that I’d caught them before they’d made it very far, and with a bucket overflowing with sweet feed like Maren had shown me, they were easy enough to get back into the paddock. After they were secured, I walked the perimeter of

the fence line and found a gate popped open. I firmly shut it, rattled it to make sure the latch was indeed holding, and stood staring at the gate for a good five minutes like it was going to speak and tell me what happened. I had a suspicion about the herd's inexplicable ability to escape, and I was going to stay hidden until I proved it.

Or I died of heat exhaustion. No matter where I positioned myself, the sun beat down on me. I would have given my right arm to have one of the popsicles I had stashed in the freezer to make the wait more bearable.

Better yet, I closed my eyes and pretended I was digging my toes into the hot sand of a quiet tropical beach, with Maren's hand in mine. Just a quick trip, since we'd need to get back to the farm. The kiss she'd bestowed on me in her overwhelming excitement at the possibility of making her dreams a reality had tipped me over the edge. I'd always wondered how people knew they loved each other. I *thought* I had come close to falling in love with a few of my more committed girlfriends. Certainly, the closest I'd been to being in love had been with Finley. We got along well enough, and were a match made in paparazzi heaven, but when compared to what I felt with Maren, what I'd had with Finley was at best a carefully calculated move to bolster our status.

Not exactly super romantic.

When I was with Maren, I could be myself. She was the first person I thought of in the morning, and the last I thought of as I nodded off. Even sleeping wasn't a goodbye. My dreams centered around her. All I wanted was for her to be happy, and I would move heaven and earth to be rewarded with her smile. Love seemed so obvious when I inserted Maren into the equation. My theory that our physical attraction was explosive had been confirmed when her lips brushed over mine. An entire Fourth of July fireworks show lit up inside me, and when it ended, I was holding a lighter, ready to find the next stockpile of artillery shells to ignite all over again. It had to have been the briefest kiss in the history of the world, but it was deep and profound, making time irrelevant, yet zipping past at lightspeed, to the future we might have together

if I didn't mess it up. I could see us rocking on the back porch where I'd earned my first kiss from her fifty years from now.

I hadn't been bitten by the lovebug. I'd been gnawed on by an entire swarm.

Seconds ticked by with only the sounds of a breeze rustling through the cottonwood leaves. When I'd first arrived in Button Blossom, I'd perceived the quiet as a lack of pulse to my new surroundings, until I realized there was a heartbeat in the country. It was just slower, and despite my initial reservations, I found I liked it. Enough that I wouldn't be sad not to go back to the life I'd spent so much time building. Actors took indefinite hiatuses all the time, and what used to scare me no longer did. If staying in Button Blossom meant having Maren, I'd give up all the notoriety Hollywood had given me without batting an eye. All I wanted was time with her.

In the monotony of weeding rows of green beans and tightening fences, she'd answered so many of the things I'd been wondering about her. Her favorite candy was chocolate malt balls, and February might as well be erased from the calendar because it was such a horrible, gray, depressing month.

She also let slip that she'd seen every single one of my movies, a fact that made me happier than it probably should have. It took some convincing, but she eventually humored me, and ranked them from favorite to less than stellar. Surprisingly, our list was a close match, except for *Love Comes for the Vet*. I'd jokingly put it on the number one spot on the list. That movie had ended up mid-list according to her rationale.

Thoughts of Finley inevitably surfaced when I thought about Maren. For a long time, Finley's knife was still in my back, but with Maren's help, I'd been able to extract it. The sting had healed, and the ghost of Finley no longer haunted me. No *what ifs* or *I wish I would haves*. Maren was my future, and as Granny had said, the only regret about the past would be if I didn't learn from it. Finley wasn't the woman I wanted

anymore. Plain and simple as she might appear on the surface, I wanted Maren.

The tinkling noise of metal against metal snapped me out of my reverie. I parted the branches of the lilac so I could get a clear view of the herd, and saw one of the cows, dewy-eyed and sniffing at the gate while rhythmically swinging her tail at the flies pestering her. I swore she knew I was watching, and was biding her time to attempt another escape until I wouldn't be there to catch her.

“Come on. I'm not fooled by your feigned innocence.” I coiled, ready to spring into action when the heifer made her move. “You're the one who's the ringleader, aren't you?”

“Am I interrupting something?”

I yelped, and my bunched leg muscles reactively sprung me into the lilac bush, while Slo Jo darted for safety so she wouldn't be crushed. Laying spread eagle across the gnarled branches, a very bemused Maren stared down at me. I waved hello.

“Hi.” She adjusted a bag with chicken cartoons printed on it over her shoulder. “I didn't mean to scare you, but you're kind of jumpy. Is there som—”

I recognized it must've made her question my sanity for her to stumble upon me, hiding behind a bush and narrating my life, there was no time to explain. I reached for her wrist and tugged Maren down. Caught off guard, she tumbled into my lap, and I clapped a hand over her mouth. “*Shh!* You'll scare the herd!”

The heifers were staring and snorting in our direction, and while I should have stayed focused on solving the bovine mystery, all that went out the window with Maren in my lap, arms wrapped around her. I inhaled her tropical island shampoo, and as I soaked in the details of being in such close proximity to her, my gaze inevitably went to my hand where her lips were hidden, pressed against my palm. They were close. So close that if I slid my hand out of the way, I would barely have to move to bring her mouth onto mine. Dragging my attention to meet hers, her eyes were wide and searching.

If it was permission to kiss her until we had sufficiently communicated everything we hadn't found the words to say, then who was I to deny her?

But, before I could capture her lips with mine, she licked my palm.

Since living at the Granges', Maren's tongue was hardly the grossest thing that had happened to me, but it was an instinctive reaction to pull away.

"What was that for?" I shook my hand and swiped my palm on my jeans. "How old are you? Five?"

She ran her arm across her mouth and grinned. "I think I have the right to free myself by any means necessary when I'm being held against my will."

Though she'd successfully gotten my hand off her mouth, she hadn't done anything to push herself off my knee. Her hands were pressed palm down on either side of my chest, and she could undoubtedly feel my heart, hammering like tribal drums. Ever so slightly, her thumb traced the contours of my chest. The subtleness of her touch was just the right amount to let me know she found me attractive without making me go completely carnal. I could stare at the ring of gold in her rich brown eyes all day, and the smell of her homemade goat's milk soap, giving her skin hints of peppermint and orange, was better than any other perfume a woman had ever worn. Those were the tiny, overlooked details that were the sum total of who Maren was.

Maren had already proven she was willing to go to drastic measures to get out of my grip, so I gave her the option of sliding off my lap, or staying by relaxing my hold. She twitched. Her instinct was to scoot off my lap, and retreat a safe distance, except something in her inner dialogue must've reasoned with her. Eventually, she conceded. Running her hand down the length of her tangled, sunkissed hair, she set her bag on the ground, and draped one arm around my neck. Yanking her down to my level in order to save from scaring the cattle hadn't exactly been my suavest moment, but I couldn't complain about the results. The feeling of her against

me was natural. I'd been born to hold her, fitting her perfectly in my arms. It might have been wishful thinking, but I was sure our hearts were synched and happily beating together.

"Sorry," I said in hushed tones. "I didn't mean to react so..."

"Psycho-ly?"

"Uh, I don't think that's a word."

"Uh, *I* beg to differ. I came over, innocently looking for you, and *BAM!* You attacked me."

"Yeah, well I'm on a covert mission, and you almost blew my cover."

Maren smiled rigidly, holding back her amusement as her eyebrows crept upward. "I see that. Do you mind if I ask what your mission is? Or is it classified by the CIA?"

"Ha ha. Maybe I'm being a little intense, but I'm pretty sure I'm on the brink of figuring something out that's been driving me nuts."

"That you're about to crack, living for two months in near-solitude except for a cat, a hen who hates you, and other various forms of livestock?"

"Don't forget my secret agent neighbor, M, who doubles as a small-scale farmer on the side."

Maren's straight face lasted about two seconds before she broke down and laughed. It was playful and teasing, and made me feel like a fool who didn't care that he was foolish. My pulse ticked along happily, and my arms tightened another degree around her.

The whole situation and her reaction to it was so Maren. Another conundrum.

"Go ahead. Laugh it up, but I'm about to prove that one of the cows has figured out how to let herself and all her friends out, and *that's* why they keep escaping."

Maren nodded. "Right."



“I’m serious. If one of them hasn’t evolved fingers in place of cloven hooves, my second working theory is that she’s using telepathy.”

Maren’s renewed laughter spread like wildfire, and I joined in, both of us trying desperately to smother our snorts so we wouldn’t spook the already wary herd.

Maren wiped at a trickle of tears. “I know cows are naturally curious, but I think you’re giving them a little more credit than they’re due. The second time they got out, we found a spot in the fence where they could have gotten through, remember? The tensioner had slipped, and the line was loose. I showed you how to fix it.”

“To which I owe you a huge debt of gratitude.”

Holding her head high, her eyes sparkled devilishly. “Keep your gratitude. I could have written an entire instruction manual by now with all I’ve taught you. I’d rather cash it in on a favor for all my trouble.”

“Don’t worry about repayment. I haven’t forgotten that I owe you about a billion favors by now.”

“Less than a billion. You *have* folded my towels, and helped me with the chicken coop. I can’t count how many times you’ve brought me a package so Remi didn’t have to drop it off for me. Lots of stuff like that.”

“But that was service.” I turned her hand over to look at her palm. The worst of the scrape had started to fade. “That was the kind of stuff I wanted to do because it makes you happy, and makes things easier on you, not because I’m working off a debt.”

I kissed the heel of her palm, letting my lips linger on her warm skin. Cradling my cheek with her fingers, I leaned into her. If she didn’t have on jeans without holes in the knees, I would have kissed the scrape on her knee, too.

I would have kissed her all over if she’d let me.

*Soon, buddy. We’re moving in the right direction.*

All this being patient was impossibly taxing. I was used to going into relationships like the thunderstorm that would have blown Maren's clothes clean off the line. In like a lion, and out like a lackluster, unreliable lamb who didn't fight to keep the relationship alive because it couldn't hold my interest.

Thunderstorms made me think of the towels whipping on the clothesline, and my brain made the leap to Maren's *lack* of towel, hiding behind a bush, naked as a bluejay. She had no idea how hard it had been not to want to take a peek.

*Time for a change of subject, Parker. And fast.*

I swallowed, and moved the conversation along to safer territory. Shifting Maren so my legs wouldn't fall asleep, I insisted, "I'm serious about them escaping. The cows got out again last night and I found the gate wide open."

"The cows were out?"

"Yep. Found them right after I came back from having Sunday dinner with you and Granny. Tell Granny I want her recipe for her honey-roasted carrots, by the way. I want to pass it along to my mom. She'd love them."

Maren squinted at me, while absentmindedly playing with the hair at the nape of my neck. She wasn't going to make this easy on me. Her touch made my head buzz, and I bit back a groan. With seemingly superficial effort, she had wrapped me around her finger, and I had willingly bent to accommodate her. "Hold up. Am I understanding you correctly? You didn't have to call for help to get the heifers back in?"

I puffed my chest. "Nope. I managed all on my own. The best part was that it took me less than five minutes. That's a new record for me."

"Huh."

"Huh, what?"

"Huh, as in, maybe there is some hope for you yet."

"That I won't be the world's worst farmer in all of written history? That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

“Yep. Gotta recognize your skills, *most* of which were probably gleaned from me.”

“To which we’ve already established, I owe you a massive debt.”

“We should celebrate.”

“I’ve never said no to a good idea like celebrating. Have any ideas?”

*I’ve got a few.* Puckering slightly, hoping her subconscious would pick up on my subtle, yearning plea. *Let me kiss you, Maren! I’ll never ask for another thing as long as I live.*

*Except maybe one more kiss.*

*And then another and another...*

“I brought ice cream.” Maren reached for her bag, and produced two containers. “Homemade.”

If I couldn’t smooch her, then sharing homemade ice cream on a hot summer day had to be second. Maybe not necessarily a *close* second, but I wasn’t going to complain.

Maren slid onto the grass, settling next to me. Handing me a chilled container and a spoon, I opened it up, and the melty part dribbled down my shirt, which Slo Jo eagerly took care of. Scooping out a mouthful, I held it up. “Cheers, to not being the worst farmer ever.”

“Hope you like vanilla bean.” Maren opened her own container and let Slo Jo lick off the lid. “I know it gets a bad rap for being boring, but I like to think it’s similar to me.”

My eyes rolled back in my head as I savored the creamy, satisfyingly frozen treat. “This is nothing like you. You’re the least boring person I know.”

I knew from Maren’s smirk that I’d totally misinterpreted her metaphor. “I was going to say that vanilla ice cream is full of potential. It can stay simple, or it can be combined with an endless assortment of mix-ins, and take on a completely different identity. But thanks. Good to know I’m not boring.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Laughing at my misstep, I wasn’t above groveling. “Sorry. I really don’t think you’re anywhere near humdrum.”

“Humdrum?” Maren giggled. “Who says that anymore?”

“Apparently I’ve been hanging out with Granny too much, and I’m picking up on her old-timey phrases.” I took another enormous bite of ice cream. There were going to be extra workouts for my greedy gluttony, but every calorie was worth it. “So, I’m dying to hear how I’m going to settle my debt with you. Do you need me to help fix that east section of fencing that’s rotting? I’d hate to have to help you come chase goats back in. Cows are one thing, but I bet if the goats made a break for the forest, we’d be climbing trees to get them all back.”

“Ugh, don’t give me nightmares. That’s on my to-do list, but that’s not the favor I need this time.”

“I never thought it would come to this.”

“What?”

“That you, the legendary homesteading master, Maren, needs the lowly assistance of a city boy like me.”

Her eyes danced as she scoffed at me. “It may surprise you to know that I only have two hands, and sometimes need four. Actually, in this case, it’s an all-hands-on-deck kind of deal.”

“Name your favor.”

“Every year, Button Blossom puts on a festival, where I’m fairly certain half the state shows up.” Maren straightened her legs and put one ankle over the other. She was wearing a pair of frayed work jeans, but it didn’t hide that she had great legs. I tried not to stare, but quickly discovered it was impossible not to appreciate them when they were stretched out next to me.

“Is this different from the farmer’s markets they have every other weekend?”

“Yeah. Those are a lot smaller, with a lot less vendors, and mostly locals shopping at it. The Button Blossom festival has a

parade, a petting zoo for the kids, face painting, a rodeo, and it ends with a huge fireworks display over the lake.”

“I see. And there’s a farmer’s market that morning?”

“It’s a madhouse. Last year, I sold out of several soap scents, all my eggs, and most of my baked goods. It was an amazing haul, but I need some muscle to keep the display stocked by dragging inventory I’ll have stacked up to the front. I’ve prepared twice as much as I normally do, and I’m hoping to see even better results as I did the past few years.”

“Wow. Sounds like a big job.”

I glanced at Maren, catching her eyes for a moment. She unconsciously caught her lower lip between her teeth, drawing my attention to her mouth. I was a goner. If I’d ever wanted anything as much as I wanted to kiss Maren, I couldn’t remember it.

“It is,” she sighed, “but selling out of products from my booth is a small taste of what I hope to have on my farm. I want to generate that kind of excitement on my farm.”

She scooted closer, and gently laid her hand atop mine. Another thrilling zip circulated through me, threatening to knock the wind out of me the way falling from the porch swing had, way back when all I knew was that I was going to have fun with a neighbor like her.

“It’s going to happen, Maren.” Cupping my palm against her face, I ran my thumb over the contour of her cheek. “I made a promise, and I’m going to see it through, even if I have to use every last penny to my name.”

Coyly, she cast her gaze to the ground. “I’ve been meaning to properly thank you, by the way.”

That caught my attention. “I think you already did. On your back porch, I distinctly remember you kissing me. It was quick, but I know I liked it.”

“That?” Maren locked gazes with me, and she edged herself close. The gold in her eyes glittered, and I could count every one of her eyelashes. “That was a warmup.”

Angling her face toward mine, she drew an arm around the back of my neck. When her lips found mine, a detonation rocked my whole world. *Delicate like a bomb*. The moment I'd been anticipating—longing for, *dreaming* about—was so much better in real life. Her lips were smooth, and she tasted like honey and citrus. As she crawled back onto my lap, her hair fell in a curtain around us, tickling my face and adding a layer of privacy to our intimate moment.

My arms slipped around her, and as we continued to explore one another, making my heart rate skyrocket with each passing moment, I knew Maren was the only woman I could ever be satisfied with. She was the definition of happiness. Of fulfillment.

Of home.

As I eased off the kiss, wanting to keep from losing total control, I broke away, leaning my forehead against hers. Breathing like we'd sprinted from my front porch to hers, I grinned. "That kiss... *wow*. I don't think I would have cared if the herd got out and stampeded past us."

Maren pressed her lips to my cheek, slowly trailing them to my mouth, where I was happy to oblige her hunger. Moving past to the other side of my face, she whispered in my ear. "Funny enough, I was thinking the same thing."

## Chapter Seventeen



### MAREN

“Thank you for stopping by.” I smiled as I handed a paper sack to a middle-aged woman with a graying pixie cut. “Enjoy your soaps, and I really think you’re going to like the tartness of that goat cheese. I put a recipe card in there with my favorite candied walnut salad. It’s one of my favorite ways to use the cheese.”

She thanked me, and slipped into the flow of foot traffic with her goldendoodle in tow. The Button Blossom Festival, coupled with unseasonably mild weather, had brought out people in droves, and from the quick assessment of my books, I was on track for record profits. Some would go toward projects around the property that had the highest priority, but the rest would be tucked away in savings. Parker had reignited my hope for expanding the farm, and while I appreciated his generosity with his own bank account more than I think I’d ever be able to express, I had plans to be a contributing partner as much as I was able. Independent and self-sufficient to the end.

I hid a yawn behind the back of my hand as I restocked my jams. Parker stood next to me, and bumped me lightly with his hip. “Tired already? It’s only eight in the morning.”

“It’s inevitable. I think I *maybe* got five hours of sleep, and it wasn’t even quality.” I twisted a row of apple plum jelly so the labels were facing the browsing customers. “I’m wondering how you’re not dead on your feet. You had to be up around four to get all my chores done, and still have time to

stop by the donut shop before I even had a chance to hit the snooze button.”

He brushed my hair aside and slid his hands around my waist, coaxing me closer to him. His breath tickled my ear as he whispered, “Guess I’m running on the high of being able to spend the day with you.”

“Isn’t that a cheesy line from a movie you’ve been in?”

“Maybe.”

Quickly kissing the soft skin behind my ear, I would have melted if he hadn’t followed it up by nuzzling his chin into the crook of my neck. He’d discovered that while I loved the feel of his scraping stubble when we kissed, I was incredibly ticklish on my neck. I squirmed and yelped, pushing him away as he laughed. Returning to restocking the vegetable bins, he smiled to himself, which in turn made me brim with so much happiness, I thought I might burst.

Every step of the way, Parker had been there. He helped wrestle our canopy into place when we arrived, and yanked the folding tables out of the truck bed faster than I could keep up with him. I hadn’t thought much about what love language I preferred until Parker came along and figured it out. Of all the ways he could dote on me, sweating alongside me, and multiplying what I was able to do on my own, made me feel like the luckiest woman in all of existence.

“Oh, there’s one other thing,” Parker said as he straightened the beets, “I get to do this whenever I want.”

He took me in his arms, aimed his lips at mine, and did not disappoint. I would have thought after a week of kissing until both of us were suffering chapped skin and swollen lips, we might have slowed down. Nope. I was anything but a quitter.

“Break it up you two.” Granny came at us with a folded paper bag. “If you two don’t quit kissing every time you look in each other’s direction, you’re going to gross out our customers, and scare them away.”

My face heated, but I wasn’t going to apologize for kissing Parker. “Nobody cares if we peck once in a while, Granny.



Everybody's too busy shopping."

"He agrees with me." Granny pointed a knobby finger at a boy who was waiting for his parents at the custom t-shirt tent, staring wide-eyed because he'd seen the whole thing. His ice cream cone was getting away from him, and drips of cherry ice cream ran down his forearm. "You think they ought to quit kissing, don't you?"

The kid nodded, grimacing like his ice cream was going to come back up. He added a decided thumbs down for added emphasis.

"See?" Granny said. "No more kissing."

"Sorry," I looked at Parker, and he winked, "but still not sorry."

Granny's vindictive finger was turned on me. "If I had a hand towel, so help me Maren, I would crack it on your hiney so hard you'd know I was serious."

"Guess I'll have to take your word for it," My sass was all teasing, and she knew it. "But I also know for a fact that you and grandpa had the same reputation when you were our age."

Granny sniffed, blinking once as she shifted her expression to neutral territory. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"In the diner? Trixie pointed it out to me one day," I said.

"Pointed out what?" Granny folded her arms, challenging me to try her.

"That black and white photo at the booth, second to the right?" My gaze flicked to Parker. "It's of a bunch of kids sharing chocolate malts on a Friday night, but if you look closely, Granny's there with Gramps, and guess what they're doing?"

"Kissing?" Parker said.

"Yep." I looked back to Granny, and raised my brows. "Rumor has it, that's not the only picture of you two making out."

Granny scowled at me, pinching her lips into a tight line, and her eyebrows dangerously close to becoming fused. She knew how to push my buttons, and I had mastered the control panel that made her tick. It was all in good fun, but Parker stepped in to keep the peace.

“You’re right, Granny. I’ll try to restrain myself,” he said. “This isn’t a kissing booth.”

“Now there’s an idea.” Granny’s eyebrows untangled and they shot up. “We could set up a corner kissing booth.”

I didn’t like where this conversation was headed. “With who? Are you going to be handing out smooches?”

Granny lowered her voice. “No. Parker, of course. Can you imagine how fast we could rake in the dough? I bet we could charge twenty bucks a pop.”

The thought of watching Parker kissing a line of women while I sold goat milk soap right next to him made my stomach slosh.

“Care to lend your boyfriend for the rest of the day?” Granny’s eyes sparkled, and I knew it was all meant in jest, but that didn’t ease the possessiveness I felt for Parker.

Those lips were mine.

“No. Nope.” I shook my head so vehemently that my skull might have come detached and tumbled to the ground. “I’m not running a lip brothel.”

“A lip brothel?” Parker doubled over with laughter. “Where did you come up with that?”

I stuck my tongue out at him, but couldn’t completely restrain a smile. “I know I’m not supposed to tell you what you can and can’t do, but I’m not letting Granny use you in a kissing booth.”

“Relax, Maren.” Granny tipped her head and cackled. “I was only kidding. You think I’m the only one who’s easy to rile up?”

Granny continued to laugh as she shuffled to her camping chair at the back of my booth, near the boxes of inventory I’d

brought to restock as needed. Plopping down into the chair, her body shook as she continued to work through her laughter.

*That woman.* Hope she enjoyed teasing me to within half an inch of my life. Judging by how raspy her laughter became, she was going to be able to entertain herself for hours at my expense. All there was to do was shake my head, and chuckle along with her.

Parker went back to work. “Looks like we’re out of the lavender and rosemary soap. Want me to get some more?”

“No, I’ll get it. Can you watch the front?” I asked.

It wasn’t often that I saw Parker anxious, but once in a while, I peeled back a layer or two that hit a little too close to the border of his comfort zone. All morning, he’d kept his ball cap low and his chin down, so no one would ever suspect that a big shot like Parker Bingham was working the Button Blossom Festival’s farmer’s market.

He might have thought he was being discreet, but I don’t know how anyone could miss his razor sharp jawline, or the breadth of his shoulders, and not wonder if he was someone important. So far, no one had succumbed to hysterics in front of my stall when they discovered he was the actor that a person would have to be living under a rock not to know.

Thank goodness. I didn’t think I could handle someone sobbing over my stash of kale.

Parker agreed to man the front, and he went back to fussing with the soap display, while I went to the back to sift through the boxes of soaps. Finding what I needed, I took a quick sniff of a bar. The earthy, floral scent of lavender and rosemary never got old. Hoisting the soap onto my hip, I swung around and ran straight into Parker. He *oof*-ed as his stomach took the brunt of the momentum. Rock hard abs or not, an unanticipated jab to the gut hurt.

“Oops.” I cringed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He rubbed his stomach. “I’ll live.”

“Is there something else we need up front?”

“Not up front.” He motioned me closer with a flick of two fingers, and I leaned in. He stole a passionate kiss, and my head swam with happiness. “What Granny doesn’t see won’t hurt.”

“I know what you’re doing!” Granny shouted from her seat.

“Doing what?” I called back in an innocent, singsong voice.

“You know what!”

Parker and I laughed like naughty children, and he took the box from me to take to the front. We worked side by side, not needing to speak as we restocked and organized. If there was a way to quantify the happiness he made me feel, I’d bottle it, so I’d always have access to it.

Worry cankered my insides. Parker and I hadn’t expressly discussed everything that our relationship had entailed yet, and I’d purposefully ignored the gnawing dread that kept fresh the fear that Parker’s commitment to John and Mary Jo was coming to an end. I’d daydreamed that Parker would choose to stay with me, but the draw of Hollywood was strong. Would it be fair to ask him to give up his dreams to help me pursue mine?

“Are you happy here?” I asked.

It was out of the blue, and it didn’t register with Parker because he was focused on stacking soap, not having a serious conversation that would define the trajectory of our relationship. “Come again?”

“Are you happy here? With me?”

Anxiety had a chokehold on me, and I wondered what I was thinking. If Parker’s answer wasn’t satisfactory, would I start blubbing, wailing in front of all of Button Blossom? Granny might’ve been right that people watching Parker and me have P.D.A moments could be a turn off, but a snotty-nosed and weepy woman would *definitely* deter shoppers from stopping to browse.

“Is this a trick question?” Parker’s grin was adorably lopsided. “I feel like there’s a deeper meaning to it that you’re not saying.”

“You’re right. Never mind. Sorry. Just forget I brought it up.”

Turning away to check on my stock of onions, Parker caught me by the belt loop of my jeans. Tugging me back against his chest, he wrapped his arms around me, and rested his chin on my shoulder. “Are you thinking about how the end of summer is less than a couple weeks away, and that might mean that I’ll have to leave?”

The onions I focused on grew blurry. I forced my tears back into their ducts, but couldn’t completely conceal the thickness in my voice. “It’s been on my mind.”

“Don’t worry about it, Maren. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from you, it’s that good things are worth fighting for.”

He pressed his lips to my cheek, and I closed my eyes, letting worry ease out of me by releasing a deep breath. The world wasn’t so vast and our lives weren’t so secluded that we would lose track of each other again, should we need to be apart for a time. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.”

I spun around and nestled into his chest with my arms hung around the back of his neck. He stood up, lifting me off the ground, and seeing an opportunity to make me laugh, he gently scraped his stubble on my neck again. I shrieked and tried to push away, but I was no match for his brawn.

Although he already knew I wasn’t above licking to get him to release me, I wasn’t trying all that hard to escape. I was happy right where I was.

With Parker.

## Chapter Eighteen



### MAREN

“Hey, Parker!” The crowd parted like the red sea, and a man I hadn’t seen in ages towed a woman with him in a beeline straight to our booth. “Is that you, man?”

“Clint!” Parker reached over the jars of honey to clap his hand in Clint’s, shaking it while he smiled at maximum capacity. “I didn’t know you were going to be here today.”

“I thought I’d bring Irma to show her where I grew up. Button Blossom might hardly be a splotch on the map, but they do a summer festival right,” Clint said.

Parker held out his hand to Irma. “Irma, nice to meet you. I’m Parker.”

I didn’t like one bit how Irma’s greedy eyes took their time soaking in every bit of Parker. I suppose Parker was used to being ogled—I’d done my fair share of gawking, because Parker was just *that* good looking—but Irma stared at him like he was the last cookie on a platter, and she was reconsidering her diet.

“Clint said he knew you, but I admit, I thought it was another one of his jokes when he claimed you were friends.” She slid her manicured hand into Parker’s. “I’ve never met a big movie star in real life.”

The smallest twitch of Parker’s lips into a frown was quickly recovered with a charismatic smile. “Out here, I’m just one of the locals.”

I might've butted in and introduced myself, effectively marking my territory around Parker, but Irma was the kind of woman who might bite my hand if I offered it. Parker's unmistakable wink in my direction offered the reassurance I needed. He couldn't help it if women were drawn to him. What mattered was that he had chosen me.

"I wondered where you were. We stopped by my parents' house, but you weren't there." Clint draped his arm over Irma's slender shoulders, not noticing that she was busy fluttering her unnaturally lush eyelashes at Parker. Seriously, I don't know how she had the muscle strength to move her eyelids with those extreme lash extensions. "What are you doing out here? If I didn't know you were in town, I might have totally walked right past you."

Parker hitched his thumb at me. I'd been helping an elderly gentleman fill a bag with homemade dog bones, while I listened in. "I've been helping Maren."

Clint's double-take was hilarious. Recognition blew his eyes wide open, and his smile doubled. "Mini Maren?"

"Hey, Clint." I handed the man his dog bones and change, thanking him for his patronage. "It's been a long time."

"No kidding. You're all grown up!" Clint reached across the booth, and picked me up in a hug that popped a few vertebrae.

"I was thinking the same thing. Where's the goofball who was always pulling pranks?" I laughed. "You still hold the town record for longest ride in a wagon being pulled by a cow through the high school."

"Let's be honest. That one wasn't even my best one," Clint said, chuckling as he remembered it. "Have I told you about that one, sweetie?"

Irma's expression had settled into somewhere between unimpressed and murderous as she glared at me. Apparently, I'd stepped on her toes with a hug from her boyfriend. If only she knew, Clint was the closest thing I'd had to a big brother, and therefore I'd never entertained the idea of thinking of him

in an even remotely romantic way, she might have simmered down.

“No.” Irma’s pouty lips settled into a scowl. “It sounds sort of like all the rest of your jokes. Outrageous, over-the-top, and usually involving an animal.”

“Yeah,” Clint laughed quietly. “Good times.”

“Hey, Maren.” Remi stopped by, looking as cute as ever in a pair of cut-off overalls, and her hair in pigtails that were barely contained by the hair ties. “Sales going well?”

“Better than expected.” I hitched my thumb at Parker, who was listening to Clint as he waved his hands while retelling something that was apparently hilariously funny. “This guy might have something to do with it. I think half the people stopping by are just interested in getting a closer look.”

“Nothing wrong with some eye candy to lure customers in. It’s your products that leave them happy, though.” Lifting mason jars of jams and canned green beans, Remi asked, “Do you have any spicy pickled vegetables left? I’m going to a picnic later today, and thought they’d go well with the baguette and greek olives I’m contributing.”

I grabbed my biggest jar and handed it to her. “On the house.”

“Are you sure?” Remi patted the pocket on the front of her overalls. “I’ve got cash.”

“Save it. I owe you for being such an attentive mail carrier,” I said.

She playfully rolled her dark eyes. “It’s not like that’s hard to do.”

“You’re still the best as far as I’m concerned. Ask anyone. You would have put Pony Express riders to shame.”

“If only I knew how to ride a horse.” Remi leaned over, and peered at Clint, who was laughing with Granny as Parker showed the scabs on his knuckles where Licorice had clobbered him. “Hi, Clint. I heard rumors from Dr. Fox that you were back in town. Guess they’re true.”



There was no shortage of hugs today, and Clint wrapped up Remi, picking her up off the ground as she squealed with laughter. I kept my eye on Irma though. I wouldn't have put it past her to go for Remi's throat if there weren't so many witnesses around.

"How does that man know so much?" Clint said.

"Think about it. Probably ninety-six percent of the town has pets or livestock, and he's the only vet in a fifty mile radius," Remi said. "Plus, he's got that quality where people can't help but talk to him. I bet he knows about every single skeleton in Button Blossom's closet."

"That's true." Clint reached for Irma, but came up short. She'd wandered across the aisle to a man selling massage oils, whose hair was so greasy and slicked back, I wondered if his product doubled as a styling product. For as possessive as Irma was over Clint, she flit around to wherever she could get a man's attention. The way she was leaning toward the man with the slimy duck-tail hairstyle, I wouldn't be surprised if she was asking for a hands-on demonstration. "Nobody's as good as Dr. Fox."

"Hey, good to see you, Clint, but I've gotta run so I can make it to the bakery tent before they're sold out of my favorite loaf," Remi said, taking a step back. "Thanks again for the vegetables, Maren. I promise to point everyone in your direction when they fall in love with them."

"I'll be ready for the rush," I called after her.

Remi smooched her fingertips and tossed the air kiss in my direction. I just shook my head and laughed at her quirkiness.

With a gap in customers, Parker sidled up next to me, standing so closely that my shoulder bumped into his chest. He slid a hand low on my hip, and tucked three fingers into my pocket. It was such a natural feeling to have him standing next to me, I wondered how I'd been able to resist him as long as I had.

We weren't going to extraordinary lengths to hide our relationship from anyone, but it wasn't like we were wearing

matching t-shirts, confirming everyone's suspicions, either. Clint pointed a finger between the two of us when he put two and two together. "You two are a thing?"

I craned my neck to look at Parker. We kept meaning to sit down across a table so we could answer those questions ourselves, so when other people inquired Parker and I were on the same page. Not that I hadn't tried. Inevitably, we'd end up falling into each other's arms, and forgetting everything we'd intended to say. Personally, I thought I would have kicked the jam aside, climbed on top of the table, and proclaimed with a megaphone how I felt about Parker, but Clint's innocent observation caught me like a deer in the headlights. Parker was going to have to take the lead on this one, because I'd never recover from my embarrassment if he didn't feel the same as I did. Was this a summer fling? Or something that had the potential to be so much better?

Tightening his grip on me, Parker kissed me on the cheek. That pushed me out of the way of the careening headlights that had scared me, and I recovered quickly. Smiling stupidly, I entwined my fingers between his and squeezed. "Yeah. Maren and I are together."

"I saw that!" Granny threw a wadded-up napkin in our direction. "No more kissing in public!"

We laughed, Clint the loudest of all. "I called it, didn't I? Small town women are the best."

"Then how'd you end up with a gem like Irma?" Parker nodded his head in Irma's direction. Indeed, she was straddling a portable massage chair, while Mr. Greasy Hair liberally rubbed his hands over her shoulders.

Any annoyance Clint might've felt was shrugged off with a sigh. "Irma has her qualities."

"Right," Parker teased. "We can see that."

"Guess I'd better go rescue my girlfriend." Clint made *pew-pew* finger guns at us as he backed away. "Let's do lunch sometime. I want to hear all about how you put up with this guy, Maren."

Clint traversed the flow of the crowd, and though we couldn't hear what he said to the male masseuse, the man jumped, and let go of Irma's shoulders like he'd stuck his finger in an electrical socket. Clint gathered Irma's purse, and led her away, while Parker and I exchanged a glance.

Then, we giggled like five-year-olds.

"Wow," I said, as I regained my composure. "Not sure where Clint dredged her up from."

"I won't question Irma if Clint's happy with her, but..." Parker curled his hands, trying to think of the right word.

"Yikes?"

He snapped and pointed at me. "Exactly."

A fresh wave of shoppers eased their way past the booth, and I was happy to help each one, but my brain was stuck on replay, immensely pleased with how Parker had answered Clint's point blank question about our relationship status. It dissolved my fears, and should anyone else ask, I'd be able to answer without a second thought.

"Need a break?" Parker gave me my water bottle, and took my hand, guiding me to the back of my booth to a corner where Granny had set up her favorite foldable camping chair. "Granny's going to watch the front so you can sit down and put your feet up for a few minutes."

"What about you?" I guzzled my water, not realizing how thirsty I'd gotten. "Granny only brought one chair."

"Easy." Parker sat in the chair first, and tugged me down onto his lap. Putting his arms around me like a seatbelt, he asked, "How's this?"

"A little lumpy, but otherwise comfortable," I quipped.

"I could always put on sixty pounds to get rid of my annoying muscles. Then I'd be nice and squishy for you."

"Nah." I ran my fingers along his forearm, memorizing the profile of his muscles. "I've kind of gotten used to them."

"So, you don't mind them?"

“They’re alright, I guess.”

Downing another gulp of water, I leaned my head back against Parker’s shoulder. I was beat from the early morning, and the hours on my feet, but I wouldn’t have traded a month-long vacation for that morning. I was happier than I realized I could be, and Parker had been instrumental in pushing away the clouds so I could more fully experience the sun.

“So, did we just make our relationship status official?” I asked. “Clint always had a way of butting into other people’s business. He really is like the big brother I never had.”

“I don’t mind. It was something that needed to be said.” Shifting to the side, Parker pulled out his phone, and opened the camera on selfie mode. “Say cheese.”

Parker snapped a handful of pictures. I made silly faces, but it got me laughing so hard I snorted like a pig. Debating which was the best one, Parker edited it, opening it in a social media scheduler, and typed out a caption:

*Having a blast at the #ButtonBlossomFestival with my favorite farmer.*

He selected a string of hashtags, several of which included mentions of *Girlfriend* and *Lucky*. The one about *Love* made my stomach do a happy somersault.

Putting his phone away, he rested his chin over the top of my shoulder. Our cheeks were pressed together, and he played with the ends of my hair. “Now it’s official. We’re on social media.”

I laughed, and as I settled against him, I couldn’t fight the heaviness of my eyelids. They were made of iron, and no matter how I fought to keep them open, I fell soundly asleep.

I had no idea how long I’d been snoozing when a woman’s frantic shrieks woke me up. “He’s here, isn’t he?”

“Calm down, girl,” Granny said. “He who?”

Another ear-piercing squeal. “I saw a picture of Parker Bingham, and the location tagged him in Button Blossom. Parker! I’m your biggest fan!”

I jumped out of Parker's lap, accidentally elbowing him in the stomach. He groaned, laughing pitifully as he grimaced. "You have the pointiest elbows of anyone I know."

"Parker? Parker! I see him!" The woman's barely contained excitement attracted others. "He's right there! It's Parker Bingham!"

A small mob of people was growing as onlookers stopped to see what the commotion was all about. Fog from my impromptu, and rudely interrupted nap, made my thoughts hazy, and it took a while to connect the dots to fully comprehend the reality I'd woken up to.

"Parker! Over here! Parker!"

"Will you take a picture with me?"

*"Parkerrrrrrrrr!"*

Women jostled to be at the front so they could catch a glimpse of him. For the first time since seeing him in front of a crowd, he wasn't composed, schmoozing everyone who flocked to him.

"Is this from the picture you just posted?" I asked. "You barely put it up a couple of minutes ago."

"I knew it might be a risk sharing it, but I didn't think it'd be *this* fast."

"Parker!" a woman sobbed. "I want to have your babies!"

If I was watching this unfold from a different perspective—maybe across the way at the creepy massage oil guy's booth—I would have laughed, but the crush of frantic women was a very real demonstration of what I was up against. Women of all walks of life wanted Parker, and when flocked together, they became rabid.

"Settle down," Granny shouted. For the first time, I wished she had a towel with her. She'd be able to subdue them like the lion tamer at an old timey circus. "You're going to knock over the booth!"

Irma was in the middle of the crowd, sunglasses on to conceal her identity, pushing her way to the front. Another

woman in a yellow sundress stumbled, catching herself on the table and knocking a case of jam onto the ground. Glass shattered everywhere, and the sound fed the frenzy of women.

“I should go,” Parker said. “This is getting out of hand.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Hopefully I can divert them away from here.”

I swallowed, though my mouth had run dry. Parker was the reason for the mob, but it felt like he was abandoning me to fight an angry bear on my own.

A case of soap wobbled dangerously close to the edge, but Granny caught it before it tumbled.

Parker was already halfway gone, but he looked to me for permission. What choice did I have but to send him away? People were going to start climbing the canopy and cutting holes in the canvas so they could slither through and get to Parker.

“Go on. Get.”

“I’ll be back for you.” Parker squeezed my hand. Usually, it made me feel light when our hands were together, like a balloon pumped with helium, but not this time. I was carved out. Hollow. Left behind while he dealt with the side effects of his status.

Parker disappeared out the back, and as the women followed him like a bloodhound on a scent, I was glad to watch him go.

## Chapter Nineteen



### PARKER

Talk about feeling like crap.

It had been three days since I'd had to run. Like, literally back out of helping Maren, so I could sprint away as if my life depended on it. I'd barely made it to my truck, and peeled out of the parking lot before I was eaten alive. Pretty sure Irma was responsible for clawing a streak of paint off the door as I drove away.

Hope Clint had fun when it came time to break up with her, because that lady was crazy.

But all the drama I'd raised was nothing to the turmoil as I bided my time, waiting for my chance to apologize to Maren. I waited and practiced, rehearsing everything I wanted to say to her. I ached to apologize. I wanted to make it right with her, so she'd know I wasn't a flake, and wasn't using her to shield me from the side effects of my job.

I waited and waited.

Three *days*. That might as well have been an eternity.

The first day, she was under the weather, and didn't want to get me sick. Alright. Fine. She was being considerate. I could appreciate that.

The second day, by the time I'd woke up, Granny told me she'd already left for a quick road trip to Indy to pick up some supplies that she couldn't get in Button Blossom. That stung a little.

The third day, it sank in that she was outright ignoring me.

It was an intentional knife to the heart, but it was hardly her fault that she'd rammed it straight in. I'd given her the knife, painted a bullseye on my chest, and leaned against the tip when I'd effectively abandoned her, leaving her to clean up the mess I'd created.

While I was busy mentally beating myself up for making Maren question my loyalty and intentions, the Granges' tractor lurched and sputtered as it slowed to a stop. I'd made progress mowing a large swath of the field to the west of Maren's house, but had brought a can of diesel with me, anticipating that I might need more fuel. It was a big job, and I was hoping it would save Maren time by ticking something else off her to-do list. Maybe then she'd have time to sit down and talk with me.

I'd left the can at the edge of the field, under the shade of the treeline. Slo Jo had been practicing tree climbing, racing up to the branches, and sliding her way down, clinging to the bark with her razor sharp claws like she was a tiger. Having worn herself out, she was stretched on a branch, snoozing in the late afternoon.

"I'm almost done," I said to her. "You think I should go over it one more time to get the rest of the stuff I missed?" Slo Jo barely cracked an eye at my question, and it made me laugh. "Yeah, you're right. That might be overkill."

Carrying the can to the tractor, I dumped it into the tank, listening to the chirp of crickets as the diesel sloshed out. Once my can was empty, I fired up the tractor again. Engaging the mower, I ran over another row of grass, and swung around back to the treeline so I could drop off the diesel can before I forgot, and left it in the middle of her field to be swallowed up by the brome grass when it grew tall again. Maren's unexpected appearance at the edge of the field shot my heart past my throat, and wedged itself in my brainstem. For all my practice, I couldn't think of what to say, or what to do to smooth things over with her. All I knew was I was thrilled to see her, even though she wasn't reciprocating my smile.



*Wait. Isn't she at least a little bit happy that I mowed all this for her?*

It wasn't even the not smiling. She was wafting between open-mouthed shock and tight-lipped scowling. I wasn't always the brightest crayon in the box, but that couldn't be a good sign.

I pulled the tractor up alongside her, and let it idle. Maybe fear was skewing my perceptions, and making me read her all wrong. This was the first time in a relationship where I'd messed up, and truly cared if I was able to fix it. If Maren wouldn't have me, and this was it for us...

*No.* I couldn't think that way. Defeat was not an option, because I didn't want to consider a life without the possibility of Maren in it.

"Howdy, stranger," I drawled like an Old West cowboy, and tipped my imaginary hat. Comedy seemed like a safe bet. "I haven't seen you in these parts for a good long while."

"Parker." She could have stared down a mad cobra with her glare. *Uh, oh.* It wasn't my overactive imagination. Something was *very* wrong. "What do you think you're doing?"

The high at seeing Maren was quickly tamped down by an avalanche of dread. My suspicions confirmed every nightmare that had woken me in a cold sweat since the Button Blossom Festival. She was mad about me ditching her. No, *livid*. Because I'd needed to post my private life online to brag for everyone to see, Maren had been thrust into the worst parts of my life. No, it wasn't my fault that chaos occasionally erupted around me. It was, however, my responsibility to be prepared for it. Using Maren as a shield was hardly a solution to what'd happened.

"I'm mowing your field." I gripped the steering wheel to keep from fidgeting. "You're probably wondering why I'm shirtless, too. It is hot out, but I'm trying to even out my farmer's tan, because everything from the elbow up was looking a little pasty. I was told once that muscles look better tanned. What do you think?"

I struck the classic hug-a-tree muscle pose, hoping it'd get a laugh out of Maren.

Nothing.

Tough crowd.

She folded her arms and cocked out her hip. Yep. She was mad. I braced myself for her wrath, and hoped I didn't make it any worse. "Why did you decide to mow this particular spot?"

"It looked overgrown?" My voice almost cracked as I turned a simple statement into a worried question.

*Way to be confident, man. You're definitely proving you're not a coward.*

Sometimes, I wish my inner dialogue wasn't so sarcastic. I needed a cheerleader right then, not a critic.

"I get that you're trying to be helpful, but I'm seriously beginning to wonder if it's ever genuine, or if there's always some underlying motive."

"I don't understand."

"I think you do." Maren held out fingers as she listed things I'd done. "Weeded my flowerbeds to get on Granny's good side, so you'd have her as an ally. Helped with my chicken coop, because you thought I've never had to work through the pain of an injury before, and your big strong muscles would make everything alright. Posting your location on social media, creating a feeding frenzy of fans, who almost tore my booth to shreds to get to you. Did you do that to reassure yourself that you're still relevant?"

"Okay, now you're punching below the belt." Irritation flipped my body temperature back to hot, and my stomach clenched as if she'd swung at me with her sledgehammer. "I came over to help, and hopefully find you so we could talk. I know I owe you an apology. What's so wrong about what I'm doing?"

"You mowed my hayfield, Parker."

"What?"

“My hayfield.” Maren jabbed her finger at the land behind me. “That grass was long for a reason. It *would* have fed my animals for the entirety of winter, but thanks to your generosity, there’s nothing to bale. It’s ruined. I won’t have any hay. Get it?”

I looked over my shoulder at the one pathetic, scraggly row I hadn’t chopped down. If I ever felt like an idiot, wrecking Maren’s hayfield had to top them all.

“I thought I was helping,” I said, as I clapped a hand over my forehead.

“Thinking you’re helping, and actually helping are two very different things.” Rubbing her hand down her face, her irritation at my unwelcome gift was replaced by exhaustion. “Look, I can’t do this right now. You might as well go ahead and cut the rest of the field. I don’t want to stare at a grass mohawk every time I come out here. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to add another unexpected item to my to-do list.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to figure out how on earth I’m going to budget for hay.”

Before I could assure her that I would buy what she needed, and it would be the greenest, sweetest grass her animals had ever had, Maren stormed off. Cursing to myself, I kicked the tractor tire. Typical. When I decided to take the plunge, everything crumbled. With Finley. With Maren. It didn’t matter if I thought a relationship was destined or not. Every single one of them had failed. It was depressing that I had a zero percent success rate with women. Me. Parker Bingham. The guy who could summon a mob at a small town festival couldn’t convince any of them to stay.

I needed a minute to cool off, so I could talk to Maren without my pride going in with its boxing gloves on. She had the right to be mad at me. I’d messed up, and I hadn’t done myself any favors by mowing down a field I assumed was useless when in fact, it was part of the lifeblood of the farm. Typical. I overlooked something that was vitally important while I was busy patting myself on the back.

It was like Camp Hottie all over again, except instead of plowing over Maren, I'd hewn over her hay.

Driving the tractor home, I went into the Granges' house and washed my hands, and scrubbed my face clean with cold water. Staring at my reflection, I gave myself the sort of pep talk that fortified my backbone. "It's not over yet, Parker. Get back over there and remind her why she'd started falling for you in the first place."

Putting on a clean shirt, I started the long walk over to Maren's house. I could hear Granny singing from the kitchen as the scent of fresh bread wafted out of the exhaust fan. My stomach growled, wanting to divert me to get a hunk of bread from Granny, and a pad of butter to slather on it.

I forced my feet to keep walking, and my eyes to search for Maren. Her truck was still in the driveway, so chances were she was somewhere close. I'd walk every inch of her property to find her if that's what it took.

Everything I passed was a reminder of something I'd shared with Maren. The first, innocent and rushed, but world-altering first kiss by the back porch alcove. The hydrangea bushes where she'd hidden stark naked, while I tried to keep my thoughts pious. The barn, where she taught me it was okay to mess up and have crooked staples as a metaphor for life.

I slowed at the proud barn, still standing after a century, and heard the sound of Becky bleating. A metal bucket scraped along the concrete, and the stanchion locked.

*Bingo.*

I wanted to charge in and sweep her off her feet, but that wouldn't fly with Maren. I'd known her since before we could read, and sharing pudding cups was the biggest compliment a person could bestow on another, and though we'd missed a few years together, she was still the same genuine, beautiful person at heart that she'd always been. Stubborn, independent, and opinionated, too, and the kind of woman who'd never go for being anyone's damsel in distress.

Taking a breath, I walked into the barn, ready and willing to drop to my knees and wear out my jeans groveling if that's what it took.

As I suspected, Maren was hunched over at the stanchion while Becky nibbled up every last piece of sweet feed she could reach from her bucket. I'd been privy to a fair share of milking sessions, and could time a watch by how steady the stream of milk hit the pail. Today, the tempo was faster than usual. Maren was definitely still angrier than a honeybee who'd flown a mile without a flower in sight. There were things that needed to be said, and I was going to be a man and apologize first.

I cleared my throat, hoping Maren would at least turn around and look at me. Nope. I coughed louder. Still, she kept her attention on Becky.

She was definitely not going to make this easy on me.

"Maren, I need to apologize. I've failed you in so many ways, it's almost ridiculous. You'd think I wouldn't know the first thing about relationships for how often I mess up."

I waited, hoping for some sign of the teeniest laugh. A chuckle? I would have taken an impartial huff. Big, fat *nuh-uh*.

I took her lack of answer as my cue to keep talking. "You're not wrong when you said that my reasons for helping around here haven't always been pure and noble. At first, they were very superficial. I wanted something from you, by doing you a favor. Namely, I wanted your attention. It was all about the here and now, because there wasn't any clearly defined future. I figured a summer fling would purge the bitterness I had accumulated when life hadn't glided along seamlessly, the way I'd planned."

Maren stopped, and sniffed, rubbing her nose against her forearm. Was she crying? I'd take that as a step in the right direction. Anger stonewalled Maren. Crying at least implied there was a crack in the dam. Drying tears, I could do.

Maren went back to milking, and I kept monologuing. "Then things started to shift. I don't think I can pinpoint the

exact moment that I realized I loved you, but I can say without a doubt that I do. I love your passion, and your grit. You have grandiose visions of helping others, and are authentic when a person earns your trust. I was lucky enough that you let me see it, but I screwed up so royally, I should have a crown. I admit that. But I want to make it up to you, no matter what it takes. I want to serve you. Spoil you. Work *with* you, so we can share in the dreams of what could be together.”

Becky bleated, and impatiently shuffled in the stanchion. The nanny goat was probably unimpressed with my apology, and was looking for another scoop of grain. Reaching for her face, Maren scratched Becky behind her pendulous ears, but still didn't acknowledge me. My heart fell like a feather, rocking gently as it drifted decidedly downward.

Taking a step toward Maren, I wasn't going to leave until I heard in her own words exactly what she wanted. If she needed time, I'd give her space to work out her emotions. If she wanted me to leave, I'd pack up my things, and hit the road, giving her peace. Whatever it was, she was going to have to say it. Otherwise, I would persist until she forgave me, and we could put this ordeal behind us.

“Maren?” I reached for her shoulder. “What do you—?”

The moment my fingers brushed against her, Maren screamed. She flailed off her stool, kicking over a full bucket of milk, and twisted around to face me, ready to karate chop me to pieces.

“Parker?” Maren tugged her earbuds from her ears, and once again, I felt like a moron. She hadn't heard a single word of my heartfelt apology and confession of unconditional love. I'd say it all over again, but I didn't want it to be disingenuous. They weren't lines I was reciting. This was real life, and though I'd practiced, and nothing about it was scripted. “What are you doing here?”

“I was apologizing.”

Slo Jo had heard the commotion, and as the spilled milk seeped into the cracks of the concrete, she jumped down from the haystack, and started helping herself. There was nothing to

do about the loss, so Maren just clenched her jaw, and let her head hang until she could recover.

“I’m sorry,” I offered softly.

“About what?” Maren snapped. “Ruining the biggest event of the year for me or mowing down my hayfield because tall grass bothers you? Oh, wait. Maybe, you’re here to beg forgiveness for using me to bolster your confidence while you got back on your feet. Is that it? I can hardly be upset over all this spilled milk when I know I’ve been treated like a means to an end by a man I thought I could trust.”

My hand found its way into my hair, and I gripped it as I steadied my temper. For all my penance, the vindictive side of me was begging to be let loose. There was plenty of hypocrisy in her accusations. I knew I wasn’t infallible, but neither was she.

Instead of giving in, I blew a breath out through clenched teeth. “I *have* been trying to treat you right. The problem is, you’ve picked apart my motives for trying to get close to you until you have a reason to leave without guilt on your conscience.”

“Really? Wow. You’ve figured it all out, haven’t you? I’m intentionally sabotaging any potential relationship because I derive some sick pleasure out of watching things get torn apart.”

“You said it, not me.”

Hurt shadowed Maren’s face, but passed over quickly. She was rebuilding her stone fortress, effectively locking me out. “Do you seriously not see yourself as the flaw in this equation?”

“I never said I wasn’t culpable. What I’m fighting is how unfair you’re being. You can’t pretend like I have to be perfect for you to be happy. That’s not how a healthy relationship works. But you wouldn’t know that, would you? You’ve already pushed just about everyone else away. That way, you can live as isolated as possible to keep from risking the pain of

loving and letting other people love you. That's pretty hypocritical, don't you think?"

So much for keeping our argument from turning into a boxing match. I'd just taken off the gloves.

Maren's eyelashes barely fluttered, and she wiped all emotion from her face. There was no coming back from what I'd done. "I'm not pushing people away, Parker. They're the ones who leave. My parents didn't want to stay. My sister couldn't wait to move. Half the friends I had in high school graduated, and have never been back. Granny won't be able to live forever, as much as I hope she does. It's hard being the one left behind. I suppose it's just as well that you were always temporary, anyway. You'll be able to leave, just like everyone else, and not feel a morsel of regret because it's what you wanted."

"My time in Button Blossom was scheduled to come to an end, yes, but I never said I wanted to leave."

"Remember my superpower?" Becky nibbled on the hem of Maren's shirt, but she was so distracted she didn't care. "You didn't have to say anything, because I figured it out by the way you acted. That's what you're good at, isn't it? Acting?"

She was skewering me with truths that had once been true, but weren't anymore. Button Blossom had been a level beneath me when I'd arrived. It was merely a place to recover from my embarrassment without prying eyes. But as I began to see it the way Maren did, I had learned to love it as she did. There were good people here, and I'd fallen in love with my home state again. I'd learned to enjoy the slower pace of country life to the point that it felt like home. But, home could never exist without Maren. She was the beating heart to my existence, and as she slowly extracted herself, I physically felt the tug in my chest.

I clamped my mouth shut and clenched my fists at my sides. It would have been so much easier to escalate it into a shouting match, where we could hurl insults and let our wounds direct our fight. I would not be that man. I didn't want



to hurt Maren any more than I had with my arrogance. “I disagree with you. Strongly.”

“Welp.” She raised her hands and exaggeratedly slapped her thighs.

I shifted my eyes back and forth. “Welp what? Is that the end of this conversation?”

“You’ve got everything all figured out, and I gave the quintessential thigh slap and welp, which every midwesterner knows is the cue that we’re done.”

So many emotions waged war inside me. Rage at being dismissed—didn’t she know who *I* was? It pushed against incredulity, anxiety, and fiercest of all, fear.

It was the last thump of my heart before it expired.

“Excuse me? Have either of you seen Parker Bingham? I stopped by the house he’s supposed to be staying in, and I saw a truck parked there, but no one answered.”

I knew that voice, and it couldn’t have come at a worse time.

Finley had found me.

## Chapter Twenty



### PARKER

“Parker!” Finley had probably never seen me in clothes so worn in. I probably looked like one of the locals, but when it registered that she’d found me, she squealed and shook her hands. Finley dropped her luggage next to Becky’s stall, took hurried, mincing steps to me, where she launched herself at me with enough force that I was nearly bowled over. I steadied her by grabbing her hips to balance her as much as to keep me from landing hard on the concrete. “Do you know how hard you’ve been to reach?”

Finley wrapped her arms around me, and my insides twisted and squirmed. I’d never been squeezed by an anaconda, but I imagined a hug from an ex was pretty close.

Add to that, being hugged by an ex in front of the woman I loved, who now hated my guts, and I was being strangled by an entire pack of anacondas.

“Finley?” I extracted myself from her, and took a step back. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you, silly.” If she didn’t tone down the brilliance of her smile, I was at risk of my corneas being scorched.

*At least someone’s happy to see you.*

“I almost didn’t recognize you.” Finley pushed her blonde hair behind her shoulder, and gripped my arms as she appraised me. “Dang, Parker. Life in the country has done you

good. There's something to be said about tanned muscles, don't you think?"

She tested my biceps with her grip, and glanced at Maren in passing, looking for confirmation from a fellow woman. Maren obliged her with something between a grunt and a chuckle, but kept herself too busy with containing the milk mess I'd caused to be conversational. Milk dribbled down a drain, and it was a poignant metaphor for what was happening to my chances with her.

Finley was blissfully unaware that the tension in Maren's barn was already stifling, and she cut through it with her usual flair. I hadn't had the kindest thoughts toward Finley when I'd arrived in Button Blossom, but time with Maren had given me perspective. They were about as opposite on the spectrum as two women could be—Finley was soft and dainty and quick to use her feminine charms to get her way, while Maren was tougher than nails, and took every hit without flinching. The world might compare the two of them and prefer Finley, but Maren had a depth and passion to her that had changed the course of my life.

That is, until it imploded. My life was still on a different course because of Maren, but now, I was careening for a crash landing.

"So, Parker," Finley's hands had minds of their own, and they traced the striations of my forearms while she talked, "how've you been?"

My face was tight, making it hard to answer, let alone fake a smile. Shifting my eyes to Maren, who was watching our exchange casually, but with great interest, trying to conceal it by working. Always working. It wasn't every day people had a famous underwear model wander into their barn, searching for their equally famous Hollywood actor ex. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Why would you? We, you know... Well, *I*..."

"Broke up with me?"

“Right.” Finley sighed with relief. “At least one of us can say it. I still feel horrible about the timing of it all. I should have waited until your professional life wasn’t so tumultuous.”

“I don’t know that it would have made a difference,” I said gruffly. I’d already struggled to have a difficult conversation with Maren, and definitely didn’t want to be rehashing things with Finley. We were done and over, and I’d accepted it. Finley was my past, and I was endeavoring to keep Maren in my future. She might have turned me down, but I still couldn’t believe we were over when we’d barely just begun.

“This is so serendipitous.” Finley wiggled her fists with excitement again. “You know, I just happened to be scrolling on my phone when this picture popped up of you with a woman, and it pinned your location to here in Button Blossom. I had to twist some arms to get your exact address while you were on hiatus, but as you can see, I eventually got what I needed.”

“You figured out where he was because of the picture he posted?” Maren was in the middle of tossing wood shavings onto the spilled milk to sop it up.

I never pinned Finley as a conniving or thoughtless person, though she was sometimes scatterbrained, especially when she trembled with excitement. It hadn’t been intentional that Finley barely acknowledged Maren, because Maren had been keeping to the background. She probably was looking for an opportunity to slip away, but I happened to know the barn so well that unless she was going to climb into the hayloft and jump out the access door where the hay was loaded, there was no escape.

“I know you!” Finley covered her hand with her manicured French tips. “You’re the woman! The one from Parker’s post!”

Maren drug the broom along the concrete, sweeping the soiled bedding into a pile. “In the flesh.”

Whipping back around, Finley regarded me with eyes that danced with elation. “Hey, do you mind if I steal this guy? I’ve been dying to talk to him for ages, and don’t think I could wait another minute.”

“Welp,” Maren slapped her thigh, maintaining eye contact while she did. There was no mistaking she was dismissing me from her presence, and I was not to argue. “It was so nice to meet you, Finley. You two have fun now.”

“Thanks.” Finley winked at Maren, and I wanted to shrivel up and die. If this didn’t make me look disingenuous, having my ex show up and acting like we were still a couple, I didn’t know what would. “We will.”

Finley took my hand and marched me outside, grabbing her suitcase as she passed it. I resisted her tug, wanting to stay with Maren.

“Hold on.” I twisted my grip out of Finley’s hand. “Where are we going?”

“Do you know somewhere we can talk privately? Maybe the place where you’re staying?” She leaned against my bicep, bent her knee and lifted one of her expensive looking patent leather pumps, and batted her thick eyelashes. Her hand found its way back into mine. “Please?”

As often as I had a chance, I’d been holding Maren’s hand to try to memorize it. Her calluses had become comfortable, and her skin was a representation of her strength. Finley’s softness was so delicate, it had become foreign.

I glanced back at Maren, but she showed no sign of distress, and when I opened my mouth to tell her I’d be right back, there was another, more stern *WELP*. The *P* popped for emphasis, and the thigh slap would probably leave a bruise. She wanted me to go. I was to get out of her barn, and get out of her life. “If anyone’s looking for me, I’ll be using my sledgehammer.”

I didn’t miss her implication I’d be leaving Button Blossom the same way I’d come—alone and ruined. *Worse* than alone and ruined. I was without Maren, while she’d be swinging her sledgehammer to beat me out of her memory. By bedtime, she might not even remember me.

“Parker?” Finley was so blissfully unaware that my world was crumbling that her smile sliced into my misery. My blood

pressure ticked higher until my head might pop clean off. This wasn't how I envisioned this coming to an end. "Would you mind taking my bag for me? I've been dragging it for what feels like ages, and I'm afraid if I keep at it, I'll get one, big, bulky arm. Could you imagine me walking down the runway with one gnarly strong arm?"

Finley laughed, and I cringed as she took me away from Maren. I was being torn in two, and not by a surgically precise cut with a sharp razor—the rip was messy and painful. I was leaving the better part of myself with Maren, and the last thing I saw was a glint of the same pain I was feeling in her eyes.

"She is so cute." Finley linked her arm through mine as we walked down Maren's driveway. I had to hand it to Finley for being able to stride like she was on the catwalk in her four inch heels while navigating crushed limestone. "The epitome of quaint with her little farm, and her funny looking... What was that? A sheep?"

"A nubian goat. Her name is Becky."

"I thought it was Maren."

"Becky was the goat. Maren was the woman."

Laughing like I was doing stand up comedy, Finley swatted at me. "The goat is named Becky? Farmers name their animals? That's super cute."

"Maren does. Maren is."

I was in a trance the entire walk back to the Granges' small farmhouse. My joints were stiff and mechanical, and my thoughts were blanketed in a hazy fog of disbelief. The rumble in my stomach had turned sour, and without Maren, I was a broken man. She was the only cure to my arrogance and selfishness, my one source of happiness. And what had I done? I'd let her slip away like spilled milk running down a drain.

At the Granges' front door, Finley waited for me to hold the door open. She stepped inside, her eyes bright and her smile fresh, like this was all a great adventure. In Mary Jo and Clint's kitchen, she turned a complete circle, and her grin

peaked. “Wow. This house is straight out of the seventies, almost like it could be a movie set. Could you imagine filming here? It certainly would be easy to get into character.” She pointed into the living room. “Are those hanging plant holders macramed?”

Slumping into a chair at the kitchen table, I held my head up by gripping my hair. “Finley, why are you here?”

That changed the mood of the conversation in a flash. Pulling out the chair next to me, Finley primly sat down. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your question.”

“I want to know why you came here. Why did you travel all the way to Button Blossom to find me?”

Finley blinked. “Why do you *think* I’m here?”

“I’m guessing you thought we’d have a mushy, teary-eyed apology over some non-fat, chia seed smoothies or whatever they’re drinking at the coffee shops now, but I’m going to have to squash your plans right now and tell you, that’s not going to happen.”

Finley giggled and patted my forearm. “I think you’ve been living in solitary confinement too long.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I’m not here to try to get back together with you.”

There had been a time when I might have been offended by Finley kindly turning me down, but after wrestling with Maren over my intentions, and failing spectacularly, I was relieved I wasn’t going into round two of uncomfortable conversations.

Finley sat back in her chair and giggled, pointing at me. “You should see your face. You really thought I was going to ask if we could get back together.”

I couldn’t bring myself to join her fit of laughter, but she did succeed in easing some of the pain that had been crushing me like a boulder. “So, you came to check in on me?”

Finley composed herself, and nodded. “Kind of. Ever since we broke up, I’ve been having the feeling that there were still some things that needed to be said. But, you up and disappeared on me, so they were put on hold. When I found out you were here, it seemed like a good time to catch up. Plenty of time on your hands out here, I bet.”

“A lot more now, I’m afraid.”

I put my forehead down on the table and closed my eyes. All I could see was Maren’s face. I didn’t know how long I’d be haunted by her, but I had the urge to pack my bags right now and take the first flight I could get. With Maren across the street, hating my guts after she’d given me the best summer of my life, I couldn’t stand to remain in Button Blossom.

“Does it have to do with that woman across the street?” Finley said softly. “Maren, wasn’t it?”

It wasn’t like I was hiding my pain, but the irony wasn’t lost on me. Having my ex comfort me during a breakup was funny. I just couldn’t laugh. I sat up and cleared my throat. “Yeah. We knew each other as friends, and for some reason, fate thought it would be hilarious to throw us back together.”

“And it didn’t go well, though you hoped it would?”

“I tried. I really did. We both did, but it seems that we’re too different for each other.”

Finley snorted. “Do you think you should only be dating people like me?”

“It seems that way, doesn’t it? Although, I think I’m done with relationships. Everything after Maren would fall short, and I’d always be dissatisfied. I couldn’t do that to myself, and I wouldn’t want to drag another woman through that. Maren was the pinnacle, and I’ll never be able to replicate what I had with her.”

“First off, wow.” Finley pressed a hand to her heart and the rings she wore sparkled as they caught the sunlight streaming in from the window above the sink. “I’m not sure if I should be offended or not.”



“I don’t mean any insult, but our relationship was nothing more than a carefully crafted plan to bolster our status. On paper, we were perfect, except we barely had a spark.”

“That’s fair.” Smirking, Finley’s eyebrow arched. “I will give you points for being an excellent kisser, though.”

I chuckled, wishing I’d saved all of my kisses for Maren. We could have made out until our lips sloughed off, but it wouldn’t have been enough. “I want you to know that I don’t have any hard feelings towards you. There were some after the initial sting of our breakup, but I’ve realized we’re better off with other people.”

Breathing out a sign, Finley was visibly relieved. “Oh, good. That’s what I came here to do. I’ve been wanting to apologize to you for a long time. My conscience has been prodding me for months, and I haven’t been able to get her to shut up. Not until now, anyway.”

“So, no hard feelings?”

“None whatsoever. In fact, if you haven’t already seen it in the news, I’m dating someone else.”

“Yeah? How’s it going?”

“I know love at first sight is laughable, but that’s exactly what happened. He walked into an art exhibit showing, and I just knew. Is that ridiculous or what?”

Maren had the same effect on me. She could suck the air right out of my lungs with a smile. “Nah. I get it.”

Crossing one leg over the other, Finley studied my face. “I know it’s not really my business, but do you want to talk about Maren? Maybe I can offer some insight.”

The weirdness of this all niggled in my gut, but Finley’s intentions were noble. I scrubbed my hand across my face, trying to sum up Maren with something as inadequate as words. Still, I tried. “Maren is like a farm. She’s harder working than an entire hive of bees, and sweeter than their honey. She has patches of wild roses that have cut me to shreds, but her soul is the culmination of the most beautiful night sky I’ve ever seen. She’s wild yet disciplined, and knows

how to let her hair down. I've never been so challenged and frustrated and utterly in love than I have been with her. ”

Glancing at Finley, I waited for her to bray like a donkey, belly laughing at my sloppy analogy. “Wow.” She grinned. “That was something.”

I covered my eyes with my hands and groaned. “I told you I couldn't do her justice.”

“No, that's not what I meant.” Finley shook my arm. “What you said was sweet, and more honest than most people are about their relationships. Everyone has things they need to work on, and though we want our journeys to be on a steady upward trajectory, there are inevitably dips along the way. There's one problem though.”

“What's that?”

Leaning on her elbows, Finley propped her chin up on her fists. “You've given up way too easily.”

“No, I didn't.” Irritation made me hot around the collar, and I yanked at the fabric of my t-shirt to give me extra space. “I did everything I could think of to get her to forgive me for being so pig-headed and stupid. It didn't work.”

Finley thought for a moment, as she rolled her fingernails in a staccatoed movement. “I don't suppose Maren's the type of woman who would appreciate being flopped over your shoulder and run to safety.”

“You hit that on the nose. If anything, she'd be more likely to toss me like a hay bale.”

“I don't doubt it.”

“So what do I do?” I splayed my hands, desperately wanting back what had slipped away.

“Parker, quit trying to force things. You don't have to *do* anything. Apologizing isn't about balancing the scales with acts of service. You can't milk a thousand goats to prove you love her.”

I snorted, laughing at her example. “I can't imagine the hand cramps I'd have after that.”

“You know what I mean.” She backhanded me. “It might be tempting to try and work off your debt, but love doesn’t work like that.”

“And you see then why I’m stuck.”

“It’s a hard place to be in, for sure, but it isn’t impossible,” Finley said. “When I’m hurt, sometimes I need time to process and let myself simply feel my emotions. When I’m over the worst of it, a heartfelt apology goes a long way. Being reminded why we work, and what the guy loves about me is also appreciated. Of course, it has to be without strings attached. No confessing your undying love so you can hurry to the kissing and making up part.”

The advice Finley freely offered was enough to reseed the hope in me that’d withered and died when Maren sent me away. There was still a chance if I could show Maren how vital she was to my existence.

“She’s my everything.” My voice cracked, but I wasn’t embarrassed. There was no shame to the emotions that bound me to Maren. “Life wouldn’t be the same without her. Not even close.”

“I can tell,” Finley said with a knowing smile. “You really are in love with that girl, aren’t you?”

## Chapter Twenty-One



### MAREN

“Earth to Maren! Are you listening?”

A pair of Granny’s socks hit me, and I blinked. I was in my living room, feet on the couch, half-eaten bowl of ice cream on my stomach, but seconds before being pelted with Granny’s dirty clothes, I’d been in a different universe. One where I hadn’t shown Parker the door in the cruelest way possible. Sure, I’d been hurt. Watching him run while a swarm of women raced after him wasn’t my favorite moment of the summer, but my reaction had been impulsive, and stemmed out of fear. Parker already had his foot out the door, since Mary Jo and John were scheduled to return soon, and out of self-preservation, I’d only helped him make the decision before I’d invested so much into a relationship that I wouldn’t survive the transition back to being single.

Barely into my twenties, and I was already considering spinsterhood as a means to keep my heart safe from the ravages of love.

I looked at my bowl of ice cream and frowned. Not only was it more melted than I liked it, Granny’s socks had ricocheted off me and landed in my dessert.

“You ruined my ice cream,” I said, picking up her socks.

“No, *you* ruined your ice cream.”

“Uh, I don’t remember serving it with a helping of filthy old lady socks on top. Why’d you throw them at me?”

“Because,” Granny huffed impatiently. “I’m sick of being in a room with you, but not having anyone appreciate my wisecracks.”

“We all know you’re hilarious, Granny.”

“That’s not the point.” She scooted out of her recliner and sat on the edge, resting her elbows on her knees and steepling her fingers. “I’m concerned for you, Maren.”

Accepting my ice cream as a lost cause, I set my bowl on the end table nearest me. “Is this an intervention? If it is, I think you’re supposed to invite more people than just one.”

“Quit being a smart Alec.”

My right eyebrow twitched into an arch. “Oh, so it’s okay if you’re sarcastic and funny, but not me?”

I put my arms up to keep Granny from pummeling me in the face with the pillow she’d been using for lumbar support. “You’re trying to deflect, but it won’t work.”

“Deflect what?”

I didn’t know why I bothered asking that question. I knew better than anyone how mopey I’d been since Parker had left. It manifested in either frenzied hurrying around the farm, trying to keep myself so busy that I wouldn’t have time to think about how awful I’d been to Parker, or I became so sluggish, I barely moved from the couch for hours, not accomplishing anything of note. Neither method was sustainable, and neither was able to evict Parker from my thoughts.

“Ever since you gave Parker the boot, you’ve been so unhappy. It hurts worse than my arthritis to see you aching over him.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“But that’s kind of the point,” Granny sat back in her chair and rocked, keeping her eyes trained on mine. “What if you *shouldn’t* be trying to get over Parker?”

That hit me like a cannonball to the belly. “Why wouldn’t you want me to recover from someone who disappointed me?”

“Are you perfect, Maren?”

“No, I—”

“Then why are you expecting Parker to be flawless before you let him in?”

Another cannon fired squarely at me. That’s the same question Parker had hurled at me when we were in the middle of our heated argument. It couldn’t be coincidence that Granny was reiterating it. It was sad that, apparently, flawlessness was the burden I placed on others as the price for my approval.

*Gross, Maren. Could you be any more horrible?*

“I shouldn’t.” I could barely speak around the boulder in my throat. “I don’t know why I’m so hard on people.”

“Because you’re impossibly hard on yourself. Always have been. It’s not wrong to expect the best of someone, including yourself, but once in a while, we’re all going to need some grace. Otherwise, everyone would be standing in their own corner, secluded from the rest of the world so nobody got hurt.”

I smiled, and my vision blurred with unfallen tears. “You should become a motivational speaker. That was very profound.”

“I probably should, but that’s not the point, either.”

Laying my head back against the couch, I let go of every molecule of air until my ribs were starting to crush in on themselves. “Part of it is that I’m scared. I don’t want to get excited again, only to be disappointed, you know? It’s really hard to wear my heart on my sleeve, especially knowing it makes me an easy target.”

“So you get hurt once in a while. What’s the big deal?”

“Apparently, you’ve never had a broken heart.”

I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes, wishing that I could fix myself. Be more. Like Finley. Parker hadn’t taken much convincing to leave with her. It wouldn’t have shocked me one bit if reports started flooding in over the internet of their rekindled relationship. If that was the case, they’d have

me to thank. If I hadn't flipped out on Parker and was looking for a way to escape where I wasn't the one to blame, I would have pounced between Finley and Parker, and let her know that he was taken.

Now, I was too late. I hadn't seen his truck in a couple of days. He'd packed up without so much as a goodbye. The let down at Camp Hottie was nothing when compared to the gut-wrenching agony of Parker *knowing* I was who I was, and still deciding to leave.

When Granny spoke, her voice was tender. "You know that's not true, Maren. I've had my share of heartaches over the years. One thing I can tell you for certain, is that there's no way to appreciate a heart that's whole without first feeling a heart that's been broken."

She had a point. Watching the ceiling fan turn overhead, I would have given my right arm to have Parker burst through the door and whisk me away. Not in a distressed damsel sort of way, but like a groom carrying his bride. One way, a person was powerless to facilitate their own rescue. Being carried across a threshold was the start of an adventure together.

But, it wasn't going to happen. I hadn't even made it through a lousy summer with Parker before we fizzled out. Marriage was a laughable thought.

A hot tear streaked down my cheek, and I didn't bother stopping it. "I don't like wasting. Not food, not effort, not my hopes and dreams... nothing. I'm afraid that's what this fling with Parker was. A big, fat waste of time."

"Why? Because it didn't work out the way you planned?"

"Basically."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Life can surprise you, even when you've worked your butt off to arrange it exactly the way you wanted. I'm sure you had some good times together, and grew as a person. Heaven knows you spent an awful lot of time making sure he was as good at kissing as the rest of the female population suspect he is."

I covered my burning face with my hands, half-laughing, half-sobbing at Granny. “He was really good at kissing. Like, there should be an award for him, he’s that incredible.”

“So, then it wasn’t a waste. You were living life. That’s worth it. Too often, we try to keep ourselves safe because we aren’t willing to pay the price for the things that make our existence exciting.”

Granny was dumping so much good advice on my lap that I had to take a moment to sort through it all. Parker and I had some trip-ups as we were coming into our own, but on the occasions where we hit our stride, it seemed like there was no limit to what we could do.

“I miss him, Granny.” A hiccup was followed by a quiet sob. “I’m afraid I really messed up, and now I won’t be able to fix it.”

Granny grinned at me. “Good thing you’re not a quitter.”

I couldn’t decide if I should laugh with her or scream into my hands. Everything I was feeling was at both extremes. “I can’t force him to come back, sit down, and listen to me pour out my apology. If I found him and persisted day in and day out, then that’d make me a stalker.”

“True, but have you even tried once? I doubt he’s changed his phone number already.”

I’d typed and re-typed heartfelt texts, then erased them, and had gone so far as to have his phone number on my screen, only to chicken out at the last moment as my thumb hovered over the call button. Something about making the first move scared me, almost more than never speaking to Parker ever again. I’d already learned once how to cope with his absence in my life. It would be a lot more difficult if I confessed my errors and he still rejected me.

“No, I haven’t called. I keep hoping that he’ll show up on my doorstep, so I can apologize in person. As weird as it might sound, seeing him in person would be easier. Then, I could read his body language before I confessed everything that’s in my heart.”



“Well, whatever you’re wanting to do, make a choice. I’m losing the will to live while I wait for you to make up your mind.”

“Alright, alright.” I chuckled. “I get it.”

The merry ring of the doorbell chimed. Neither Granny nor I moved. “Are you expecting someone?” she asked.

“I thought you were.”

I’d never been so aware of my sternum as when Parker reappeared in my life. Without fail, my heart took off, hammering with deadly force against my ribs, whenever Parker grinned or winked at me. Heck, a healthy whiff of his cologne was enough to give me heart palpitations. Ringing the doorbell was no different. I hadn’t even seen him yet, but the potential for his return sent my pulse into high gear.

“Why don’t you get it?” Granny said. “I would, but if it’s who I think it is, it’s a conversation you don’t need my help with.”

Standing, I wasn’t sure if I had the strength to walk to the door. The possibility of Parker returning to me shot adrenaline through every vein of my body.

“Get going.” Granny shooed me. “Don’t make yourself out to be a diva who can’t be bothered to answer the door.”

Nodding, I moved as swiftly as my wobbly limbs allowed. Swinging open the front door, ready for a fresh start with Parker, I came face to face with Finley.

“Is this your kitty?” She held Slo Jo in her arms, and as usual, she was purring like everything today was the best day ever.

I really wish she’d stop doing that, especially when the day was very decidedly *not* the best day ever.

“Yeah.” My insides became leaden, though I tried to be pleasant to Finley. It wasn’t her fault I was disappointed at her arrival. *Be neighborly, the Button Blossom way.* Granny’s voice weaseled its way into my thoughts. “I hope she hasn’t been giving you any trouble.”

“On the contrary. I don’t usually like cats. They’re so pretentious, you know? But this one,” Finley held Slo Jo up to her nose and spoke to her like she was holding a baby, “is too adorable. She just might change my mind! Yes, you!”

I scanned the front yard, wondering if Parker was out there, secretly doing something thoughtful without my knowledge. The cruel, cynical part of my mind reminded me that he wasn’t. I’d taken every kind thing he’d ever done and spit on it. If he’d brought me a cake, my behavior would’ve been the equivalent of shoving his face in it.

*What a perfectly good waste of cake.*

“Your top is really cute,” Finley said as she set Slo Jo on the porch. “You look good in pastels.”

I peered down at the blouse I was wearing. It was another one of my clearance rack finds, and a very noticeable dribble of ice cream dotted the front. *Classy.* “Thanks.”

We stared at each other, neither of us knowing exactly what to say. I realized it would have been polite of me to return a compliment since Finley had broken the ice with her kindness, but there was nothing I could think of to say that wouldn’t be redundant. Finley was gorgeous the way water was wet or Slo Jo was soft. We all knew it. Did anyone need to say it out loud anymore?

“I bet you’re wondering why I’m here,” Finley said, clasping her hands in front of her. “This isn’t a typical social call, since I barely know you.”

“I know a lot about you.” I wished I could recall those words, but they were already out there, and I cringed. “Sorry. That came out all wrong. I mean, I’ve read a lot about you online. Not that I’m personally obsessed with you.”

Finley batted away my comment and laughed. “I knew what you meant. At this point, I’m more surprised when someone *doesn’t* know everything about me. Not that I have a big head about it. It’s just part of the gig.”

“Right.”

I don't know why it's a relief, but I'm glad that Finley isn't as stuck-up and self-absorbed as I'd assumed her to be. Perhaps it's because it meant Parker isn't attracted to awful women. Like maybe, it means I have a chance with him, because I'm generally not always awful.

Correction—*had* a chance.

That distinction of tenses gutted me.

Knotting my fingers together, I chewed my lower lip until it was raw. "Is Parker around?"

Finley looked over her shoulder, toward the Granges' house, though there was no way she could see it from my front porch. I'd taken that fact for granted when I'd strolled out to the clothesline sans clothes, and now, I sort of wished I had a clearing in the brush so I could see. Maybe Parker's truck was in the drive.

Maybe he'd come back.

"He left."

I didn't know how many more cannonballs to the stomach I'd be able to endure, but Finley's hurt the worst. "Where'd he go?"

"He said he needed to get some things taken care of at home."

"At the Granges'?"

I knew the answer before Finley shook her head. "No. In California."

So this was it. My chances with Parker had disintegrated and blown away like dandelion fuzz in a stiff wind. "Oh. Okay. Thanks for letting me know."

"That's not why I came by."

I blinked rapidly as my eyes swam with tears. "It's not?"

"No. I needed to have a little girl talk with you."

Unexpectedly, a laugh bubbled out of me. "Girl talk? The only overlapping girl talk you and I have is Parker, and you

already told me he's packed his bags. So, unless you're going to give me lingerie advice, which I probably won't take, because I'm a firm believer in function over fashion, I'm not sure what you'd have to say."

"Lingerie? What? No." Finley shook her head, and I should have applauded her for shrugging off my weirdness. "It *is* about Parker."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear. What if she told me they'd reunited after he and I fought? I wasn't sure if I'd be able to stomach it. Already, my ice cream was threatening to come up all over Finley's adorable peep-toe shoes.

Finley took a deep breath, and shrugged her purse strap over her bony shoulder. "I think you should give him another chance."

I heard what she was saying, but it bounced off my brain like a rubber ball. "Come again?"

"She said she thinks you should give him another chance!" Granny had pushed aside the window dressing, and had her nose pressed against the glass. I guess her soap operas weren't as interesting as the real thing. I caught her staring, and a prairie dog zipping into its hole as a hawk circled overhead couldn't have been quicker than her closing the curtains.

"Parker and you... You ought to give him another chance. After I showed up, we went back to the house he's staying at, and he told me everything. What he thinks about you, how *horrible* he feels about ruining stuff between you two. It was so sweet to see how lovesick he is. And I don't say any of this lightly. Parker's always been a fun guy, but you're the first, and probably the only, to ever make him so sappy it was almost too sweet for me."

"But, he left." My mind was being pulled in a hundred directions. "If he was so torn up, why'd he leave?"

Finley's shoulders crept toward her ears. My question was valid, but she didn't have an answer. "He didn't tell me. I'm not sure what he's up to."

I needed to burn off some of my nervous energy, so I brushed past Finley, and paced the length of the porch. “So you two didn’t get back together?”

“Me and Parker?” Finley wrinkled her nose and grimaced. “Nope. I respect the guy, but in some ways, we’re *too* similar. It gets kind of boring when the person you’re dating is like looking in the mirror. I mean, where’s the fun in that?”

“That means Parker’s still single.”

Finley caught me by the elbow. “I don’t want to tell you how to run your life, but I truly hope you don’t totally dismiss Parker. He’s the kind of man who has so much to give, and wants the people around him to be happy. You’re at the top of that pyramid for him. *You’re* what he wants.”

I collapsed into a chair, and hung my head in my hands. Finley had no reason to lie, especially since by all accounts, she was convinced Parker still loved me. It was impossible not to hope, but without Parker on my steps, telling me himself, I couldn’t truly believe.

I closed my eyes, and imagined him as Santa. It wasn’t funny what he’d done to wreck the girl’s birthday party—*okay*, it sort of was. Especially the part about the pony—but the point was, as an adult, I couldn’t believe in Santa without seeing him work his magic.

Same with Parker.

“I don’t know if he truly wants me when his first inclination was to leave.” My chin wobbled, and the tears I’d been doing battle with broke through the barricade and slid down my cheeks.

“Just promise me when he’s back, you’ll hear him out.” Finley squeezed my hand in a gesture of solidarity, and for a brief moment, I wished I was as soft and feminine as her. She might think opposites attract, but I worried that I was too different from Parker. That by loving me, I was asking him to give up too much. A black sedan pulled into my driveway, and Finley waved to the driver. “That’s my car. I’ve got to head back to L.A.”

“Thanks for stopping by.” I dried my tears. “If nothing else, it was nice to meet you in person.”

“Likewise. And when you and Parker tie the knot, I want an invitation. I bet people in Button Blossom know how to throw a party.” Finley glided down my steps like she was born in heels, and thanked the driver, who’d had the good sense to get out and open the door for her. “Oh, and Maren? Parker told me all about your vision for your farm. I told him I’m in.”

“In? In what?”

Finley dazzled with her trademark, pearly-white, symmetrical smile. “I’m investing in your farm, too.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two



### PARKER

I shouldn't have been surprised that Maren was absolutely right—painting fences was the worst. It'd taken forever, and when I finally stood up, my lower back protested, and I'd probably dripped as much paint on myself as I'd actually gotten onto the picket fence. The next time Maren's fence needed to be freshened up, I'd just pay for a contractor to install a new one.

I couldn't wait for Maren to see what I'd accomplished, but checking my watch, I knew I had to get out of there fast, or I'd be caught in the middle of my final good deed. Granny had only promised me until seven in the evening. Any later than that, and Maren would start getting antsy, wanting to get back home to feed the animals prior to sunset. Well, too bad for her. I'd already taken care of the animals, too.

I wanted my service to be anonymous, if only for a few minutes. It wasn't going to cost Maren too many brain cells to figure out it was me when I appeared on her back porch, but I wanted her to know I'd done it for the right reasons. Yeah, I'd painted her fence, and would paint a hundred miles of fencing if it meant she knew how much I loved her. Only a few days away from her, and it reconfirmed that my life had already been irrevocably changed by having her in it. I couldn't go back to the way I was, and I was completely miserable without her.

It seemed my life had been building to this moment. All the good times we'd shared as kids, the growing we'd both

done on our own, and the magnetic way destiny had brought us together was nothing short of a miracle. I hadn't put much stock in the mushy love stories I'd heard from other couples until I'd experienced it myself. I'd been struck by lightning, and Maren was the bolt that sent the charge through me, blowing away any expectations I'd ever had about love and how happy I could be.

Now, I just needed the chance to say it to her in person, preferably with a hearty round of makeup kissing to really drive my point home.

I'd been racing the sun since Maren and Granny had left, and it was starting to lean toward the horizon when I heard the grumpy rumble of Maren's diesel. The truck was older than both of us, but it was a workhorse. Other than the scratches and dents, all of which were superficial, the truck was an unrelenting staple of the Kent farm. I'd memorized its sound when I first arrived in Button Blossom, so I'd know if Maren was coming or going.

Slightly stalkerish, but with the best intentions.

Maren's approaching vehicle meant I was out of time. Grabbing the painting supplies, I ran for the barn and tossed everything in the garbage outside. Without a moment to spare, I dove for a hedge of wild plums before her headlights spotlighted on me.

Landing my diaphragm on a rock knocked the wind out of me, and I choked out a laugh, wondering if all the daring things I'd been finding myself doing around the farm qualified me to do more of my own stunts. Some days, I was lucky to crash into bed in one piece.

Parting the branches, I could barely see between the tangle of foliage, and the sharp branches, but I could make out Granny and Maren climbing out of the truck. Two doors slammed shut, and while Maren got to work unloading bags of feed, Granny stood at the edge of the drive with her fists planted on her hips. She didn't say anything, but she was watching for me.

Waiting for the signal.



“Granny, you’re right in the way.” Maren’s voice was weary. Poor woman. I’d wanted to call and pour my heart out over the phone, but it wouldn’t be the same. I needed to look into her eyes, and hold her hand in mine when I apologized. It was nothing less than I owed her, and not nearly as much as she deserved, though I hoped it would be enough. “Can you scoot so I can get these bags unloaded?”

“Sure, sure,” Granny said distractedly. “Sorry, hon.”

Maren kept working. Sliding one bag out of the truck bed, slinging it over her shoulder, and dumping it in the barn. Over and over and over. “What are you looking at?”

Granny dropped her hands from her waist, and looked at Maren. “Me? Oh, I’m just enjoying the sunset.”

“The sun sets in the west, Granny. You’re staring east. If you didn’t notice, it’s already dark that way.”

Maren’s observation didn’t faze Granny. “No one ever talks about the natural beauty of shadows.”

I smothered a laugh with my hand, but I wasn’t fast enough. Maren’s head snapped over in my direction. That shut me up fast.

“Did you hear that?” Maren asked, craning her neck to see. I held deathly still, praying I wasn’t exposed prematurely.

“I’m not sure what kind of creature it was,” Granny said. What was she doing? She should have been deflecting Maren’s suspicions, not fueling them. She was supposed to be on my side. “You know what I think all those unidentifiable sounds are. The things that go bump in the night.”

“Granny, if you say Bigfoot, I swear I’m going to go inside this instant to soak in a bath and leave you to unload everything.”

“I’ll have you know, I have seen Bigfoot before. Practically ran over the thing, so I got a good look at it.”

I smothered a burst of laughter with my arm.

“Granny,” Maren said, “I’ve heard your very detailed recounting many times before, but right now, I don’t want to

debate whether or not you heard Bigfoot choking on the sweet corn its been stealing, because I know for a fact the raccoons have been after it.”

“How do you know for a fact?”

“I shined a flashlight into the yard, and saw their gleaming eyes reflecting the light,” Maren said, hoisting another bag of feed onto her shoulder.

“Bigfoots have gleaming eyes, too.”

“Gah!” Maren tossed the feed off her shoulder. “You know what? I *am* going to go take a bath. A nice, long one with so many bubbles I’ll have to dig my way out when I’m done. ‘Kay?’”

“Be my guest.” Granny gestured for the house, and Maren stormed off.

The tug on my heartstrings was real, and I wanted to run after her to wait on her hand and foot, and soothe her troubles with chocolate and foot rubs. *Soon, Parker. Wait until the time is right for maximum effect. She doesn't need help taking a bubble bath.*

I had to close that mental door quickly. Imagining Maren up to her chin in a bathtub was not where my thoughts ought to be headed. Besides, I needed to get myself cleaned up, too. Maren would undoubtedly accept me, regardless of the state I was in, but when we talked again, I wanted to be scrubbed clean and smelling better than sweat and paint.

With Maren safely inside, Granny cupped her hands around her mouth and hissed, “The coast is clear!”

I fumbled with my phone to turn on the flashlight, but it was dead after a long day of work and streaming music to keep me company. In the daylight, I knew Maren’s property like the back of my hand. I helped her build, tear down, weed, and plant almost every inch of it. The night was a different story. As I tried to find my way back to the road so I could run over to the Granges to change, I might as well have been in foreign territory.

My toe caught on a rock, and in an effort to steady myself, I swung my arms wildly. Ricocheting my shoulder off the tool shed, I bumped into a large roll of old barbed wire that was sharp enough to do some serious damage to my jeans. When I lifted my face out of the dirt, Granny's small frame cast a shadow by pale moonlight.

"I *was* right." She chuckled. "I knew I saw Bigfoot!"

I rolled to my back and sat up with what I was sure was a ridiculous grin. "I don't think I'm nearly as hairy as him."

"No, but I know for a fact he's a lumbering oaf."

"Guess I fit the description, don't I?" I climbed to my feet and bent over to grab my ball cap, dusting it off against my leg.

"I never took Bigfoot for boxer briefs, though. I kind of assumed he went commando."

"Excuse me?"

"I see you wear boxer briefs," Granny enunciated.

Instinctively, my hands found my backside, and I used my fingers to investigate the damage. It felt pretty catastrophic. "If I'm hearing you right, my underwear's hanging out, huh?"

"Yeah, it is," Granny said with a cackle. "It looks like they were almost torn clean off. Didn't you feel a breeze?"

Since she mentioned it, yes, there was some air movement back there that wasn't normal. I held the strips of fabric in place as best as I could. "I must have torn it on that barbed wire."

Any embarrassment I was feeling was dismissed by Granny. "You're not the first one to rip your clothes on barbed wire. Come on. I'll fix you up."

I took a step backward. "Actually, I was going to run home and shower so I could change anyway."

"I wouldn't change yet. Maren still needs your help unloading the truck," Granny said. "Surely, you aren't going to

make an old lady like me aggravate her sciatic nerve any more than it already is.”

She winced and sucked in a breath as she rubbed her back. Granny was laying it on thick, not that she needed to convince me.

“You don’t mind if my unmentionables are exposed, do you?” I joked. “I’d hate to make you blush.”

“Blush?” Granny laughed. “Please. Your unders are hardly the worst thing I’ve ever encountered in my lifetime. Now, I have safety pins inside that could hold together elephant skin if it’ll make you feel more modest, because you know if you don’t unload the truck, and I can’t do it...”

I sized up the mound of feed bags still in Maren’s truck. If I hurried, I could get them into the barn, race home to the Grange’s, and make it back before Maren’s fingers and toes turned to prunes in her bathwater.

“She really would come back out after a bath to unload all of this, wouldn’t she?” I asked.

“Every last one,” Granny confirmed with a curt nod. “That girl’s so stubborn she’d work herself to the bone. You’re not going to let a little ripped denim keep you from helping, are you?”

The thought of Maren in a bathrobe, with her wet hair twisted into a bun at the top of her head made me feel all sorts of things—amusement and admiration, a touch of desire, but mostly love. The kind she’d talked about. Mud, and thistles, sunshine, and abundance. She was all of it. Tough as nails, and somehow, still delicate.

*Like a bomb.*

“Granny,” I nodded toward the house, “bring me the safety pins.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three



### MAREN

“Granny, did you empty the truck?” I waited to hear the screen door slam shut, and for Granny to join me.

“Did I do what?” She dunked a chocolate chip cookie into a glass of milk and ate half of it in one bite.

“Did you empty out the feed?” I stared at the empty truck bed, wondering if I was more tired than I thought. Slo Jo was circling inside the truck bed, batting around an errant piece of hay to get her hunting practice in. “I distinctly remember grouchily stomping upstairs for a bath, while grumbling to myself that I’d get the rest of the feed bags put away later. However, when I came out, the truck bed was already empty. It looks like it’s even been swept out.”

Granny brushed a trail of crumbs off her chest. “Maybe you’re the next level of human evolution, and you’ve developed telekinetic abilities. Were you thinking about putting away the feed while you were having a soak?”

I’d been thinking about Parker. Since I’d chewed him out, and especially once Finley had paid me an unexpected visit, he’d occupied every space in my thoughts. The trill of excitement that wiggled around in my gut, and the hope Finley had reseeded had grown quickly, but without any communication from Parker, it’d dried up, crumbled, and blown away. If Parker was so smitten with me, he had an odd way of showing it. No phone calls, no texts, not even when I’d finally worked up the courage and tried calling. For all I knew,

he'd got back to California for good. Finley must have been mistaken because this didn't feel like adoration. The abandonment was a lot closer to Camp Hottie than it was to reconciliation.

"If that's the case, then I also managed to feed the animals, and lock up everyone for the night." I glanced toward the barn, where I'd left the aisle light on. Moths flitted in and out between the light and dark, and I understood their frenzy. One minute, they were ecstatic about being in the light, but being blinded by it, they flew too fast, too far, and overshot it into the dark. I'm sure there was some sort of analogy in there about Parker and me, but I didn't want to keep thinking about him. It hurt too much. "I flipped on the barn light, and everyone's already in their stalls, stuffing their faces with dinner."

"Sounds like you've got the night off." Granny finished her cookie, and chased it down with the rest of her milk.

"You aren't at all concerned about our farm being mysteriously taken care of? I even found empty cans of paint in the trash. Call me crazy, but I think someone painted the fence. Some spots are still wet."

Granny set down her glass on the bumper, and Slo Jo hurried to it, sticking her whole face in to get at the final drops of milk. "Yes. Terror strikes at the Kent farm as a mysterious assailant generously does all the chores, and goes so far as to paint the very fence neither of us could find the willpower to get around to doing. His motives? So two tired women could relax for once in their lives."

Her sarcasm was not lost on me. I had my suspicions, but I shrank when considering them. I wasn't sure I *wanted* to have revealed the master plan of our mysterious assailant, because it would mean they were close by. It would mean having a difficult talk, and unless things went as perfectly as they only went in the movies, then there was still work to be done. I would have rather this miracle happened by mutant abilities than thinking Parker might've been responsible.

Like Granny said, I was tired.

“*His* motives, huh?” I folded my arms. “It sounds like you might be an accessory to all of this.”

Suddenly, the backyard lit up with soft, warm string lights, crisscrossing the porch to the gazebo. Soft, classically romantic music filled the air—was that Frank Sinatra? I didn’t know my bygone singers like Granny thought I should. Going to the backyard to investigate, standing at the top of the steps was Parker. He’d cleaned up, and looked absolutely scrumptious in a tuxedo. He grinned and I tripped right into his dimple, like I always did.

“I sure was.” Granny smirked and patted my hand, disappearing around to the front of the house to give us privacy.

I should have walked to Parker. Said something. Done *anything*. I couldn’t. My feet were rooted in place, and the synapses in my brain had all broken. When I didn’t move, Parker stepped off the porch and slowly made his way to me. I’d never thought of a man’s walk as sexy before, but Parker made everything look good. It wasn’t in a preening, showy peacock sort of strut. He simply knew how to carry himself with confidence.

He stopped inches from me. Close enough that I was blessed with a measure of his spicy, heady scent, and his gorgeous eyes ripped right through the poise I pretended to possess. “Hello, Maren.”

“What are you doing here?”

Smirking at the tremble in my voice, he looked down, before turning his eyes up to me. Was he nervous? “In all those romance movies you’re so fond of, this is called the grand gesture.”

“I know that.” I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. “What I’m wondering is why you’re doing it. We’re not in a movie, if you haven’t noticed.”

Holding up his hands, Parker said, “Why don’t we dance while we talk. I find I’m able to better express myself when

I'm busy focusing on my footing, instead of what I'm going to say next.

I wasn't going to argue with his logic, and I was willing to try. "You should know I'm a terrible dancer. At my senior prom, I broke my date's toe when we were doing a line dance. Stomped on it so hard he had to walk graduation with crutches."

To Parker's credit, he only laughed lightly as he slipped his hand around to the small of my back, and clasped my left hand in his. He eased us into a slow rock, and I tried to relax. I had warned him of my history of foot breaking, so I knew what I was capable of.

"I wish I would have been able to take you to prom," Parker murmured. His gaze was intense, and it sent shivers down my spine. "I bet you were beautiful."

"Is that what you want from me?"

My question surprised even me. I had played this scenario out in my head a hundred times. I fantasized about Parker returning, how we'd fall into each other's arms, pour out our souls in apology, share an epic kiss, and things would be right again. Truth was, I was scared, so as we swayed back and forth, I waltzed around apologizing, afraid I might do it wrong.

He quirked his head. "Is what what I want from you?"

"Do you want this? The glamor, and parties, and late nights dressed up and dancing? For me to be more like the women you've dated before? If that's what you want, I'm willing to change. I can get my eyebrows professionally waxed, and I'll shave more often. I'll make myself presentable, so you wouldn't be ashamed of being seen with someone like me."

I stared at the lapel of his tux, trying to quell the terrible feelings my confession birthed. It wasn't that superficial changes to my appearance bothered me. It was that I wasn't sure if it'd be enough. Parker's world was so different from my own, that trying to introduce me into it would be like



ramming a square peg into a round hole. I wasn't refined and polished enough to make a seamless transition.

Hooking his finger under my chin, Parker persuaded my eyes up to his. "I'm going to stop you right there. There is nothing you need to change about yourself, because you're wonderful the way you are."

"Ornery, tough, and stubborn?"

"Yes, all of you. You're too hard on yourself. I love every facet of you. I think you're incredible, Maren, and have for a long time. I'm sorry that I took it for granted as long as I did."

I blinked. "I know I'm tired, but I think you said love."

His grin spread into a whole smile, and it made warmth bloom like a peony in spring in my chest. I'd never get tired of that smile he saved for me, like it was our secret. "When I arrived in Button Blossom, I had no intention of being lassoed into love. I was going to recuperate my bruised ego, and come back swinging when the summer was over, but life had different plans. It threw me into your path, and because of it, I've had the chance to see what true happiness is."

"I was downright cruel to you. Don't you remember what I said after the festival? I do, if you need me to jog your memory."

He laughed softly. "That won't be necessary."

"Then how can you look at me and not be angry? I betrayed your trust the second things became difficult and scary."

"I'm not pretending like we're perfect already, Maren. It takes practice to find the right balance, for any couple. You know how it's easier to carry two buckets full of water instead of being lopsided while toting one? It's like that. Sure, there's more weight, but if we're doing it together, it's better. I'm not expecting rainbows and blooming flowers all the time, for the record. I'm willing to see us through the hard times, too."

"I know." I rested my head against his chest, and counted his heartbeats. Stroking his fingers through my damp hair, another shiver trailed down my back. "I'm sorry, Parker. For

everything. I was terrified, and I thought if I sent you away before you rejected me, then I'd be safe. It was stupid of me, and unfair to you."

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have left you to fix the mess I created at the festival in the first place. I want to be a full partner with you, in every sense of the word, and if I ever make you feel like anything less, don't be afraid to tell me I'm being an idiot."

"Granny'll referee the both of us, I'm sure." Wrapping his arms around me, Parker held me close. I hadn't realized the hole I'd been missing in my life, until Parker breezed in, fell in a cowpie, and filled the gap. "I love you, Parker. Whatever you do, don't leave me again."

"I love you, too." Parker kissed the crown of my head, and squeezed tighter. "I've done some idiotic things in my life, but I hope I won't be so stupid as to do something like give up the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't want to lose your friendship or your love. Not again."

"Is it because you'd miss kissing me too much?"

Parker smirked devilishly and pushed my hair away from my face. "That is definitely one of my favorite perks. Do you realize we haven't had a single kiss in days? I'm going through withdrawals."

Parker gazed down adoringly. Our lips were only inches apart, but as eager as I was to quench my thirst for a passionate kiss, the moment needed to be savored to be appreciated.

Apparently Granny wasn't as patient. "Come on, Parker! Close the gap!"

Our heads both whipped over to the house, where Granny was leaning against her window screen, eavesdropping on our entire conversation.

"Oh, my gosh," I hissed. "*Granny!*"

Parker's eyes wandered back over to mine. "I was thinking about it."

“Good,” Granny shouted from her window. “Don’t let Maren play hard to get. She’s got it bad for you, no matter what she says.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Parker drew me closer until there wasn’t a spare inch between us.

“You’re welcome,” Granny slammed her window shut, and closed her curtains.

“That was awkward,” I said weakly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know we had an audience.”

“At least she’s rooting for us. We might have had to go somewhere else if she started throwing rotten tomatoes.”

I clutched Parker’s tux as I tipped my head back and howled with laughter. “I wouldn’t put it past her to have chucked a few tomatoes in her life.”

Tracing the buttons of his shirt with my index finger, my gaze eventually found its way to Parker’s eyes. There was a burning intensity there. His breathing was shallow and excited, and at every point of contact between us, there were bolts of lightning striking through my nervous system.

One moment, we were frozen speechless in a sort of pleasurable torture, the next, Parker was kissing me like a madman. My fingers were in his hair, his hands traced up my back, and all I could hear was my heart thundering in my ears, wishing it could last forever. What we couldn’t say with words was passed along in our embrace. It was a release of our pent up stress, the worry that we’d lost each other, and the very act knit our hearts together. Parker was still my best friend, but now, with experience, trust, and steady devotion to each other, he shifted into something so much more. Parker was my soulmate.

*This would totally make for a great corny romance movie.*

“Maren?”

Parker broke off our kiss abruptly but not drawing far. Our noses touched and our arms remained tangled around one another.

“*Hmm?*” I nuzzled against him. I needed another hit of his scent, making my head lightheaded and dizzy.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Is it going to make me happy?”

“I hope so.” He kissed my cheek, trailing it down my jawline until the whiskers of his chin were tickling my neck. I squealed and squirmed as he laughed. “What do you think about being in a documentary?”

I pulled away and met his gaze. “Me? In a film?”

“Yeah. While I was back in California, packing up my things to be shipped out here, I reached out to some of my contacts and asked them what they thought about making a documentary featuring you and your farm as you get it up and running.”

The initial shock tied my tongue in a securely held square knot, that I couldn’t undo without serious effort. “Is anyone interested?”

“Rabidly. I was afraid I was going to have to start swinging a stick at people to keep them under control.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. People love stories about the underdog, and that good people like you are still living their dreams. It gives them hope.”

I laughed softly and curled my fingers in the hair at the back of his neck as I considered his offer. “And you’d be here?”

“Every step of the way, Maren. I’m not going anywhere, I want to be your partner, your friend. I want to be your everything.”

## Epilogue



### PARKER

“Hey, Maren. Could you come here?”

I tried to keep my voice light, but there was a definite tremble to it. I had been practicing my lines for weeks, except when it came time to deliver them, the nerves came back in full force. I hadn’t been this anxious about a scene since I starred in my first play when I was eleven. I may or may not have barfed on the director’s shoes before the curtain opened.

But once I took the stage, the production went swimmingly, and I remembered everything I was supposed to say.

The problem with time, it was the real thing. No props, no stunt doubles, no retakes if I messed it up. I had one shot, and I wanted it to go off without a hitch.

“What is it, sweetie?” Maren came out of the barn, wiping the sweat off her brow with the back of her glove. “Did you need help backing up the trailer again?”

“No.” I chuckled. “Granny sat in the truck with me and made me pull forward and back until she was satisfied I had figured it out. I never knew how convoluted backing a trailer could be, but you make it look easy.”

“Of course I do.” She stole a quick kiss. “I’ve been doing it since I was twelve.”

“Well, this isn’t about the trailer. I have something to show you.” Teasing her favorite pair of leather gloves off her hands,

I wove my fingers with hers, and guided her to the backyard. Production of Maren's documentary was in full swing, and we had been working long hours under sometimes grueling conditions to get the work done. Even with hiring three additional people, and contracting out what work we couldn't get done, there was still so much to do. Yet, the progress was encouraging. We'd finished planting twenty acres of apple trees the week before, and we'd expanded Maren's hayfield to triple the size to accommodate her larger herds.

Once Maren killed the tractor, she spoke slowly and used big hand gestures. "This grass is going to grow thick and tall. *Big*. You don't need to mow it unless I ask you to, okay?"

I pulled her down into my arms, and tickled her with the stubble on my chin, in my favorite spot on her neck. She squealed and squirmed, and ended kissing long enough that Granny had to come find us.

For all the pleasure we gleaned from the work, Maren needed to be reminded once in a while to put her feet up. More than once, I'd found her asleep in random places, the oddest being draped over Becky's back. Nothing like a goat pillow in the barn for some decent shut-eye.

"Is this another surprise?" Maren asked. "You have to stop doing that. You're going to spoil me."

I snorted. "Right. Like I'd ever be able to catch up to everything you do. It's not like lavishing a gift on you once in a while is going to make you lazy."

"It's mostly because I can't keep up with you. Last week you bought me a new truck!"

I pulled her against me, our hips bumping together as we walked, and kissed her firmly on the mouth. Kissing Maren was never going to get old. "I think we already established that you make it more than even by letting me kiss you whenever I want."

Maren rolled her gorgeous eyes, and her cheeks pinkened. Turning the corner to the backyard, Maren stopped. "Is that a hammock? You put up a hammock for me?"

Guiding her over, we jogged to where two oak trees had grown exactly the right distance apart to string up a hammock. “It’s a visual cue that once in a while, you need to slow down and let yourself just enjoy everything you have out here. You’ve got fresh air, sunshine, the trees—”

“You.”

“Always, babe.” I landed another quick peck.

She nodded, keeping her lip tucked between her teeth. “You’re sure it won’t flip over?”

“This? Nah. It’s actually even a double hammock, which means we can both snuggle inside.” I wagged my eyebrows. “Wanna try it out?”

“Who am I to say no?”

Scooping her up in my arms, I set her gently in the hammock, then climbed into the opposite side, so we could lay facing each other. I quickly discovered there was no way to do it gracefully. At least it made Maren laugh.

“There,” I said as I wiggled next to her. “I’m in.”

“This is nice.”

Closing her eyes, a slight smile remained on Maren’s lips. A breeze blew through the trees and rocked the hammock as I lay next to Maren, enjoying the opportunity to just be before I asked Maren to turn her whole world upside down for me. After the summer had ended, I’d talked to the Granges about staying on as a farmhand in exchange for keeping my room at their place, but as things continued to progress with Maren, I wanted to make my residence in Button Blossom more permanent. My movie production schedule had slowed out of choice, and though I occasionally had to leave for work, the beauty of my career was that I could pick and choose my projects. Right now, Maren was priority number one.

“Want to know something funny?” Maren murmured, her eyes still closed.

“What?”

“I thought when you were bringing me back here, you were going to propose to me.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, and I wondered if Granny had spilled the beans. I’d already shown her the ring, and she’d sworn an oath of secrecy, but I knew for a fact that she’d already told all her friends that she played cards with. I’d been living on borrowed time since I cracked open the jewelry box for Granny to see.

Slo Jo, now almost full grown, but still as amiable as ever, slid down the tree she’d been snoozing in, and trotted over to us. “You want in here, too, girl?”

I reached for Slo Jo, and she sniffed at my fingertips. Leaning a little further, I tried to entice her to come closer so I could pick her up. Brushing against her fur, the hammock snapped, tipping over and dumping Maren and me on the ground before I even knew what was happening.

Maren was cushioned by my body, and I received the brunt of the fall on the unforgiving earth. “Ow.”

Laughing, Maren rolled off of me, settling into the crook of my arm. “You have a horrible track record with recreational seating arrangements.”

“I think you’re right. Maybe I should stick with chairs from now on.”

“That or stand the rest of your life.”

Reaching into my pocket with a trembling hand, the moment felt right. Everything I had imagined it being was already going out the window, and no matter what I did, I wasn’t going to be able to recover, and make myself appear dignified. I decided to go with the flow, and let my love for Maren guide me the rest of the way through the one thing I’d been wanting since I told Maren I loved her.

“I guess this is as good a time as any to ask you something, since you already are suspicious.” I held up the jewelry box and opened it, eliciting a gasp from Maren as I showed her the ring. “I had a scripted proposal, but I seem to have forgotten all my lines. That’s how terrified I am. Not because I’m scared



for the future, but I don't think I could imagine life beyond this if you said no."

Maren was giggling, breathing in sharp, hyperventilating huffs. "Really? Is this real life? You're actually proposing to me?"

"I am." Turning my head to hers, I slipped the ring on to her finger. It fit perfectly. "Maren, I know that we've already had our share of challenges, but I am a better man with you. You encourage me to set my sights higher than I have before, and have shown me how much happiness one person can have because they're loved by someone else. Remember when you were telling me what the difference between romance and love is?"

"You mean my sloppy analogy comparing it to a farm?"

"Yeah. I think I understand it now. Love encompasses it all. The thistles, the harvest, the rain, the sunsets. I want it all, if it's the life we'll be able to build together."

Maren was sniffing back tears, and when one streaked down her cheek, I wiped it away with my thumb. I hoped from now on, I'd only make her cry happy tears.

"If you'll let me, I'll cherish you for the rest of my life, and make you feel seen and loved for the beautiful, vivacious, incredible woman you are. Would you do me the supreme honor of being my wife?"

Maren held out her hand, admiring the sparkle of the diamond band as it caught the sunlight. "Yes! You've made me the happiest woman alive. I love you."

"And I love you." She let me kiss her. Slowly at first, then deepening the kiss, she rolled onto my chest, and tucked her arms around me. "So is that a yes?"

"Yes, I'll marry you, but on one condition."

"Name it."

"How do you feel about getting hitched in a barn?"

## Remi



I wiggled my toes, enjoying the tickle of green grass under my bare feet. Summer in Indiana could be unforgiving, with sweltering temperatures, and humidity so thick it could be cut with a knife, but I loved the freedom it brought, especially as a kid. No more school, no being stuck inside when it rained or snowed, so much time at the pool that I had a golden swimsuit tan that lasted well into the new year.

Closing my eyes, I just listened. The town of Button Blossom swelled the weekend of our annual festival, and it seemed like the whole of the state converged to enjoy the festivities. Usually, I preferred the quiet of small town life, but once in a while, I liked having out-of-town guests, who were reminded that there are still pockets on this earth where time ticks along slower.

Over the hubbub of voices, a blues band played in the distance, their rich, sweet sound adding to the depth of the festival. A mockingbird seemed to appreciate the music, and rotated between a warbling song and a chattering shout. I could have been blindfolded and still followed my nose to the food trucks, and though I was en route to a picnic with friends, I thought about detouring to pick up an elephant ear on the way.

During the summer, calories from fried, sugared foods didn't count, especially if they were served out the side window of a brightly painted truck.

The side pocket of my overalls rustled, and I stuck my hand in. Tiny claws gripped my fingers, and I chuckled as a

young fox squirrel looked expectantly at me. “You’re hungry, too, huh, Roscoe?”

He started scaling my arm, but I stopped his progress and put him back in his makeshift nest. Placating him with a piece of popcorn I’d stashed in my other pocket, I tickled his neck, and promised him more when I sat down for my dinner.

As much as I would have loved a piping hot elephant ear, I was low on cash, so I settled for walking as close as I dared to the rows of food trucks, where a cloud of delectable scents was enough of a reward.

“Ow!” I cried and jumped back as a sharp pain shot up my leg, originating from the arch of my foot.

As I stood with one leg up, massaging away the pain, I spotted the offending item. Someone had dropped a toy firetruck in the grass. Picking it up, I turned a complete circle to see if I could spot the child it belonged to. All I could see were happy children, whose faces were smeared with chocolate or dotted powdered sugar as they indulged their sweet tooth.

Then I heard it—the quiet snuffle of a boy who’d lost something dear to him. Knelt down next to him was who I assumed was his father. They had the same wavy textured hair, and though the boy’s profile was still softened by lingering baby chub, someday, he was going to grow up and be every bit as handsome as his daddy.

“I dropped it back there.” The shuddering breath from the boy made me want to rush to him with a hug, reassuring him that there was no reason to cry. “It must have fallen out of my backpack.”

“We already looked,” said his dad. “I didn’t see it, and neither did you. We can’t stay here all day. I need to get back to the office. A client is needing an important meeting. Remember I told you that?”

The boy nodded and a glistening tear streaked down his cheek. “Can I look one more time? I’ll be quick like a bunny.”

His father stood up to his full height. I was nothing to bat an eye at, towering over most women at five-foot-ten, but the boy's father had several inches over me.

"How about I get you a treat?" He rested a hand on his son's shoulder, shaking him gently. "Your choice."

I hadn't misplaced any of my favorite things when I was the boy's age, because I hardly had any toys to my name, but I knew by the way his lip quivered, and the way his eyes swam that he was doing his best to hold in his sadness.

That was all too familiar.

"Can I have cotton candy?" the boy asked.

The frown that seemed permanently etched on his father's mouth deepened. It was an irrelevant thought that, unlike other people, the man wore his grumpiness well. *Geeze. Why don't you try flexing your muscles by smiling once in a while, buddy?* "How about we look for something healthier?"

Healthier? We were on main street in Button Blossom during a festival, and this guy was looking for whole grains and salads?

The Button Blossom Festival had gained traction over the past several years, especially when folks from larger cities caught wind of it. They came out in droves, spending their money on local merchants and farmers, which we were all very grateful for. Most were kind and respectful of our town, but with every good bunch of grapes, there were inevitably a few raisins.

I'd found a dry, shriveled, grumpy raisin if there ever was one.

I should have been able to mind my own business. Other than handing back the child's toy, maybe I'd ruffle his hair and offer him a smile of approval he looked like he needed, they weren't my concern. Except, I had a fatal flaw. I wanted to rescue everyone and everything.

Hence the baby squirrel in my pocket.

“Hey, buddy,” I strolled over to the man and his son. I couldn’t help but look into the father’s dark eyes. How fitting that they were nearly as black as his soul. *Yikes, Remi. Harsh much? You don’t even know the guy.* “I couldn’t help but overhear that you lost something.”

The boy wiped his wrist under his nose, and nodded. “A firetruck. I didn’t zip up my backpack and it fell out.”

“It happens.” I shrugged. “But, it’s your lucky day. I happened to step on it.”

The boy’s eyes widened, and another urge to hug him swelled in my chest. I kept my hands to myself, because as quirky as I was, I knew I couldn’t just go around hugging everyone to make them feel better. Not everyone appreciated random hugs.

“Did you break it?” he asked.

“Nope. Also lucky for you, I’m barefoot,” I held up my right foot and wiggled my toes, “and I felt it long before I put enough weight on it to crush it.”

Handing back the firetruck, he beamed at me. “Thanks.”

His smile mended a piece of my heart, like it’d never been fractured in the first place. It’d happened a long time ago, but the ache was still there. Children were particularly good at lifting my spirits.

Kids sometimes get a bad wrap. They can be irritable, obnoxious, greedy, and downright ridiculous when they don’t get their way—but what adult isn’t worse than a child throwing a tantrum when they lose their cool, only on a bigger scale? As far as I was concerned, children were the sweetest, most innocent thing to grace humanity.

Roscoe was a close, *close* second.

“What happened to your shoes?” the boy’s father asked. I almost laughed at the way his lip curled in disgust. Apparently, he’d never seen a dirty foot before.

I shrugged. “Left my flip flops in the car.”

“And you didn’t think to put them on before you got out?”

Another shrug, but I accompanied it with a charming smile. I wasn't going to let this grump steal my sunshine. "It's summer. Life's too short to have my feet crammed in sweaty shoes when I could feel the grass underfoot."

I glanced at the man's feet to make my point. Shiny cordovan dress shoes that had been recently polished, and probably cost more than I'd spent on my car. Predictable. With a white polo, and navy slacks, the guy looked like he'd be more comfortable putting around on the golf course with business clients than hanging out at a festival, looking for the nearest protein shake.

"Do you like going barefoot in your yard?" I asked the boy.

He made a face. "I live in an apartment. We don't have a yard, but I like the rug under my bed. It's long and feels like grass."

"That's cool. All I have under my bed is..." I thought about the dirty brown carpet that hadn't been replaced since my dinky apartment had been built in the eighties. "I like grass better."

Roscoe must have smelled the delicious food in close proximity from my pocket. Poking his head out, he started crawling down my leg, his bushy tail whipping back and forth. Before I could catch him, Roscoe darted to the ground, up the nearest picnic table, commandeered an unsupervised hunk of corndog, and ran up the man's leg.

Pandemonium ensued.

It was useless to try and catch Roscoe when he didn't want to be caught, but that didn't stop the man from failing. Around and around Roscoe went, using the man's chest, shoulders, and back as a playground. The whole time his son laughed hysterically at his father's panic, and if I couldn't cure cancer or solve world hunger, at least I could bring some joy through laughter.

Or rather, my rescue squirrel could.

“Get your rat off me!” He was near hyperventilating when Roscoe landed in his hair.

“Roscoe! Come down from there.” I reached for the man, and dang it if his hair weren’t the softest, thickest locks I’d ever had the pleasure of running my hands through. I wouldn’t be surprised if Roscoe would want to settle down and nest in it. Finding a peanut in my pocket, I held it out from Roscoe. “Hold still, and I’ll get him back.”

Roscoe nibbled on his pirated corndog, dropping crumbs in the man’s hair. I would have apologized, but I didn’t suppose the guy would have accept it right then. “Is he rabid?”

“Hardly.” I waved the peanut, and Roscoe got the hint. Leaping from the man’s head to my hand, he greedily snatched the peanut. Tucking him back into my pocket, I offered a bright smile. “Sorry about that. Guess I underestimated how hungry Roscoe is. It is dinnertime.”

The boy’s laughter continued. “I’ve never heard my dad scream like that.”

Pulling his son back, and his eyes were cold as he pinned me with his glare. “Why do you have a rat in your pocket?”

“Roscoe’s a fox squirrel, actually. He fell out of his nest when he was a baby, and I’m raising him until he’s ready to live on his own again.”

Mr. Hot Grumpy Dad huffed, and I was tempted to loose Roscoe on him again. Any guy who was intimidated by an adorable animal that weighed less than a fraction of a pound wasn’t as tough as he supposed himself. “Don’t they have rescues for wild animals?”

I held out my hands with a flourish, and bowed. “You’re looking at her. Remi Bravo, Button Blossom’s very own animal rescuer, at your service.”

“I’m Asher,” said the boy, “and this is my dad, Wilberforce.”

A name like that deserved an eyebrow raise. A big one. “Your name is Wilberforce?”

“About as believable as Remi Bravo,” he grumbled.

I laughed. Pushing Wilberforce’s buttons was too much fun. “Except I’m as amazing as my name sounds. I can’t say I’ve ever met any Wilberforces, so my opinion of the name is going to be based one hundred percent on you. No pressure.”

Asher’s dad clenched his jaw, and I could see the muscle’s tick. “People call me Wil.”

“Well, Wil and Asher. Welcome to Button Blossom. Roscoe apologizes for his poor manners, but he’s hungry, and he’s just a baby, after all.”

“I’m hungry too.” Asher tugged on his father’s hand. “Dad, can I have cotton candy? *Please?*”

My heart swelled another size larger for Asher. Another feeling I knew well, too. Of wanting, hoping to be indulged. As a kid, I had cotton candy exactly once, and though I wasn’t a proponent of eating it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, there was something magical about the way something so sweet and light melted on the tongue. Everyone should eat cotton candy at least once in a while.

“Why don’t we try the wraps over there? They have a turkey and tomato one that looks good,” Wil said.

I couldn’t have stopped my eyeroll if someone promised me a million dollars. “Oh, come on Wil. It’s summer. We’re at a festival. Summer and festivals are for cotton candy and snow cones.”

“Summer’s for mosquitoes and sunburns,” Wil countered.

I laughed again, and shook my head. Fishing out the crumpled five dollar bill I had stashed under Roscoe’s food, I strutted to the cotton candy vendor, bought the largest bag I could, and knelt down to Asher’s eye level, so I could soak in the joy that radiated from him when I handed it over.

“Here you go, buddy,” I said. “Be sure to share with your dad. He could use a reminder of the simple pleasures in life.”

I looked up at Wil to make a point, but I stopped myself. His son’s happiness changed Wil’s countenance, too. He’d



softened, and there was a crack in his angry veneer. That was all I'd been hoping to accomplish when I stuck my nose where it didn't belong. Standing up, I brushed off my knees, and turned my attention to Wil. Putting his hands on his waist, the smallest smile made the corners of his lips twitch.

*Success.*

Twiddling my fingers as I backed away, I grinned when Asher dug into the cotton candy, before offering his dad a sticky chunk. "Enjoy your time in Button Blossom, you two, and remember, summer only comes once a year, so live it up."

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## About the Author



Rachael Elikier is an avid reader and author with eclectic tastes, a lifelong horse fanatic, and self-taught home renovator—a skill that has been tested with every home she's ever owned. She forces herself to nurture her love/hate relationship with running and often brings her cowardly dog along. Not that the dog would help since she'd leave Rachael for dead should anything ever happen. Married to her very own absentminded rocket scientist, together they have more kids than most people can comprehend. When she's not writing, she enjoys mucking stalls, riding her geriatric horse, milking their ornery Jersey cow, and otherwise living her best life as an introvert.

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