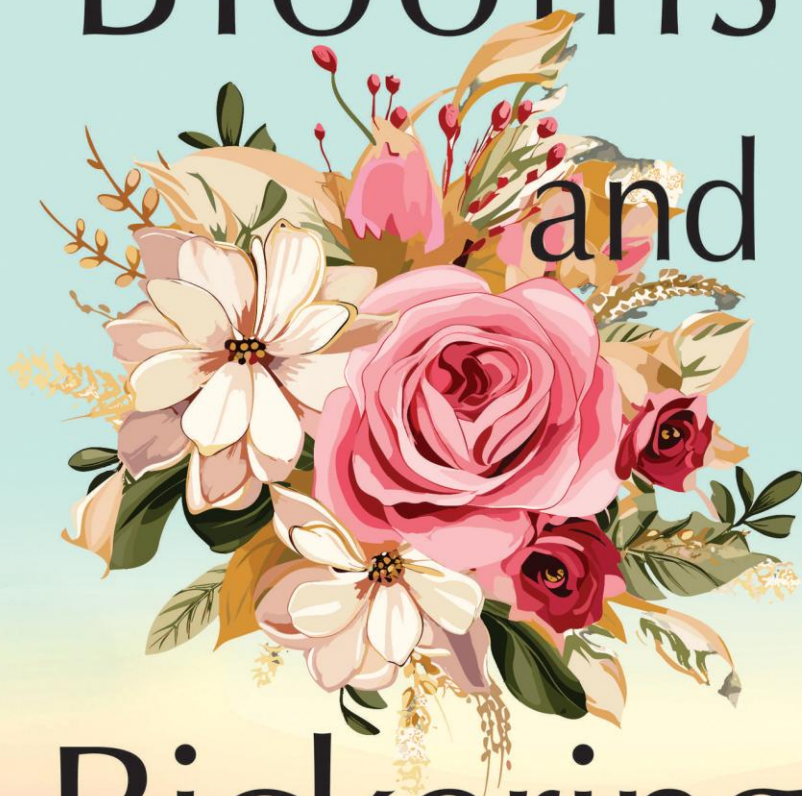


Blooms and



Bickering

MORGAN PARK



CHAPTER 1

KATE

The wind drifts through the elm and maple trees beyond the hill. Water trickles along the barren river rock in the stream behind the house. Taking a sip of cool white wine, I rock in my chair, soaking in the peace that's rare to find. I close my eyes and, for a moment, everything fades—it's just me, the breeze, and the quiet.

Until it's shattered.

"Dammit! What the hell—" A shriek echoes through the open air, past the little dirt road separating our houses, and onto the front porch where I sit.

"Oh, for Pete's sake..." I groan, setting my glass down too fast. Wine splashes over the rim, staining my freshly refinished birch table.

Perfect.

Moose whinnies from the side, his long neck curled around just enough so those chocolate eyes meet mine. He huffs, stomps, and flicks his ear backwards—a silent reminder that I still owe him our afternoon walk.

I sigh even louder this time as I stand from my chair and tighten the buckles on my denim overalls. It's become a habit—tightening something, clenching another—rather than releasing the fury of my unfiltered mouth and resting bitch face on an unsuspecting soul. I scrape the extra muck off my boots before stepping to the edge of the deck. One hand shades my eyes as I squint toward the source of all the racket that just won't leave me be.

And there she is: copper-blond hair glinting like a warning sign in the afternoon sun.

Margot Reed. It's always Margot freaking Reed. Why she can't just pick up her chaotic life and move somewhere else, I'll never know.

Serenity Springs lived up to its name, back before she showed up. Quiet rivers bank every property, only separated by the rolling hills in all directions, refusing to be calmed by man's expectations. My land was especially quiet, tucked into hundreds of acres of untouched beauty. My little slice of heaven.

When I retired early—sure had enough of working 12-hour days at the floral shop and then racing barrels every weekend—I bought this house not only for the picturesque white wrap-around deck and four stall barn sitting just beyond acres of pristine fencing, but because I had 42 acres to call my own and miles of open land before me.

Then Margot Reed bought the vacant lot across the dirt road, ruining my market value with every ridiculous and precariously placed contraption she continues to pull out of a toddler's dreams. She's a glitter-soaked fever dream that's lost its damn mind. Her unorganized personality alone ruined my tranquil retirement.

It's constant. Never ends. Like a fly that just won't quit buzzing around your biscuit.

Wild greenery snakes around her house—though “wild” is putting it kindly—which frankly, shouldn't be possible, given that she built the house from the ground up less than 5 years ago. How her plants survive, let alone thrive, is beyond me. Pipes snake across the side of her ranch, and somehow, the plants are thriving like they know they're defying every rule of nature and want to show off about it.

It's a fire hazard waiting to happen.

And her flowers? Don't get me started. I was a florist for thirty years; I know a thing or two about pairing flowers. There should be a plan, some harmony between color and size, but Margot plants like a blind woman who just spun in a tight circle fifteen times and then dropped on her head with a trowel in hand.

Behind her house, but unfortunately still within my view, there are dozens of galvanized steel planter beds, none of them placed with any rhyme or reason. Some have bright flowers, overgrown and chaotically drooping over the sides, while others reach six feet in the air with makeshift frames holding each delicate pot of cilantro and romaine. Morning glories crawling up rusted metal frames, reaching for sunlight in a tangle that defies any logic.

It's ridiculous. And unnecessary. It's so *unorderly*—practically a hot mess on stilts. An unadulterated chaos, and it grates on my last, fraying nerve.

"Shit!" Her voice rings out like a shotgun blast, snapping my shoulders tight with tension.

"So much for some peace," I grumble, shaking my head. Easing back into the rocker, I hold my breath at the way my sciatica always protests. "Lord have mercy!" Reaching around my waist, I rub my lower hip while picking my glass back up with the other hand.

If there's one thing I wish my momma didn't give me, it's this early onset, constant, aching arthritis.

Moose snorts beside me, nose aimed right at the scene across the way like he knows somethings coming. I sip the rest of my drink, cool and sharp going down, and sure enough—here she comes.

It looks like Miss Rainbow Bright isn't always sunshine and glitter all the time. She's furious—her lime-green shirt disheveled and showing off her bronze skin, jeans smeared with mud, and her strawberry-blond hair spilling from a clip. She's muttering to herself, arms waving, face twisted in frustration. She's coming down fast, and I swear she's either gonna roll the whole way or at least slide halfway there. And honestly? Wouldn't bother me one bit. Might even do her some good. Maybe a smack to the ass is exactly what this excruciatingly annoying woman needs.

But as I take another sip of wine, content with watching her flounder, fate intervenes. One of her rainbow-colored clogs slips off, and she teeters, arms flailing. Before I can blink, she's flat on her back in the dirt, one leg flung in the air.

My laugh catches in my throat, and I roll my lips inward to prevent it from tumbling out and over to her ears. This is a situation that I'd much rather observe than be involved in. Preferably with popcorn, but I guess the wine will have to do.

I take another long sip, feeling that familiar flicker of happiness blooming in my chest because maybe karma does work sometimes. But Moose, that meddling beast, turns to me and fixes those deep, pleading eyes on me. His body is still as a statue, waiting for me to do the "right" thing. The sun glints off his hair, absorbing the rays into his scattered brown paint splotches.

"Moose, no." I scowl at him, folding my arms.

He doesn't move, just tilts his head in that way he knows makes me cave.

"Don't you give me attitude today," I say, sighing. "I'm not goin' over there."

He whinnies—sass in every ounce—pointing his adorable speckled nose towards Margot's house again. She's still sitting in a pile of rock and dirt in her driveway, her head folded over her knees. I was sure by now she'd stand back up, dusting off her dirty jeans, and continuing down the road where she's most likely going to walk a mile into town towards the hardware shop for something else to buy to get under my skin.

But no. She's just sitting there.

Moose's snort catches me off guard. He spins in a circle and slowly ambles towards the front of the deck, bringing himself eye to eye with me.

"No," I repeat.

And right on cue, he pulls out that look. Ears tilted in, eyes all soft and wistful, like he's a gangly baby again instead of the fifteen-year-old hay-vacuum he is now. When he gives me that look, he knows I can't say no. Not to an extra carrot. Not to him sneaking a bonus alfalfa cube from the canvas bag while I grab his grain. Not to another five minutes on our strolls when I could heel over from exhaustion and chub rub.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." I stand abruptly, hands on my hips, stifling a groan from the movement.

The little jerk looks like he's smiling as he trots back over to his favorite shaded maple to the right.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this." I huff, snatching my sunhat off the chair arm. I clomp down the steps, meandering across the front lawn like a woman sent to death row.

He snorts in response.

"You're ridiculous." I shake my head, releasing a breath as I step onto the dirt road and up that steep old curve towards her house. "I'm going to regret this. I know I am."

Margot looks up at the sound of the gravel crunching beneath my boots, her eyes red and puffy. With tears swirling in her expression and the sunlight raining down on us, the hazel in her eyes fractures into so many colors—a sunburst of hazelnut browns, verdant greens, and sparkling gold—that I've forgotten why I'm standing before her at all.

"Kate?"

Yupp. That voice is enough to smack me awake. It's always so high, light, and fluffy that a scowl immediately lands on my face.

"I came over to see if you were alright," I grumble, more out of Southern obligation than any real concern.

She's not bleeding from what I can see. She's alive, and that's enough. I did my due diligence. That oughta count. I checked the box. Time to go, and with a clear conscience. With that thought lodged in the forefront of my mind, I turn on my heel to leave.

"I could use a hand up," she says quietly, a snuffle hidden just beneath. *Of course you would.*

My shoulders sag like wet laundry, sympathy tainting my softcore when I meet her glossy eyes. Reluctantly, I turn back to her, reaching out a tentative calloused hand.

The second her fingers touch mine, I nearly pull away—they're soft. Too soft for anyone rooting around in the dirt all day. They're not calloused and rough like mine from years of using shovels in the barn and gripping worn leather reins. They feel like rose petals.

"Thank you," she whispers, brushing away the tears she didn't want me to see. "I slipped."

"Obviously." The word slips out before I can stop it, harsher than I intended. "Are you okay?" I ask again, though my heart's not in it.

"No worse for wear." Her voice is thick, molasses-sweet. "Thank you," she adds softly.

I glance up, ready to say something, anything, to get out of this moment, but her eyes catch the sunlight, turning them into a kaleidoscope of browns and greens, flecked with gold. My breath hitches for just a second. Another second passes as I look at her perfect wrinkle-free face.

She smiles, that infuriatingly bubbly way that only Margot Reed can accomplish no matter the weather.

That's my cue.

Turning on my heels once again, determined to get away from this woman, my head shakes because that one single look gets beneath my skin and spreads roots.

"Can you try to keep it down over here?" I snap, already half-gone, desperate to escape. "You're lucky our only neighbor is the cemetery on the hill, who obviously don't mind the racket."

She scoffs, standing up straighter. "And here I was thinking we actually got along for five minutes."

"Gettin' along?" I whirl around, eyes narrowing. "I moved this far out of town for the peace, the quiet. Not to *get along* with anyone. If you wanted a knittin' club, you probably shoulda rented one of those apartments on main street."

She crosses her arms, all wrapped up in whatever wild mess she's wearing, trying to fight that grin. Failing at it, too. "Thank you for the assistance."

Rolling my eyes, I storm back towards my house, boots stomping like I have something to prove.

"Have a *great day*, Kate," she hollers, her smug smile felt on the back of my head.

I don't say a word. Not to her.

"*Have a great day*," I mock beneath my breath. "All sunshine and freakin' roses all the damn time." Only when I reach the deck and bring my now warm glass back to my lips, do I realize my head still shakes vigorously. "So damn chipper. So loud. So, so, so," I sputter, "annoyin'. Can't she just relax once in a while? Put down the damn power tools and just, just, just *be quiet*. She's as busy as a one-armed paper hanger, and twice as loud."

Moose comes trotting around the side of the house, looking mighty pleased with himself. He's probably spent the morning sunbathing without a care in the world. He ambles right up to the deck, stretching his long neck out until his satin nose brushes the loose fabric of my overalls.

I palm his snout—his whiskers tickle my hand and the puff of his breath is warm against my wrist. I stroke his multicolored mane. "Lord knows I tried. I really tried this time."

He neighs in response, calling my bluff.

And right on cue, like the universe just couldn't help itself, another hammer starts ringing out across the hills.

My gaze cuts straight to Margot Reed's ranch house, and I'll be damned if I can't almost make out a smug little grin on her face, rosy cheeks and all, bold as brass from clear across the way.

"Margot damn Reed," I mutter, flopping back into my creaky rocking chair with the grace of a sack of potatoes. I wince in pain, my sciatica tensing every muscle once again. And Moose? He snorts as if laughing, as if karma decided to pinch me in the ass, too.

CHAPTER 2

MARGOT

I storm into Bolts and Bonsai, barely keeping it together as I collapse onto a wobbly wooden stool in front of Jess. My curls fall out of my bandana and into my face, hiding my frustration as I bury it in the counter.

“Why is she so infuriating?”

Jess’s laugh is low and rough, her smile teasing as she leans over the counter. “Kate again?”

“She’s so—so—” I sputter, searching for the right words, though I know there are a thousand more colorful adjectives I could use.

More colorful, yes. Nicer words? Not so much.

“So...beautiful?” Jess bats her lashes dramatically, propping her chin in her large hands.

“Oh, please.” I scoff, lifting my head just enough to catch her rolling up the sleeves of her plaid flannel. “She’s so crude and rude, and frankly, socially unacceptable.”

Jess laughs. “Tell me how you really feel, why don’t yah.” She pulls the kettle from behind the register and pours steaming water into two white mugs, the tea bag string already hanging over the side. “Just because you’re neighbors doesn’t mean you have to be friends.”

“I *don’t* want to be Kate Willow’s friend.”

“You want everyone to like you.”

“I do not,” I say, a little too quickly.

“It’s killin’ you.”

“No it’s not.”

“Sure.”

“I *do not* want her to like me.”

Jess slides my mug toward me, smirking behind her own. "Sure, Margot. You're totally unaffected." Leaning into the counter behind her, she crosses one jean covered leg over the other, dark hair swaying from the fan behind.

I huff and pick up the tea, blowing on it as I glare at her. "I don't care if she likes me."

"Sure you don't. It's not like you're entirely pleasant with her all the time either, you know."

I gasp, utterly offended, and my wide eyes show it. "I'm always *pleasant*."

Jess just watches me, sipping her tea slowly. "Mhm. You're pleasant until she opens her mouth, then you're both off to the races. Admit it, you're not exactly warm and fuzzy."

"I am too pleasant!" I gasp, affronted.

"Mhm." She leans against the counter, clearly enjoying this too much.

Narrowing my eyes, I say tersely, "I'm pleasant until she ruins it. She's just...mean. At her age, shouldn't we be past this whole mean-girl routine? We're not wearing pink on Wednesdays or vying for the cool-kids table. Plus, her ridiculous accent and insults."

Jess's inward smirk, holding in her laugh, says it all. "She's in her fifties, Margot, not her eighties."

I mumble into my tea, "Some of us age like fine wine, some like moldy cheese."

The bell chimes and Deanna shuffles in, mud-streaked from knees to hairline, and sweat glistening on her chestnut-brown hair. Without a word, she grabs a shovel from the back wall and plunks it, along with a roll of duct tape and some nylon rope, onto the counter with a dramatic huff.

"Where's the dead body?" I tease.

Jess, never missing a beat, plays along. "Probably in the back of Charlene's truck."

I nod solemnly, impressed and only slightly concerned, because it's something that I could see happening with those two. "Need help dragging the old ball and chain to the woods?"

Deanna snorts. "I can't believe I was delusional 'nough to think I could remove that ugly dead tree stump from the front lawn." She pulls damp cash out of her pocket and slides it over to Jess. "I've already broken two shovels, and if Char complains one more time about the soil on the grass, I'm gonna bury her in the hole when I get it out."

Jess and I burst out laughing, knowing full well that even though Charlene is as small as a middle schooler, she'd probably win that fight.

I smile, eyeing the rope. "The shovel and rope I get, but the duct tape?"

Deanna responds flatly, "For her mouth."

"Oh, Deanna." I laugh before taking another sip of my cooling tea. "If I'm ever lucky enough to be with someone as long as you two have been together, I'm sure I'll want to tape their mouth closed too."

Jess swats me with the cloth from her pocket. "Five years of friendship, and I already want to do that to you."

"Hey!" My lips take the shape of an O at her audacity. "Former friends, you mean. At this rate, the roadkill beyond Johnny's farm seems like better company."

Deanna shakes her head. "How's the prep going for the Rose Festival? It's soon, right?" She scoops the items into her heavy chest.

"I've got a good feeling about this year," I say, though my gaze drifts to a new purple hydrangea swaying near the back door, wondering if it would pair well with my coral bells.

"Like you need a feeling," Jess snorts. "You've won the last five years you've competed. At this point, it's a given. We should just call it Margot's Rose Festival, 'cause no one else has a chance."

"I don't know," Deanna says, humming mischievously. "I have it on good authority that Kate is bringing in big guns this year."

"Explain." I lean in, knowing Deanna is the town gossip. She could never keep a secret if her life depended on it; her lips are as tight as an open door.

"Well," she says, swaying closer like she's about to drop a major secret, "Martha at the post office said Kate got a special delivery from Turkey. Live plants."

"What's so special about that?" Jess shrugs as she takes a handful of cashews and tosses them into her mouth. "I get plant deliveries weekly."

Deanna raises an eyebrow. "From Turkey?"

"I prefer supporting local businesses," Jess mocks.

I scoff. "I'm not worried. I've got three varieties of Floribunda and have been testing my soil every week. Last year's fungus isn't getting me again."

"Diplocarpon Rosae?" Jess scrunches her nose. "That hit Johnny's too. At least the cows were safe."

"It was Rosa Gallica," Deanna explains without prompting, her voice so low they could be discussing central intelligence for all anyone knew.

I nearly drop my mug. "No."

"Yes." She nods, a glint in her eye, apparently proud of her bombshell.

"There's no way it will grow in our conditions," I argue.

Jess looks between us, confused. "What's a Rosa Gallica?"

"How do you own a hardware and nursery shop and not know about one of the most beautiful rose species there is out there?" I sigh into my tea. "I really need to rethink this friendship."

"It's one of the first rose species to be cultivated in Europe, and they have these large heads, massive clumps of thick petals, and tons of bud clusters," Deanna explains, once again more than willing to share whatever knowledge she has. "They're absolutely gorgeous, and better than a show horse in the Kentucky Derby." Then looking at me, she wiggles her dark, bushy eyebrows. "The perfect rose to win the festival with this year."

I roll my eyes. "Over my dead body."

"Well." Deanna flips her wrist and takes a look at her battered-up watch. "I better get back to Char before she comes looking for me."

"See you next time, Deanna," Jess says with a wave.

I take another long sip of tea, feeling the warmth spread through me as the reality of Deanna's words sink in. *Rosa Gallica*? Kate has really upped her game this year.

"Well, at least I know what I'm up against," I mutter, my mind already spinning with strategies to ensure my Floribunda outshines whatever Kate's got planned.

Jess watches me with an amused smirk. "You know we can't trust everything Deanna says."

"That's a specific rose to be wrong about."

"You could always just go over there and ask Kate what she's growing," Jess drawls, one brow lifted like she already knows I won't.

I snort. "Yeah, right. She'd probably slam the door in my face or send Moose after me. Besides, where's the fun in that?"

Jess shakes her head, chuckling. "You two are like oil and water. It's kind of entertaining to watch, actually."

"Glad my misery's amusing." I roll my eyes but can't help smiling.

Jess has a way of making everything seem less serious. Typically, her brash exterior—buzzed hair, light scar kissing her temple and across her

cheekbone courtesy of a snowmobiling accident years ago, steel-toed work boots, and ever-present white tank top that's probably older than most of the succulents in her greenhouse—puts people off immediately. But beneath all that stone holding up her sharp features, she's actually quite squishy on the inside, despite her best efforts. It only took a few trips here for last minute supplies while building my house for us to become best friends.

"You know what, Jess?" The idea comes out of nowhere before I can overthink it. "I'm not going to just sit around and worry about what the Wicked Witch of the West is up to. I need some fertilizer, soil, and maybe a few new plants to fill in some gaps."

Jess quirks an eyebrow, grinning. "Stockin' up for the big throwdown?"

"Something like that." I wink. "And maybe I'll pick up a couple of those climbing roses you've been raving about."

"You don't even like fertilizer. You spew crap nonstop about *organic this* and *organic that*."

"I need something to give these newbies a kick start."

"Go get 'em, tiger." She offers a tragically accurate military mock salute. "And remember, if all else fails and for some reason you lose the festival this year, you can always come back here and hide behind the counter with the tiller and broken wind chimes."

I laugh as I take my tea and head out the door towards the nursery. "There's not enough room back there for both of our personalities." I turn towards the exit, but stop when a small dark figure bursts through it.

"Have you seen Deanna?" Charlene asks, her dark braids frizzy and sitting in a loose bun atop her graying head.

"She left five minutes ago," Jess says without missing a beat. "You fightin' or flirtin'? Can never tell."

Char scoffs so forcefully, she's thrown into a coughing fit that leaves her clinging to the doorframe. "Get married, they said. Women are easier, they said." After rolling her eyes backwards and into the next county, she turns back towards the rotted-out truck in the parking lot, much faster than anyone approaching eighty should be able to.

"Never a dull moment," I say, smiling to Jess before heading towards the nursery in the back.

The sun is high in the sky now, casting a warm glow over the town. As I walk down each row, my arms stretched wide and touching the leaves as I walk past, I can't help but feel a sense of determination.

The Rose Festival will be mine. Again.

That's what I repeat to myself even an hour later, with a car full of new plants and enough fertilizer to supply to a small farm. It takes minutes before I find myself back home, unloading my haul. As I'm lifting the last bag of fertilizer out of the trunk, I hear the unmistakable sound of hoofbeats.

Moose.

I turn to see Kate leading him down the road, her expression unreadable as always. Her hair lies in one long braid over her right shoulder. She always has on the same woven sun hat, the brim tilting downward on one spot, regardless of the fact the sun set an hour ago.

My heart skips—whether from annoyance or something else, I can't tell. If we hadn't butted heads so hard when I first built this house years ago, I think maybe we could have been friends. The first rose festival I won, ending Kate's fifteen-year streak, definitely ruined that chance though.

"Margot," she says curtly as she approaches.

"Kate," I reply coolly.

She walks up the long driveway towards me, and then we stand there for a moment, the tension between us almost tangible, almost scented. Moose snorts, seemingly impatient with our silent standoff.

"Whatcha doin' with all that?" Kate nods to the plants and fertilizer in my truck.

"Just getting ready for the festival," I say, trying to sound casual. "You know, the usual."

Kate narrows her eyes slightly, as if trying to read between the lines. "The usual, huh? Somehow, I doubt that."

I shrug. "What can I say? I like to be prepared."

A small, almost imperceptible smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. "You always seem like one who has an abundance of over-preparedness."

"And you always were one for underestimating me," I fire back, though there's less bite than I thought.

Kate looks like she wants to respond, but instead, she takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "How's the leg feelin'?"

"The leg?" I repeat, utterly confused.

"From your fall earlier?"

"Oh." I nod absentmindedly, still taken aback from Kate's change in demeanor. "Right. I'm doing alright," I answer unsurely. This politeness is strange. More than strange. Politeness with Kate Willow is downright uncomfortable. "Thank you for asking."

She smiles gently. "Good. I wouldn't want to win because my competition was hobbled."

"Don't worry, you won't."

Kate adjusts her hat, a habitual gesture for her, and looks around. "You need help with that?" She nods toward the heavy bag of fertilizer still sitting in my trunk.

I hesitate, taken aback by the offer. "Uh, sure. Thanks."

She gracefully slides off Moose's back. Together, we carry the bag to the shed. Moose follows close behind, his large, soft eyes watching our every move. As we set the bag down, I can't help but glance at Kate, wondering what's going on in her mind. This is the longest we've gone without snapping at each other in...well, ever.

Kate looks around the back yard, a clear scowl on her face even in the moonlight. Out of habit, I glance at her property below, at the solar lights haloed shine. Her backyard is lined with clear concrete paths, matching white raised planter beds with one variety of vegetable in each. Roses are planted in a line between her back porch and the riverbed. It's neat. Organized. Specific.

Everything my planting is not.

"So," I say, breaking the silence. "Rosa Gallica, huh?"

Her eyes widen and lips part slightly before she recovers. "You know about that?"

"Word gets around." I shrug before smirking. "Deanna can't keep her mouth shut about anything."

"Yeah, I reckon that's true. Everyone needs a batty woman spreading gossip in their town."

I chuckle, and chuckling in front of her is a foreign feeling. "She has that down pat."

Her eyes sparkle with mischief. "So, what are you growing this year?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She rolls her eyes. "Fine, keep your secrets. But don't think I'm going easy on you."

"Of course," I reply, my tone light but gaze intense. "You might want to pick up the heat, though. Wouldn't want you to lose to me again. It's getting to be a bit embarrassing."

There's a moment of silence, and then Kate looks down, shuffling her feet slightly. Her expression softens, and I'm still shocked I'm seeing her like this in comparison to our typical bickering.

I have another idea, one I'm sure I'll regret in the morning.

"Listen, Kate," I say nervously. "I know we've never really gotten along. But maybe we could try to be, I don't know, civil? At least for the festival? I think it's well past time to just let bygones be bygones."

She blinks rapidly as if taken aback by the suggestion. I know: Kate and I, civil? The idea seems almost laughable, but there's something in her expression that makes me pause. She's actually considering it. Maybe it's time to put the past behind us, at least for a little while. I don't know how we got off on the wrong foot five years ago, but we did, and it's about time we fixed that.

Only when Moose nuzzles into her hip, does she answer.

"Alright," she says slowly, as if she's working on her pronunciation and just learning the language today. "Civil it is. But this doesn't mean I'm gonna let you win."

I smile, a real smile this time. "I wouldn't dream of it."

CHAPTER 3

KATE

I tighten the cinch on Moose's saddle, giving his thick neck a firm pat. The tangerine sun is just beginning to break over the hillside, spilling the meadows in a marigold light that looks like warm honey.

"Thatta boy, Moose. Ready for our morning ride?"

He snorts and stamps, full of spit and vinegar like he's got somewhere important to be.

I lead him towards the porch, using the deck's height to mount his sixteen-hand-height. I'm sure there was a point when I could pull my body up the entire way myself, but I can't even remember that.

Age has a way of reminding you of your limits. At fifty-nine, retirement hit harder than I'd like to admit. I spent too many days on my knees in the dirt, neck tilted at an ungodly angle. Thanks to the generous delinquent genes of my mother who passed away years ago, the early on-set arthritis has me signed up for life. It's like a timeshare you just can't get rid of.

We ease into a trot down the familiar path, the soft thud of Moose's hooves keeping rhythm with the stillness of the morning. Long shadows stretch out over the pasture. It's quiet. Peaceful. Likely because someone—Miss Rainbow herself—isn't up yet making noise with her damn power tools.

No, Kate. You made a truce. No more fussing. No more bickering. No more taunts like two kids on a playground.

On the way back, Moose's ears perk up, his legs stomping erratically as we pass the long stretch of hill towards Margot's property. He whinnies, his body jerking forward and then back.

"Easy now, boy." I tighten my grip on the reins. "What's got you so worked up?"

Before I can react, a red fox leaps from the brush, crossing our path. Moose bolts. I cling to the reins, but my control is no match for his panic.

"Whoa, Moose!" I say, trying to keep my voice calm as I rub at his neck. "Ain't nothing but a critter. You've seen a dozen of 'em."

It's no use. Before I know it, he stops rearing just long enough to dart up Margot's front lawn. I'm left with no choice but to tighten my thighs around the saddle, praying I don't get thrown. The incline forces me backwards, and I'm certain I'll be flat on the ground in moments.

"Stop!" I yank the reins, but he's locked into the bit, head thrashin' in resistance.

His snorting grows louder as we tear up the hill. My options are to ride it out or jump—and I'm too high off the ground to risk a fall. But before I can even make a decision, I run out of time as he runs straight for Margot's meticulously tended rose garden like a wrecking ball with no brakes, everything a blur of brown and green beneath us.

"Moose, no!" I shout, yanking the reins with everything I got. But it's too late.

He charges into the garden, his massive hooves crushing the galvanized steel boxes, decimating the delicate roses underfoot. He leans backwards on his hindlegs, and I'm doing everything I can not to fall off.

My heart sinks at Margot's frantic cries. "Moose, stop! Stop!"

Those three words from that high pitched voice is all it takes for him to halt, lowering his head towards the ground. I swing one leg over and half-slide, half-fall outta that Western saddle, boots hitting the ground with a thud that rattles my joints. I grab for his reins, breath catching in my chest as I yank hard, leading him away from the wreckage like I'm dragging a stubborn child outta the candy aisle.

Sweat beads down my brow, panic tightening my chest. Moose senses my distress and finally calms, but the damage is done. Crushed petals and broken stems litter the ground. Once gorgeous rosebeds are trampled in every direction, every plant destroyed.

My eyes lift, and there she is.

Margot.

Standing right in the middle of her yard—well, what used to be her prized possession—looking like her soul just up and left her body. Her arms hang loose, dirt smudging her wrists, and her face? Pale as linen, eyes full of shock and tears she's not ready to let go.

"I'm so sorry, Margot." My voice trembles, uncharacteristically shaky. Her sunny demeanor is gone, replaced by something far more unsettling—heartbreak. "He got spooked, and I couldn't get 'im to stop."

Her eyes well with unshed tears. "Kate, my Floribunda..." Her voice trails off at the end of a sob. "They were for the festival."

She's so quiet, so broken, but I think I'd rather have the happy-go-lucky person back if this is the only alternative.

I scan the wreckage, trying to ignore the lump in my throat. "I'll help fix this." I plant my hands on my hips confidently, even though I'm dying of shame. I have no idea how to fix this. "We can replant—"

"Replant?" Margot's voice rises, cutting through my words sharp and bitter. "Do you have any idea how much time and effort went into these? You can't just replace months of work overnight!"

I flinch at the venom in her tone. "I didn't mean for this to happen. Moose got scared and—"

"And whose fault is that?" She steps closer, eyes flashing dangerously. "You and your damn horse!"

"That ain't fair. Moose is a good horse. He didn't mean to—"

"Mean to? Meaning doesn't matter when everything's ruined!" If I didn't know any better, her hazel eyes could have turned black. "This is important to me, and you've ruined it."

I bite my tongue so hard I nearly draw blood. Lord knows I wanna yell back. But the truth is, she's right. Whether Moose meant it or not, this whole thing's a disaster, and it happened on my watch. He made a mess big enough to take a village to fix, and even then, it will never be as established or beautiful. It takes years to cultivate roses like these.

My knees feel weak, legs trembling like they're ready to give out. I need to sit, to breathe, but I hold myself upright like I've got something left to prove.

"I know it was important," I say, quieter this time, feeling the ache of it in my chest.

Margot folds her arms, her posture defensive, like she's holding herself together with sheer will. "What was it? Were you afraid I was going to win again this year? You wanted to win so badly, didn't you? So much so, you got Moose to do your dirty work."

Her words hit like a slap, and I recoil. "You really think I'd do something that low? I might be cranky, but I'm not a monster."

Margot turns, her shoulders shaking with barely-contained emotion. "Just...go. There's nothing you can do now."

For some reason, I hesitate, wanting to say more, to somehow fix the situation. That, too, is a new feeling. I've been fine being bitter on my own. Moose understands it, understands me. That's why I don't need anyone else. I haven't for a very long time, but something about Margot makes me want to.

The look in her eyes tells me it's no use. *So much for joint civility.*

I take Moose's reins, slowly leading him away. When I walk past Margot, her shoulders tremble with cries she won't release into the air. I don't know what comes over me, but I want to reach out and hold her. I want to make it better, and that's not a feeling I've had in a long time.

Not since Allie.

Shaking the feeling off, I lead Moose away, feeling the weight of our rivalry settle even heavier on my shoulders than it's ever been.

By the time I make it to the bottom of the hill, his reins are quivering in my hands. Adrenaline from the slight fear I could have actually died on his back, coupled with the mortification of his handiwork, courses through my veins and makes my ears feel like they're on fire.

"I can't believe you," I hiss, breath still short. "Do you have any idea the mess you just made?"

He reaches his lock neck around and nips at a fly settling on his hindquarters.

"Outta all the people, Moose! All the people! And you go trampling through her garden? I oughta trade you in for a goat!"

He snorts, rubbing his velvet nose in the dirt before bringing his sad eyes back to mine.

Turning with enough force to pull one of my denim straps off my shoulder, I leave the big lug to consider his actions.

I'm halfway to the door when—

"Jiminy freaking crickets!" I nearly jump clean outta my skin, clutching my chest like my heart's about to bolt through my ribcage. "Charlene, what the hell?!"

She's sitting in my rocker like she owns it, legs crossed at the ankle, not a care in the world, laughing that deep, rich, rumbling laugh of hers that always sounds like it's got history behind it. She flips her long graying

braids behind her. Her face stills as she leans forward, both cocoa-colored hands in front of her.

"What'd ya get yourself into this time, Kate? You seem to make more racket than a cat stuck in a screen door. Margo was not happy when I passed her on Main Street earlier today."

I follow her gaze to Margot, who's furiously yanking up destroyed stems and tossing them over her shoulder.

"I," I say, sneering, but mostly at myself, "didn't get myself into anything. I told Charlie to get this fox population under control last year. They wiped out another farm's chickens this spring, and even attacked two of Mary's goats before headin' onto the Wilkenson's rabbit den this summer. It's gettin' out of control."

"So, you're tellin' me a fox did all that damage and has Margot riled up enough to start a third World War?"

I roll my head towards her, eyes weakly narrowed, lips pursed. "Obviously not." Pulling the hat off my head, I wipe the sweat from my forehead. "A fox jumped in front of Moose and he went wild. Plowed right through everything Margot was perfecting for the festival."

"Oh," Char gasps, leaning back in her chair. "Not the Floribunda."

"Yes." I sigh. "The Floribunda."

"She's been showing everyone at Book Club pictures of them for the past month," Char says, side-eyeing me like I just kicked a puppy.

"I'm surprised she didn't put it in the town's newsletter," I scoff, instantly feeling a pinch of shame, knowing the mess I just left up on that hill.

"She probably tried, but you know Danni won't let anyone put anything in that letta' unless she wrote it or took the picture herself," Char quips, laughing roughly. "Damn woman has had a death grip on that thing since Deanna retired."

"Dammit!" Margot's shout echoes over to us, and I grimace at the sound. "You mother f--"

"I don't think I've ever heard that little ball of sunshine swear before," Char says, her dark eyes wide and face taut. "You really done fucked up, didn't you?"

"In the worst way." I groan, slumping into the chair, silently hoping it will pull me through and into the dirt basement where I can finally wither away in peace.

"There's no way she's going to be able to get anything established enough to use in the festival."

I squeeze my eyes tight, guilt flooding through me. "I know."

"She traveled all the way to Boisey to get a couple of those varieties." Char stays quiet for a minute, not looking at me. "There's probably no chance of replacing them."

Another groan rattles out of me, and I press a hand to my forehead like maybe I can rub the mistake out. "I know."

"She probably would have won again. No offense."

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary, Charlene!" I sit up, throwing my hands into the air for emphasis. "Are you tryinna make me feel worse? It's not like it was intentional!"

Then, Char turns towards me, eyes soft. "Does she know that?"

"We are two grown women. Why would she think I did that on purpose?"

"Because you two have never gotten along," she responds plainly.

"Because she doesn't *want* to get along."

"Huh." She huffs, turning her attention to the hills in the distance, the chair creaking beneath her. "Margot doesn't have a mean bone in her body."

"You shoulda heard the meanness come out of her five minutes ago."

"As I was saying," Char continues, as if I hadn't said a thing, "Margot is what would be produced if sunshine screwed a unicorn. She's been nothing but a pleasant ball of glitter to you, and you're cold."

I gasp, mouth hanging open.

"You might want to close that before you start letting flies in." Char grins, knowing that she's the only person I'd ever let talk to me like this. Then, her expression softens. "You know she's not Allie, right?"

I scoff, unable to hold my disdain. "She's nothing like Allie."

"She's got the hair..."

"It's so much more unruly."

"She's as chipper as a landscaper's hedge trimmer," she says cautiously. When I close my eyes, hiding my eye roll, she takes a breath. "You may have moved way out here to avoid the world, my dear, but you can never outrun fate."

"Oh, please!" I rip the sunhat off my head and throw it to the white deck. "Margot Reed is not my fate, Charlene. And if you think so, Deanna has you more up in the clouds than I could've ever imagined."

"Allie hurt you." Her eyes bear holes into my soul. The way she leans comfortingly towards me has her words seeping in despite my best efforts. "Just because she left, just because she wanted other things, doesn't mean everyone does. Not everyone wants something from you, takin' their fill before leaving you behind. They won't all use you and then disappear. Not everyone will hurt you, but you won't know that unless you crack open that guarded chest of yours. Some people will stay—if you let 'em. Even if it's just another friend."

"I don't need another friend." I close my eyes once again, leaning into the chair and allowing it to rock back and forth with the breeze.

"I know you have friends." Charlene stands from her chair, pulling her long braids off her shoulder before twisting them into a bun. "But maybe you just need a person."

While I contemplate the meaning of those words, she steps off the deck and heads towards her truck. Slowly, she backs out of the dirt driveway, leaving a dust cloud in her path.

I'm left alone, Moose snorting behind me, hooves stomping into the dry earth like he's protesting right along with my conscience. The old rocker creaks beneath me as I grip the arms tighter, my fingers turning the color of pickled okra. My jaw's locked, throat tight, breath stuck somewhere halfway between cussing and crying—but neither one gets the satisfaction of coming out.

I don't need anyone else. I don't even need friends.

When Allie left, it taught me all I needed to know. The only person you can trust is yourself. Everyone else will take too much. They always do. More than you have to give, and when you stop giving? They go.

So now I don't give. Not one bit. Not anymore. I keep to my side of the dirt road, I water my own garden, and I sleep just fine without anyone snoring beside me.

If I stay in this bubble, if I settle into the hollow part in my stomach, I'll be safe. You can't miss what you never had, and you can't hurt if there's no one there to wield the weapon.

"Ugh!" Margot's shouts roll over the hills once again, and it takes everything in me to stay seated. "God freaking dammit!"

CHAPTER 4

MARGOT

“Help.” The word escapes like a gasp, frantic and barely audible into the phone.

It’s been twenty-six hours since the disaster. All I’ve managed to do is fling broken foliage across the lawn like a child throwing a fit over spilled milk. I haven’t even assessed the damage or checked if anything can be salvaged. There’s too much green mash coating the mulch for that.

“What’s wrong?” Jess’ voice is tight, probably because she’s never heard me so unhinged. Definitely not before lunch—that’s what tea and books are for.

Sweat drips down my brow as I shade my eyes from the sun. “Moose ran over my gardens. He took out almost everything.” My shoulders slump as I stand beside the house, the entire cacophony of chaos surrounding me. My head swims, chest heavy, and for the first time in the 41 years of my adult life, I want to cry like a baby. “It’s all ruined. Everything.”

“Moose?”

“Yes, Moose. Kate’s horse.”

“Ran over your gardens?”

Who names a horse Moose, anyway? Isn’t that right up there in illegal acts with naming a Saint Bernard Kitty?

My head tilts back towards the excruciatingly hot sun, exasperation surely tainting my face in flushed hues. “Yes. He got spooked, *supposedly*. He trampled all the roses, herbs, and vegetables.” I scan the remnants. “Thankfully, he didn’t hit the gardens hidden in the back or the wrap-around beds.”

“*Thankfully?*” Jess says with a laugh, frustration sharp in her words. “Thankfully, Margot? Really?”

Glass half full. Glass half full. Maybe if I tell myself that enough, I won't let the reality of this hit me.

"Can you come over?" Turning in circles to look at the destruction, I don't know what to do. "Please?"

"I'll close the shop at lunch," Jess says, hardware clinking in the background. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thank you." My voice cracks, the weight of everything breaking through.

It's almost embarrassing—until I remember it's Jess. My hard-ass, no-nonsense best friend who owns a hardware store and a nursery. She's the only one I can break in front of.

I doubt Kate Willow has ever had one of those.

"I'll be there soon," she says softly into the phone, a tone she's only ever used with me. "Just hang tight. Everything will be okay."

The line goes dead, and I don't know what to do with myself. After spinning around three times, I stop. Pulling my sweaty hands over my even more sweaty face, I hide my eyes and force the tears back that threaten to break free.

This isn't the end of the world, I tell myself. It's just a rose competition. It's just a silly little festival. It's just flowers. It's not the end of the world. Just flowers.

But then, I mutter aloud, "Fuck this."

It's more than that.

This acre is all I give myself. Every single day, day in and out, I make everyone else's landscaping dreams come true. That is what I signed up for when I started my company, Reed's Pristine Landscape Design. With a little ingenuity and fresh eyes, I can make any property, blank or not, shine into all the beauty it's always meant to become. I've hardscaped hundreds of acres, probably over a thousand houses and farms. Some industrial and public, but most private. I've created the most beautiful displays, organized and precise. And it's something I can do from my home, protecting my peace, and enjoying the sunrise with my tea from the back patio every single morning.

This land is the only location, the only opportunity, I give myself the liberty of going wild. There's no measuring tapes out when I plant here. I don't argue with the dirt when my buried edgers don't want to go any deeper. I don't precisely determine the spacing for each plant. I don't draw maps, expertly aligned to the surveyed layout, and analyze the terrain. I

don't have to make it picture-perfect. It can be crazy. It can be a mess, and it's all okay.

It's all I give myself. It's *everything*.

I make everything so perfect for everyone else. Why can't I have this little piece of human imperfection for myself? So what if dozens of feet of piping spike towards the air with greenery pouring out of each hole? Hydro vertical planting is becoming very popular these days. So what if my garden beds aren't in straight lines? It's fun to walk through them like a maze after a rainstorm. So what if the edging wraps around the front of the house in wavy patterns, and there's no symmetry to the vibrant Purple De Oro or Hibiscus planted there? Isn't there something beautiful found in chaos? It sure as hell makes my shoulders feel a little lighter.

I turn towards Kate's house down the hill. Moose grazes calmly in the paddock, as if he didn't just wreck my world. Her house, of course, is perfect. Flowers line every wall in neat, symmetrical patterns. Raised vegetable boxes stand like soldiers in perfect rows. Everything is orderly, controlled—perfect. The kind of landscape I'd design for my high-end clients.

It's beautiful. Much more beautiful than the mess I'm staring at now.

With the determination to rip every single thing left in the soil from this green Earth, I tilt on my heels back towards the house. Except, I'm stopped by a little glimpse of what sits on the porch across the way. Not a what, per-say, but a who.

Kate is sitting on her porch, mug in hand, hat tipped low. Even from this distance, I can see the amber in her eyes, catching the light. She doesn't look smug, like I thought she would. Her face is still, almost...sad.

But before I can make sense of it, Jess' ancient, rusted green Ford barrels up the driveway, kicking up a cloud of dust. The second the engine shuts off, she bursts from the door in a flurry of waving plaid and pure gumption.

"Oh, honey," she drawls in that thick accent that Kate has too, striding over to me and pulling me into her teakwood-scented chest. "We'll figure this out," she murmurs into my sweat-soaked hair. "We'll clean up, and then replant for the festi—"

I pull back. "There's no way we can reproduce an entire crop in less than a month."

"We can try and—"

I cut her off. "It takes months to ensure these roses have the perfect soil and pH level to produce those bountiful bunches. There is no possible way I will be able to compete in the festival this year."

Jess falls silent, surveying the damage. She leans on one hip, her plaid shirt billowing in the breeze, thumb tapping rhythmically against her chin. After a long pause, she sighs. Her optimism is of no use.

"Would you mind helping me clean this up?" I say, voice heavy with defeat. "I'm done for this year."

"We could clean up and then recoup the loss," she says, those deep chocolate eyes softening my heart.

"I have too much going on to fix this right now." Looking towards the bronze front door, I'm reminded of the piles of prospective clients sitting on my dining room table. "I'm withdrawing from the festival this year. Work has been too demanding to deal with this all, too."

"If you're sure." She sighs hesitantly and scratches the back of her neck. "I'm sure we could—"

"I'm sure," I state, my tone a demand and statement all at once. It feels so unfamiliar against my throat; strong, determined, fearless almost. I don't add that I've completely given up; that's obvious.

With a resigned nod, Jess grabs a yard waste bag from the shed and starts yanking up what's left of my garden.

"I can't believe Kate let this happen," she mutters after an hour of silent work.

"Well," I say, sucking in some fresh air to desperately hide how out of shape I am, "technically, it was Moose."

"Was Moose holdin' the reins?" she shoots back, defensive as any best friend would be. Mauled green leaves hang from her gloves as she stands.

"No, but I saw the fox darting across the front lawn before he rampaged up the property." I keep pulling the roots from the soil, tossing them to the side, as I hear Jess forcing the shovel into the ground.

"The excuses you make for that woman."

"I don't make any excuses for Kate."

"Please," she scoffs, chin resting on the end of the handle. "She could bring down the sun and you'd say we needed night."

I stand away from the unrecognizable basil I was just pulling from the ground. "Are we really doing this right now?"

Her daring gaze holds me frozen in place, my pink shirt open and billowing in the wind, bandana holding my unruly hair in place.

"I'm just trying to look out for my best friend. You do nothing but butter her biscuits while she cuts down your forest."

"I do *no* such thing." The shock in my voice is real, but Jess isn't fazed.

She shifts further onto one hip, folding those muscled arms across her chest. "You are a people pleaser."

"And is that a bad thing?"

"When you're trying to please the wrong people." Then she motions to the mess around us. "Obviously." She goes back to picking up the leaves scattered around her feet, avoiding my gaze.

"Just because you'd rather hide in the shop with nothing but your playboy magazines and power tools, doesn't mean everyone else is built for solitary life."

She recoils, eyes wide and dark, thin eyebrows as high as they've ever gone. "Take it back."

I grin despite myself. "Never."

"I do not hide."

"Oh, you absolutely do. You barely talk to anyone but me. You're a total hermit." I raise an eyebrow. "Charming, yes, but still. You are okay without people in your life, but I'm just not that way."

Her eyes roll two counties back. "Never understood that."

My shoulders slump at her casual demeanor, one I've missed compared to the judgy one I saw just now, and that's usually reserved for others.

"I just can't stand Kate." She scoffs at whatever thought she just had, shaking her head before kneeling back down on her stained knees to clear the muddled foliage from another mulched section.

I laugh. "Most people can't."

Looking up slowly, her eyes soften imperceptibly. "But you do."

In an instant, my mind drifts to Kate's eyes, the way they catch the light, how her gaze travels over my skin. There's always that scowl, but I hardly notice it anymore. What draws me in are the soft lines etched around her lips, the deep accent buried into the fiber of her being. I know her wrinkles are from a lifetime of smiling, and it leaves me wondering... where did that smile go? Why did it vanish?

She doesn't seem happy, at least not towards anyone except Moose. But even then, it's not real. Her smile feels like armor, an old piece of shrapnel

she's carried far too long. It doesn't suit her anymore. It's out of place, and one day it'll crumble.

Maybe I'm crazy, or a glutton for punishment, but I want to be there when it does. I want to see that mask fall into the dust, to finally glimpse what's underneath. Maybe it'll be the same person. Maybe it'll be someone even more beautiful.

When the sun dips below the horizon, Jess hauls her dirt-streaked self back into her creaking truck. As she rolls down the driveway, she tries one last time to convince me that this mess is fixable, that we can spend the week driving around to find the biggest plants and start again. It's not as easy as that when I drive four hours away towards the city for my clients.

I can't tell her I'm tired of starting over, so I just smile.

Starting over never fills this hollow ache in my chest. Even now, lying in the hammock, drenched in sweat from the sweltering day and gently swaying with the evening breeze, that void reverberates through my exhausted body.

It's always there—waiting, watching, hoping. Hoping for what, I don't know. I haven't found the cure yet. Quitting my job didn't cure it. Building a new career from scratch didn't either. Moving away from the city and buying land to develop? That didn't help. Drowning myself in gardening didn't touch it either.

Maybe nothing will. Certainly not the Rose Festival, or the simmering disappointment and raw anger that surges through Kate every time I beat her.

The crescent moon hangs high, glowing against the strip of blue still lingering over the trees. I breathe in, the cool night air washing over me. And in that moment, I realize I'm done. Truly done. I don't want to keep clinging to the Rose Festival, replanting flowers, or fixing beds. It's an endless cycle, and I'm tired. I need to focus on my clients now, anyway.



A dull throb pulses in my ears as I shift, cold sandpaper dryness brushing against my cheek. The crinkling of papers fills the air. It takes me

a second to realize the sound isn't just in my head—it's someone pounding on my front door, over and over.

I wipe the sleepy drool from my face, straightening the papers I've fallen asleep on for the third night in a row. My work is still scattered across the dining room table. With a sigh, I drag myself toward the relentless knocking.

When I pull open the heavy door, Jess's distressed face greets me. If I hadn't locked it last night, she'd probably already be standing over my unconscious body.

At the sight of me, her shoulders droop, relief evident in her dark eyes. "You had me worried shitless, Margot."

I roll my tired eyes and leave the door open as I head for the kitchen.

She doesn't waste a second before clicking the latch and shuffling out of her workboots, immediately dropping them, untied, to the marble floor. "I've called you twice."

Glancing at the cellphone sitting on the counter, I shrug. I dropped it there right after that night Moose ruined everything, and haven't picked up, looked at, or charged it since. "It must be dead."

"You don't say?" Jess steps through the entryway and right into the kitchen. "I was about to send Sheriff Jones out to check on you." She opens the refrigerator, pulling a cold bottle of water out before taking a long sip, her eyes never leaving mine. After setting the bottle on the granite countertop, she leans into it until her elbows are resting on the cold edge, her eyes bearing into me.

"How was your day?" I ask nonchalantly, turning back to my work while she continues to stare at the back of my head.

"Margot."

"I was able to finish the design for the Walden's four-acre mansion last night." Turning in a circle, I find my laptop in the middle of my invoices. "Maybe it was this morning. I'm not sure."

"Margot."

"I took on another three clients, which I think I'll be able to finish by the end of the month. Actually, I was thinking of taking a trip to the Insignie's Estate this week to create their plan in person, like I used to. It's only six hours away, and I could be back before the weekend."

"Margot." She sighs, head hanging over her shoulders.

I'm silent, standing between her and the dining room.

Looking up at me with those chocolate eyes, she rolls her lips inward before offering a sad smile. It's the type of smile that leaves an impression, a lasting stamp on your heart.

"Margie," she tries again, her voice softer. "Just talk to me."

I exhale slowly, my body sagging with the weight of exhaustion, and turn back toward the scattered papers on the table. I don't want to talk. I want to escape into the only place that makes sense to me: the world where art, science, and nature blend to transform barren spaces into something beautiful and alive. Where the vibrant hues and intricate patterns of plants speak in ways people never can.

Each plant in my designs is carefully chosen, each placement deliberate. Together, they form a sanctuary, a testament to years of learning, trial, and passion. When my fingers trace the lines of the map, I see the potential in every empty yard, the hidden beauty waiting to be uncovered. I can lose myself in the grand mosaic, where every petal, stone, and pathway tells its own story.

With every pencil stroke and note scribbled, I dive deeper into this world. The wind outside fades to a distant hum, the weight of the day dissolves. Here, in the quiet of my work, I find peace. This is my refuge, my creation, my escape. It is the balance to the chaos I allow myself outside in my own gardens.

And right now, it's all I need to keep the emptiness at bay, if only for a little while.

Instead of telling her any of that, I turn away from her, my eyes pinching close. "I really should get back to this."

Several long seconds pass before Jess moves from the counter, and I hold my breath for every moment of them. In five long strides, she's standing behind me. It takes the time for the breath to return to my lungs for her to wrap her arms around my shoulders, pulling me into her chest.

"I'm here for you." Her voice is barely a whisper against my head. "When you're ready to tell me, I'm here."

There's nothing romantic about the offer. It's not a move, not that the almighty heart-breaker Jess Montgomery doesn't have them. It's just two friends, who know each other better than their own selves, trying to be there when it matters most.

I don't speak as she presses a chaste kiss to my temple and heads for the door. She picks up her boots but doesn't put them on, just grips them

loosely in her hands. Before she leaves, she offers a small smile, unusually soft, then slips out through the glass-paneled door and disappears into the cool air.

The moment the latch clicks shut, I collapse back into the chair, staring up at the walls lined with the markers of my career. There's the Lansingburg beach house where exotic flowers touch grass and sand, the Problano project where I landscaped their 6,000-square-foot mansion with stately elegance, and the Hereen Community Center, where I designed the waterfall moonflower canopy—for free—just to see the kids' faces light up when they saw it.

Serenity Springs was supposed to be my fresh start. When I sold my sedan and bought the truck that would trek me along the highway and over rolling hills, I made a promise to myself. I'd leave behind the endless work, stop hiding in it, and start living. I wanted a life that worked for me, not one spent working myself into the ground. But as I sit here, surrounded by a workload I willingly took on, I realize I lied. When life presses in too close, I retreat into the one thing I know—work. I've always done that. It's the only place that feels safe.

No amount of exaggerated bubbly personas, quick quips, or floral-patterned blouses will fix it.

"Fuck." My head meets the table with a dull thud. "Ow." I rub my forehead, wincing at the pain, then let out a sigh as I lean into my hand, closing my eyes.

Maybe I shouldn't have moved here.

I can't run from the past. It isn't a figment of time. It's a physical thing, and it doesn't leave. Crossing county lines, building a new life, a new career—it doesn't matter. You can't escape what's ingrained in you, especially when you've lost yourself along the way, mistaking it for a clean slate.

The past never really leaves.

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