

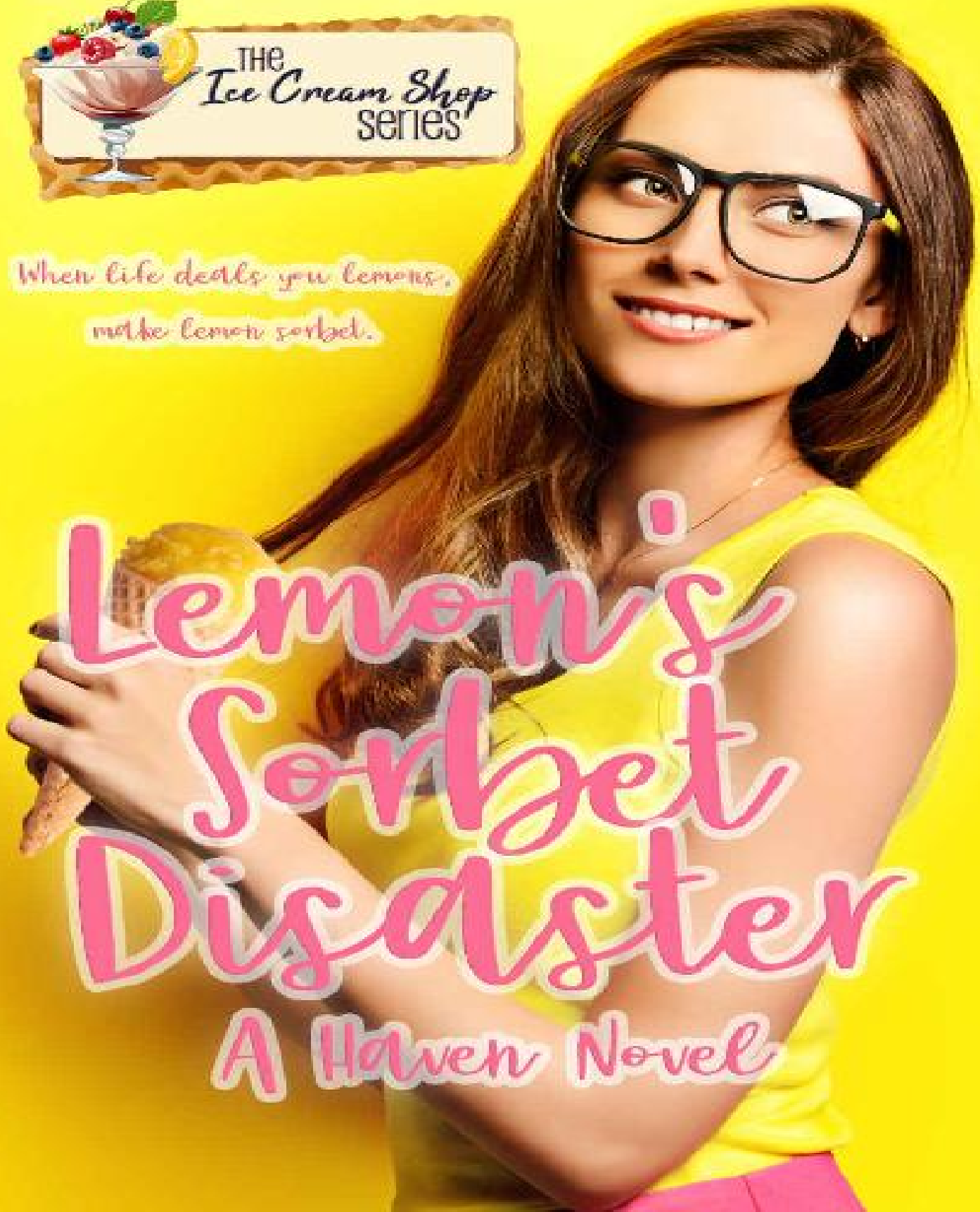
E.H. Demeter



*When life deals you lemons,
make lemon sorbet.*

Lemon's Sorbet Disaster

A Haven Novel



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Chapter One

I groaned as the bus bumped over yet another pothole, jarring me in my seat and causing me to grit my teeth for the four hundred and thirty-second time. Blowing out a breath, I tapped in the code on my phone, only to groan once more as I realized I had no signal. Dropping the phone into my bag in disgust, I looked out the window, crossing my arms over my chest. I felt like I had been on this bus forever, but at least it had air conditioning. I did *not* want to think about what it would smell like in here without it.

Turning away from the landscape speeding past, I reached into my purse for my phone and headphones, plugging them in and pulling up a playlist. About halfway through my playlist, I realized I'd regained signal and I had a text from my mother.

Mom: How far are you? I'm glad you're doing this.

I bypassed the text message, closing my eyes and falling back into my playlist. I was glad, in a way, that she was proud of me. But truth be told, it would have been so much easier to just have settled all of this at probate.

I hadn't been that close to my great uncle. In fact, I only had a handful of memories of him scattered throughout my life. We had written letters though.

When I was in elementary school, I'd had an assignment to write to a pen pal for a month. Being painfully shy, the thought of writing to a stranger had left me terrified. I had begged my mother to be my pen pal, but she'd sworn the teacher would recognize her handwriting. That's when she had suggested her Uncle Beauregard.

Being that I had only met him a few times before, I was still terrified. But I wrote to him. And he answered back. It was only supposed to be for a month, but we had kept up correspondence until he'd died. Though I had been slacking in my responses to him of late. Things had been insanely busy at work, and I'd been finding less and less time to answer him. I hadn't even known he was sick. I supposed he hadn't wanted to burden me with it, always keeping his letters light and positive.

Still, when the lawyer had called us in for the reading of the will, I was shocked when he announced that Uncle Beau had left property to me. I'd wanted to sell it, sight unseen. Just sell it and move on with my life. Then my mother had brought up the letters, and all the times Beau had mentioned me coming to visit him in his small, country town. Something I had never quite found the time to do as an adult.

She used that against me. Guiltting me hard all while telling me that having the property could be beneficial to me. Depending on the condition it was in, I could always rent it out. And living in D.C. wasn't cheap; a secondary source of income *would* be nice to have.

But the worst part was, in order to gain the property, Beau had requested that I spend a year in his town. A year in the country wasn't my idea of a fun vacation, and yet here I was, on a bus to Haven, South Carolina. I didn't hate the name of it, but I wasn't entirely sure what I was about to walk into.

At least I didn't have to worry about getting a whole year off work. Being my own boss had its perks. I worked from home as a freelance editor and web designer. As long as I could connect to the internet, I was pretty much free to work wherever I wanted. Which was a huge burden off my shoulders, and it meant I wouldn't have to look for a job while in town.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head back and let myself zone out to the music. I'd wanted to fly, but my mother had insisted that taking a bus was the best way to see the scenery. I didn't want to argue against her fear of flying, so I'd agreed. I suppose I could have lied and flown anyway, but that thought had left a bad taste in my mouth. So, I'd hopped onto my computer, bought a bus ticket, and then set to packing. Not having been to South Carolina since I was a child, I hadn't been sure *what* to bring. So, I'd played it safe and packed a little bit of everything. Though I was doubting I would need the heavy jacket as it was currently summer, and I didn't think it would get too cold in the wintertime. Still, it was responsible to be prepared.

My phone buzzed against my thigh, and I cracked an eye open to see a couple more text messages flash on the screen.

Dad: Answer your mother.

Dad: She's driving me crazy.

With a smirk, I lifted my phone, opening the text message to respond. Before I could begin to type, another message popped up that had me laughing.

Dad: She says if you don't answer soon, she'll make me track your phone. Don't make me do it kiddo

Shaking my head, I quickly typed up a response and sent it to my mom, then typed three letters to my dad: **ILY**

Where was I? Pulling up my GPS, I typed in the name of the town and waited. 36 minutes remaining. That wasn't too bad. I tried to convince myself that it would go by fast. That before I knew it, I would be off this godforsaken bus and settling into the local Bed and Breakfast.

I had been a little shocked that the only offerings were the Bed and Breakfast or a motel by the interstate. I guess living in a metropolis had spoiled me in more than one respect. Shifting in my seat, I blew out a breath, rolling my shoulders I groaned. Only three minutes had passed.

This was ridiculous. The drive wasn't going to go any faster while I stared at the clock. Instead, I pulled up a streaming service, and settled on a show to watch.

With ten minutes left in my episode, the bus began to slow, rumbling as it turned into the depot. I chuckled, switching everything off and wishing I'd kissed my data plan goodbye earlier in the trip.

Not surprisingly, there weren't that many people on the bus, so it didn't take long to disembark. I winced as tingles shot up and down my legs, and I hoped the Red Bird Inn was close enough to walk to. After sitting for so long, my backside was good and numb.

I gasped audibly as my glasses fogged up completely the moment I stepped off the bus. It was like I'd been slapped with a wet blanket. Cursing the humid air, I moved out of the way, trying my best to clear my glasses and ignoring the chuckles of those around me.

“City gal,” I heard someone mutter, though I was determined not to let it bother me. I *was* a ‘city gal.’ I didn’t have a reason to deny it.

Moving to the side of the bus, I cleared my throat to get the attention of the attendant pulling the luggage from the bus.

“Um, excuse me. Lemon Wilder, two bags?” I rose on my tip toes, peering over the broad expanse of his shoulders as I tried to identify my bags.

“Wilder?” he cried, whirling around on me so fast we all but collided. A nervous laugh broke past my lips as my hand flew to my chest.

“Y-Yes. Wilder, Lemon Wilder. I have two bags, please.” I chewed my lower lip as the man turned his back on me, sweat already discoloring the dark blue shirt he wore.

“Here ya go.” He grunted as he lifted my bags, dropping them down in front of me. “You gonna be able to heft those bags, darlin’?”

I smiled as his eyes rolled over me, taking in my slight frame. “Oh, don’t worry.” I leaned forward, grabbing the handles and pulling them up. “They roll.” I winked.

His deep chuckle had my smile widening as I bid him farewell. After a quick stop by the office, I determined that, while it would be a bit of a hike, I could feasibly walk to the bed and breakfast. It would most likely be my exercise for the week, but after sitting for so long, I felt the walk would do me good.

I wasn’t anticipating the heat and the humidity, however. After about ten minutes, I was sweating like a sinner in church, feeling like I was carrying the sun on the back of my shoulders. I would have sold my soul to the Devil for a cold glass of water. With lemon.

Licking my chapped lips, I pulled up my phone to check how much farther the walk would be, only to find a black screen.

“Dang it!” My chronic GPS checking and video streaming had killed my battery. Sighing heavily, I swung my purse around, burying my head in it as I searched for my portable battery charger. Which had apparently chosen this exact moment to disappear into the nether.

“Great, this is just great. My first hour in this town, and I’m going to die walking to the Red Bird Inn,” I grumbled, slinging my bag over my shoulder. With little choice, I gripped the handles of my bags and started down the road again. Why I had expected sidewalks, I wasn’t sure, but I

was certainly cursing the lack of them as my bags bumped and jerked over the rough edges of the road.

After another ten minutes, I was two seconds away from a full-blown temper tantrum when I heard a loud ticking behind me. Turning, I watched as an old blue Honda pulled up beside me. The car had *definitely* seen better days, but the woman driving it had a friendly, if cautious, smile on her face.

“Hey there, you okay?”

Biting my tongue to hold back my first response, I let go a heavy sigh and shook my head. “Not even a little bit.”

“Did your car break down?” she asked, leaning out of the window and looking back the way she’d come, as if she were afraid she’d missed it.

“No, no. I thought I could walk...” I chuckled, drawing a hand over my face in embarrassment. “I thought there would be sidewalks...”

“In *those* shoes?” The woman chuckled, shaking her head as she looked at my kitten heel booties. “Well, come on, it’s hotter than blue blazes out there.” I stared at her, my mind refusing to comprehend what she was saying. I jumped when she laughed and waved her hand at me. “Come on, get in! I’m melting just sitting here!”

Hefting my bags, I smiled in gratitude as she stepped out and opened her back door, even assisting me in getting the bags inside.

“Thank you so much,” I started, losing my words as she waved me off.

“Don’t worry about it. Where are you heading? I’m Daisy, by the way.”

“Oh, umm, the Bed and Breakfast. And thank you, again, Daisy. I’m Lemon.”

“Lemon? Like the fruit?” She smiled as she pulled away from the curb, the ticking sound resuming.

“Um, yeah, exactly. I’m sorry, but is it *supposed* to make that sound?” I shifted in my seat, my throat tightening, certain we were about to blow up.

Daisy let go a laugh, shaking her head. “No, but it’s okay. It’s just the muffler. Sometimes it jostles loose and sorta... bumps against the car a bit.”

“Oh... I see.” I didn’t. Not even a little bit. I didn’t own a car. I didn’t really need one. If I needed to go somewhere, there were city buses or cabs. Uber had saved my life more than once. *Oh, crap. Do they have Uber here?* I hadn’t thought to check.

For an old car, despite the almost constant ticking, the ride was cool and smooth. Angling the vent directly at my face, I closed my eyes and allowed the cold air to wash over me. I would never take AC for granted again. I

thought I heard Daisy chuckle, but I kept quiet as she smoothly turned off the road and up into a circular driveway.

The large white house was more than impressive as we crested the top of the drive, Daisy pulling up before the front door. Country charm was the only thing I could think of as I stepped out of the car and looked up. The porch was wide and welcoming, tall round pillars leading the eye upward toward the roof and the bluest sky I'd seen in a while.

Blinking against the sun, I lowered my hand and let go a low whistle. "I wasn't expecting a place like this in the middle of nowhere."

Daisy popped her head up on the other side of the car, her smile wide. "Oh, yeah. Most folk don't. The Red Bird Inn is kind of like, Haven's little secret, you know?"

I nodded as I moved around the car, surprised to see her pulling my bag from the back. "Oh, no, you don't have to--"

"It's okay, I got it. I'll see you in, but then I've gotta go. My shift starts soon. Betty'll be on my butt if I'm late."

Before I could answer, the door opened and an older gentleman came bounding down the stairs, surprisingly spy for a man of his years.

"Daisy! You put that down right now, young lady. That's my job and you know it!"

I stared as Daisy sat my suitcase down, lifting her hands and backing away from it. "Whatever you say, Professor Fitzgerald."

The older man winked at her, bending at the waist and grabbing the handle of my suitcase. "It's Thomas, and you know it."

A woman with short, greying hair came out of the Inn, a warm smile on her face. "Good afternoon. Welcome to the Red Bird Inn. You must be Miss Wilder."

I nodded, extending my hand to shake hers and blinking when she took mine and pulled me into a brief hug. "Oh, uh... Yes. Please, call me Lemon. You must be Mrs. Fitzgerald?"

"Yes. I'm Carol Harmon-Fitzgerald. We spoke on the phone. Come on, let's get you in and settled."

I turned, offering a grateful smile to Daisy. "Thank you again, for the ride."

"No worries! Come see me at Betty Anne's some time!" And with a wave, she slid into her car and was off.

I turned, jumping as I found the Fitzgeralds staring at me. “Uh, my room then?”

Thomas beamed and Carol chuckled as they led me inside. The entranceway was large, with warm wood covering the floor. The walls were half wood panels, half linen wallpaper, the paper fresh and new. A large wooden desk took up half the room, a computer sitting on it. Plush armchairs rested opposite the desk, a small bookshelf between them, with a matching wood coffee table ready to catch books or an errant tea cup. I followed the couple as they led me through the main room, toward the wide staircase that led to the second floor.

“We’ve just finished renovating the whole place,” Carol explained, her voice soft, touched with the sweetest drawl. “All the rooms have new furniture and new linens. Oh! And all new plumbing, so you won’t have to worry about water pressure.”

Thomas chuckled and flashed Carol a grin. I had to bite my tongue to stop from asking what the joke was.

“Great water pressure is a good selling point,” I muttered. The top floor was just as beautifully decorated as the lower level and boasted what appeared to be four rooms. Mine was room number 2.

“Here you are, dear. There’s a phone in the room you can use. If you need anything, just dial zero, and it’ll call down to the front desk,” Carol said, beaming a smile as she unlocked my door, then dropped the key in my palm.

“Do you need help with your luggage?” Thomas asked.

“No, I’ve got it from here. Thank you so much.” I took the bags from him with a smile, then stepped into the room, offering a sketchy wave before closing the door. Sighing, I leaned my back against the wood, letting my head hit it with a thump. Was everyone in this town going to be so friendly? If so, I would need to prepare. With booze.

Opening my eyes, I looked around the room. Like the rest of the place, it was beautifully decorated with a soft country flair. It looked like something out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. The queen-sized bed was covered by an ivory quilt with blue stitching. The four-poster bed frame was a soft, knotty pine, and identical end tables sat either side of the bed. A matching wooden dresser stood to the left of the window, waiting to be filled. After a quick inspection, I found a small, but nice bathroom to the

left as well. Sighing in relief, I stripped off my sweaty clothes, entered the shower, and turned the water on high.

Carol hadn't been lying, the water pressure was strong and full when I stepped into the stream. Turning my back to the spray, I once again closed my eyes and let the water soothe my aching muscles. I'd been so caught up in the planning and travel that I'd neglected to think about my plans once I'd arrived in Haven. I would need to get a car, as I was beginning to doubt they had Uber here. Tilting my head under the spray, I washed my hair and body before reluctantly turning off the taps. Wrapping towels around myself and my hair, I padded back into the room and dropped down onto the bed, fishing my phone out of my purse.

TO MOM: Arrived at BnB, safe and sound.

I had barely sent the message before three dots flashed on the screen and my mother's message popped up.

MOM: That's GREAT, Sweetie! Have a wonderful time, and send lots of pictures! Xoxo

I smiled as I dropped the phone on the bed beside me, laying back and staring up at the ceiling. For today, I would just rest and recover from travel. Tomorrow, I would venture into town and discover what ol' Beauregard had left me.

Chapter Two

Sunlight streaming through the windows woke me. I rolled to my side, groaning as I tilted my head left and right. I must have been more tired than I'd anticipated, because I'd fallen asleep in my towels, my glasses still atop my nose. My neck ached from the lack of pillows, but it was nothing a few good stretches couldn't cure.

Once I was up and dressed, I triple checked that I had everything in my purse before heading downstairs. I was almost certain I had missed breakfast, given it was close to ten o'clock, but as soon as I'd descended the stairs, the smell of toasting bread and bacon hit me, making my mouth water.

"Lemon, that you, dear?" Mrs. Fitzgerald's voice called out seconds before she appeared in the hallway. "Good morning. You hungry?"

"I, uhh, actually, I am. Is that bacon?"

Carol laughed, waving her hand in invitation. "Come on, let's get you fed."

I followed her down the hallway and into a rather large country kitchen. It was what I had always imagined a dream kitchen would be like. Warm, cherry wood cabinets with gleaming white fixtures wrapped around the ceiling. Butcher block counters surrounded a state-of-the-art range and offered plenty of work space. A long, wooden table sat off to the right, an upholstered dining booth offering seating. I could tell a lot of thought and care had been put into the design of this place.

"Have a seat at the table. We've got bacon and biscuits. I can fix you up a couple'a eggs. Do you like grits?" Carol turned toward me, her dark brows lifted in question.

“Oh, umm. Eggs, scrambled, please. And, I’ve never actually had grits before.”

“Oh, well, how about you give them a try? If you don’t like them, it won’t hurt my feelings none. Coffee?”

I very nearly groaned. “Yes, please.”

Carol chuckled as she came toward me with a steaming mug of coffee. “Cream and sugar’s on the table.”

I watched her as she went back to her cooking, then filled my mug with an ungodly amount of sugar and cream. Closing my eyes, I sipped from the sweet brew. And this time I did sigh. Audibly.

It was comforting, somehow, to simply sit back and watch as someone prepared breakfast for me. It should have been awkward, being waited on like this, yet Carol made it seem almost normal.

“Do you have children?” I asked, setting down my mug.

“I do. I have a daughter and a son. How about you?”

“Oh, no. No children here.” I looked down at the coffee in my hands. Much to my mother's disappointment, I was unwed and not yet a mother. If she had her way, I would have been married straight out of college and already be giving her grandbabies. As it was, I had graduated college all but still living with my parents. And finding my dream job seemed to be eluding me.

“Oh, well, you’re young yet,” Carol said, turning and setting a plate before me. “If that’s even something you want. I know some young women nowadays aren’t wanting the old-fashioned traditional family anymore.”

“It’s not that I don’t want kids. I mean, I think I do. I just... Haven’t met the right man, I guess.” I shrugged, twisting my lips to the side and setting my coffee down. “Thank you, Carol, this looks delicious.”

“Oh, no need to thank me. I enjoy cooking for people. And currently, you’re our only guest. So, you’ll get extra pampering.”

We shared a laugh as I dug into my breakfast. It was delicious, and I was certain I would gain ten pounds off her cooking if it was all like this. Carol poured herself a cup of coffee and sat across from me, a single biscuit on a plate in front of her. I felt her eyes on me, and set my fork down, lifting my napkin before meeting her gaze with my own.

“What brings you to Haven? You didn’t exactly say when you called...”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat, reaching for my coffee and taking a long sip. What could it hurt to tell her the reason for my visit? There was nothing in

Uncle Beauregard's will that said I couldn't say anything. "I'm here because of my great uncle. He passed away and left me some property. So, I'm here... To check it all out, I suppose."

Carol nodded, sipping her coffee. "I'm sorry for your loss. Who was your uncle?"

"Beauregard Reginald. Did you know him?" I winced as I asked the question, but it *was* a small town. Everyone knew everyone, right?

Carol inhaled deeply, nodding once more. "I did know him. A good man. He cared a great deal for our little town. I'm deeply sorry for your loss." Repeating the sentiment, she reached across the table and rested her hand atop mine, squeezing slightly.

It took everything within me not to squirm. Smiling softly, I pulled my hand out from beneath hers. "Thank you. I didn't know him that well. I met him once or twice when I was a girl, and we kept in touch through letters over the years. But..." I shrugged. It felt weird to talk about him with someone who knew him. While I had loved and appreciated every letter from him, I didn't feel like I knew him in the same way as people here would know him.

"Well, like I said, he was a good man. If you need any help getting anywhere, just let Thomas know. He'll give you a ride."

"Oh, I was actually going to rent a car..."

Carol waved her hand, shaking her head as she rose. "No, there's no need to spend your money. Thomas or I can take you wherever you need to go. And if you really need a car of your own, you can just borrow one of ours."

I blinked at her. "Are you serious?"

Carol laughed, washing out her coffee mug and setting it in the drying rack. "Of course I'm serious. Is it such a strange offer?"

I nodded, finishing up my last bite and rising with the plate in hand. "It is to me. I have friends who won't even let me borrow their car for a few minutes."

"Well, I won't say nothing on them. But, to me it's just hospitable." She smiled warmly at me, her dark brown eyes lighting with mirth as she took my plate. "Now, you run along and get ready for the day. Let me know if there's anything you need."

I knew when I was dismissed. Chuckling to myself, I left the kitchen, taking my time as I wandered the hallway and discovered the other rooms.

The Red Bird Inn was truly beautiful. They had done an amazing job restoring it. Running my fingers along the wall, I stepped into a lovely little room that I could only describe as a library. Floor to ceiling shelves lined the side walls, while the wall ahead was taken over by a large, picturesque window, complete with window seat. Two burgundy wingback chairs sat on either side of a cherry wood coffee table, crocheted blankets thrown casually over the arms. I felt my lips curving upward as I explored the room, unable to help the smile. The room just evoked peace and joy.

Looking over the books, I was thrilled to see many titles I recognized. There were the almost requisite classics: *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Anne of Green Gables*... But there were newer titles as well: *Harry Potter*, *Dr. Seuss*, *The Maze Runner*...

Plucking a book off the shelf at random, I grabbed a blanket off one of the chairs and snuggled into the window seat, curling my legs beneath me.

I don't know how long I sat there, pulled into the book, but the rays of the sun had lowered, warming me. I sighed happily, turning the page. It had been too long since I'd simply sat and read a book. Most of the time I was so busy editing that I didn't have time to sit and read for fun.

I was close to halfway done with the book when I could no longer ignore the growling of my stomach. My face twisted in annoyance as another rumble pulled me from the pages of the book.

"Fine. Fine, I'll feed you." With a sigh, I rose from the window seat, groaning as I stretched out my stiff muscles. Folding the blanket haphazardly, I left it on the seat and made my way toward the kitchen, carrying the book with me.

I hadn't heard anyone else in a while, though I wasn't complaining about the lack of hovering. I got enough of that from my mother. I didn't need strangers waiting in the shadows, jumping to my every whim. Peeking into the kitchen, I let out a small sigh of relief in finding it empty. *To the fridge!*

Pulling open the stainless steel door, I perused my options before finally settling on a sandwich. Arms full of fixings, I bumped the door closed with my hip and almost screamed when I found Mr. Fitzgerald standing in the doorway.

"Oh, do forgive me! I didn't mean to startle you." He rushed forward, helping me unload the items onto the island. "My office is just through

there, and I heard someone in the kitchen, so I came to see if any help was needed.”

Swallowing down my panic, I shook my head. “No. I mean, it’s okay. I mean...” I stopped, closing my eyes and blowing out a breath. “I mean, thank you. I could use some help finding the bread.”

Mr. Fitzgerald smiled at me, moving across the kitchen and opening a wooden breadbox. *Because of course it was in a breadbox.* I shook my head, accepting the loaf he offered.

“A sandwich sounds pretty good. You don’t mind if I make one too, do you?”

“Oh, of course not.” I gestured to the sandwich fixings before me. *It’s your kitchen.*

“We don’t usually offer lunch. Most people leave for the afternoon, so we just decided to stick to breakfast and dinner.”

I dropped the knife I was using, looking up at him. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Fitzgerald! I didn’t think--”

He held up a hand, shaking his head with a warm smile. “No, you’ve done nothing wrong. I was just saying. And please, call me Thomas. I haven’t been called Mr. Fitzgerald since I was teaching high school.”

I licked my lips, swallowing and smiling. “Thomas. So, uhh, you were a teacher?”

“For a while. I taught history in the local high school for a number of years. Then I went onto be a professor at the community college. But, yes, long story short, I was a teacher.” He smiled and winked at me with a soft chuckle.

I nodded, smiling at him as we fell into an easy conversation. He told me more about his life and gave me a rundown on everything I needed to know about the town.

“Thank you, for having lunch with an old man. It was nice to have someone to talk to.” Thomas smiled, rinsing off our plates.

“Oh, no, thank you, for everything. I really enjoyed it.” I glanced at my watch, chewing the inside of my cheek. “Do you know of a cab company I could call? I’ve been a bit spoiled by the city and wasn’t expecting to need a car.”

Thomas shook his head, grabbing a towel and drying his hands. “No need for a cab. You can borrow Mrs. Fitzgerald’s car. Unless you’d be more comfortable in my truck?”

I stared at him. They couldn't be serious. Yet they had both made the same offer...

"Mrs. Fitzgerald said I could use her car, but I didn't think she meant it."

He chuckled, folding the towel and setting it on the counter. "Of course we mean it. No need to spend your money when we have a perfectly good vehicle you can use. Just let me know your preference."

"Umm, the car?" I stared after him as he bobbed his head, disappearing from the kitchen, only to return a moment later with a set of keys.

"Little maroon car in the back. Let me know if you have any issues." Thomas smiled.

"Thank you. That's really kind of you." I took the keys and, after grabbing my purse, I followed his directions to the car. A powder blue Chevy Impala sat in the side yard, looking pristine. Blowing out a breath of relief, I glanced over to the large Ford truck sitting beside it and knew I would have never gotten out of the driveway with it.

I was lucky I had GPS on my phone, or else I might never have found the building. The plot of land that Beauregard had left to me was little more than a roadside shack, though I could tell it had once been a thing of pride. The building might have been white once, though it was in desperate need of a good power washing.

Frowning, I pulled into the postage stamp sized parking lot and shut off the car. I stared at the building, my brows creeping higher as I took in the dilapidated building. Faded awnings had probably been red and white in their prime, but were now dull, dingy, and shades of brown. Everything about the place was just... Sad. Though I could see the potential. If I squinted and tilted my head.

"You've got to be kidding me." Pulling the keys from the ignition, I climbed out of the car, shading my eyes with my hand as I looked around. Surely, this had to be a joke. I couldn't imagine anyone running a business out of a place like this. My surprise only increased when I saw the faded *open* sign in the window.

Walking up to the door, I pushed it open and slipped inside. The hum of an air conditioner filled the room, the cool air more than welcome after the heat of the day. I looked around, taking in the worn booths that lined one wall, the few scattered tables with mismatched chairs. Everything seemed

to be coated in a thin layer of dust, and the whole place needed a good cleaning.

“Hello?” I called out, striding across the room toward the counter. I paused, looking through the musty glass, gasping as I saw familiar tubs tucked into the cooler. *Ice cream?*

A soft shuffling sounded from the back, and I straightened. There *was* someone here.

“Hello?” I called again, stepping around the counter and making my way toward the back. I had just reached out to pull the black curtain aside when it was yanked away from my hand. I screamed and jumped back as a man filled my vision.

“Jesus! You scared the life out of me!” I placed a hand to my chest, forcing a laugh as I tried to meet his shadowed gaze.

He didn’t crack a smile. Simply grunted and moved past me, carrying what appeared to be a large drum. “We’re not open.”

I felt my eyebrows lift at the terse response, and instinctively crossed my arms over my chest. “Well, the sign in the front says different. And the door was unlocked.”

He paused, looking at the door before glancing back at me. “Must have forgotten to lock it back up.” With another grunt, he hefted the drum and moved toward the cooler, using his elbow to slide the door open before hefting the drum and angling it to slide inside. I felt my eyes widen as I watched his muscles bunch and cord with the effort, my mouth going dry and sticking to the roof of my mouth.

He turned toward me, his brows lifting. “You still here?”

It was everything I could do not to grit my teeth. Running my tongue over my teeth, I squinted my eyes in the dim lighting and peered over his shoulder at a Manager on Duty sign hanging on the wall behind him. “Well, actually, Mr... Fuc-”

“It’s Tucker. Signs dirty.” He grumbled, turning and hastily wiping at the sign.

“Oh. I-I’m so sorry.” I felt heat burning my cheeks and ducked my head, pushing my hair out of my face.

He sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. The act alone had my throat tightening, just as his shirt tightened over his shoulders. Was he *intentionally* wearing a shirt that was too small for him? Or was he just that massive?

Thick fingers snapping in my face had me jerking my head back and my nose wrinkling. "Excuse me!"

"Yeah, excuse you. This is private property, and I've told you we're not open. So, state your business or I'm calling the sheriff."

Blowing out a breath, I held up my hands. "Listen, my name is Lemon Wilder and--"

"Lemon?" He cut me off, not bothering to hide his chuckle.

Narrowing my eyes, I set my jaw. "Do you have a problem with my name, Mr. Tucker?" I didn't bother to warm my tone. If the man wanted to be a jerk, well, two could play at that game.

He sobered, shaking his head and shooting me a glare before brushing past me, his shoulder bouncing off mine. "Not at all, Mrs. Wilder. And the name is Wade. Mr. Tucker was my father."

The way he spat the explanation had my hackles lowering, my heart aching for the pain and anger in his words. There was some bad blood there. Clearing my throat, I tucked my hair behind my ear and tried again. "It's Miss Wilder, for the record. And I'm here because this property belonged to my great uncle, and, for some reason, he left it to me."

He spun around at my words, his brows shooting upward into his blond hair. "You're *that* Lemon Wilder?"

I shook my head at his shocked tone, lifting a hand to rub at the back of my neck. "Do you know that many women named Lemon?"

"No." The word was short and curt. "I just never expected you to actually show up."

With that, he turned on his heel and disappeared behind the curtain again. I stared after him, bewilderment running through me. What in the heck had I done to afford such rudeness? Scoffing, I shook my head, planting a hand on my hip as I looked around the dingy space.

This was going to take a lot of fixing up. And so far, my welcome to Haven had mixed reviews.

Chapter Three

After seeking out the lawyer to let him know I was in town and prepared to fulfill the requirements of the will, I headed back to the Inn. I hadn't even done that much in the day, but I was exhausted. I was thankful that the Fitzgeralds were otherwise occupied when I arrived, though it did feel a little like I was sneaking up to my room.

Flopping down onto the bed, I removed my glasses, covered my face with my hands, and blew out a breath. It was only my first day here, and already this was turning into so much more than I had expected.

The meeting with the lawyer had been shocking. Not only had Beauregard left me the ice cream shop, but he'd also left me his house and 'all surrounding properties,' which the lawyer made sound substantive. I had once again thanked my lucky stars for GPS and being a careful driver, because I was certain I had returned to my temporary home in a daze.

The thought that someone could love and care so much about someone they only communicated with in letters and the occasional phone call was crazy to me. I knew that Uncle Beau had never had any children of his own and wondered if that was why he'd always been so fond of me. But he had a sister, and my mother had a brother. I had cousins... There were so many others who probably had more right to it than I. But he'd picked me. What had I done to deserve this? The thought was a grain of sand in my mind. But like a bit of food stuck in your back teeth, I couldn't be rid of it.

I rubbed my hands over my face once more. Returning the glasses to my face, I rolled to my side and grabbed my phone, pressing the speed dial for my mother.

"Lemon! Darling! How are you? What do you think of Haven?" My mother's voice was warm and welcoming. How I missed her already.

“Mom, I think your lawyer left something out at the will reading.” I didn’t bother beating around the bush. I craved her advice.

There was a brief silence, and a soft rustling before she responded. “What do you mean, honey?”

“I just met with Uncle Beau’s lawyer here. He didn’t just leave me Sweet Rose Creamery, mom, he left me his house and ‘other properties.’ What was he thinking? Was he losing his mind in the end?”

Again, I heard shuffling, as if she were adjusting the phone. I had a mental image of her shifting in her chair, pulling at the perpetually twisted phone cord as she tried to get more space. Why they didn’t just get a cordless phone and enter the twenty first century, I would never know. Mom claimed she *liked* landlines.

“No, sweetie. He wasn’t losing his mind. As far as I know, he was very clear headed up until...” Her voice broke, and I kicked myself for being so callous.

“Mom, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t... I know how much you miss him. It’s just all... So much. I can’t figure out why he left all of this to *me*.”

“Because he loved you, sweetie.” Her tone was matter of fact, and she sniffled once before clearing her throat. “Now, tell me about your first day. Are you liking it?”

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. Her topic change meant that any further discussion of the matter was null and void. “Yeah, I mean, it’s okay. Ungodly hot, but the Inn I’m staying in is nice. The whole town is almost too adorable, actually, like something out of a story book. And I drove out to the ice cream shop today, too. It’s a mess, mom. I don’t know how it hasn’t been shut down... Oh! And there was this guy there!”

We talked for an hour, about the repairs the shop would need and my run in with Wade Tucker. Mom didn’t recognize the name but told me to ask the Fitzgeralds. I promised her I would, though I didn’t promise her *when* I would. I needed to think more about how this was all going to play out.

As frustrating as our first meeting had been, Wade obviously knew what he was doing with the shop. Maybe not in terms of *cleaning* it but managing it. A huge yawn overtook me, and I rolled onto my side, setting my glasses on a bedside table as I snagged a pillow and stared at the dying light outside my window. Tomorrow, I would ask to borrow the car and drive by the shop again. I wanted to see it during business hours, to observe its operations.

Closing my eyes, I released the breath that I'd been holding. Tomorrow would bring some answers to the mysteries surrounding me. Hopefully.

The following days were spent with research. At first, I felt bad, constantly hounding the Fitzgeralds for information, but the two quickly jumped on board with the project.

"We just redid this whole place, remember?" Carol reminded me over breakfast. "We would love to make suggestions on who to call!"

"Well, it's going to need a serious clean, both inside and out. And new paint, probably all new furniture, shelves, coolers..." I pressed a hand to my stomach as a wave of nausea washed over me at the thought of how much this was all going to cost.

Carol reached across the table, giving my hand a squeeze. "Don't fret, honey. I know it's a lot all at once. But you know how to eat an elephant? One bite at a time."

It was odd, how her words stuck with me. After collecting all of the phone numbers I would need, I disappeared to the library, computer in hand.

By the end of the day, I felt like I had called the whole of Haven. But I had managed to secure a consultation with the owner of Mcallister's Construction the following week.

Progress.

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I rose from the chair and stretched out the kinks that had formed during my hours of sitting. I knew better than to go so long without stretching. The rumble of my stomach and a glance at my watch told me it was long past time to eat. Blowing out a breath, I gathered up my things and headed up to my room. I wasn't sure what the Fitzgeralds were offering for dinner, but I had an urge to go out and be around people.

Dinner plans decided, I took a quick shower, dressed, and went to find Carol to once more ask about use of her car. I would need to look into my own transportation soon, as I didn't want to keep bothering her.

After a much longer conversation about the best restaurant to go to, the decision was made that I would go to the Blue Ribbon Bar and Grill. Directions were given, made sure they were understood, and I was off.

I chuckled to myself as I stepped outside the inn, thankful for the balmy evening. If it was going to remain as warm as it had been of late, I would need to go shopping for more summer wear.

The drive to the Grill was pleasant, with light traffic and good music on the radio. The irony that the only two stations to come in loud and clear were country and Christian didn't pass me by.

I turned into the parking lot of the cutest restaurant I think I had ever seen. The building looked as if it had once been two that were smooshed together, the section on the left shorter than that on the right. Probably an original building with an add on. Dark wood siding covered the walls, increasing the country feel to the place. A blue balcony wrapped around the top of the right building, shading a seating section below it with a few scattered tables and chairs. It looked like something vaguely out of an old Western, but more modernized. A bright blue door stood open, welcoming diners.

Grabbing my purse, I climbed from the car and made my way inside. Country music filled the air from a jukebox against the far right wall. Tables filled the space nicely, cozy, while still leaving plenty of space for movement. A long wooden bar took up most of the wall directly in front of me, and I noted the bathrooms were tucked into the back corner. A set of stairs sat to the left of the bar, leading to the second story.

"Welcome to the Blue Ribbon! Just grab a seat anywhere!"

I blinked, jerking my head toward the voice and offering a smile as I moved toward one of the tables. I had expected them to be busier, though I was a bit early for a standard dinner rush. I picked a table at random, lowering down into a chair and setting my purse on the one next to me. A pretty brunette woman came toward me, a notepad in her hand, brown eyes filled with warmth.

"Hiya, darlin'. What can I start ya off with tonight?"

I blinked, my hand shooting out as I reached for the laminated menu propped up by the napkin container, managing to hit it at a glancing angle and shoot it off the table.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" My hands flew to my lips in horror, but the woman only chuckled, bending down to retrieve the menu.

"Hey, it's no problem." Her smile seemed wider somehow as she passed me the menu. "You seem a bit skittish, how about something to drink to

knock the edge off? We've got a fully stocked bar..." She twisted at the waist, using her thumb to indicate the bar.

As if you could miss it. The large wooden bar was obviously well loved, the warm toned wood seeming to shine under the rustic lamps hanging from the ceiling.

"Oh, I... I don't drink. Do you, um... Do you have lemonade?"

The woman chuckled again, the sound warm and friendly. It was almost enough to set me at ease. "You ain't from around here, are you?"

I shook my head, feeling my cheeks heat up. "Is it that obvious?"

"Most folk who come in here already know what they want when they leave their house. Plus, I've never seen you before." She smiled, setting the menu on the table in front of me. "I'm Ellie Webb, if you need anything, just let me know. I'll go get that lemonade."

I covered my face with my hands, blowing out a breath. Today was getting to me more than I had thought. Lowering my hands, I looked over the menu, praying for peace. It was pretty standard fare: burgers, sandwiches, gumbo... And something called a cowboy steak, which intrigued me, but I knew I would never be able to finish on my own. Ellie came back, setting a tall glass of lemonade in front of me and pulling out her notebook once more.

"You know what you want, hun?" she asked, cocking her hip out to one side, pen poised to take my order. When I hesitated, she leaned over and tapped the menu. "I recommend the Blue Ribbon Burger. Hard to go wrong with a burger that's won awards."

I nodded, smiling at her, feeling my shoulders relax. "Well, you've sold me on it. A burger sounds great. Thank you." We shared a smile, and then she was off. I watched her walk toward the kitchen before I looked around. The place was homey, the music filling the space nicely, and I could easily imagine the place full of loud diners, arguing over a game of darts or football.

My tension eased further as I bounced my foot to the music. I recognized the song playing, but not enough to remember the name of it. More and more people came in as the night moved on, and I settled back to do some people watching. Ellie brought me my burger, and, after just one bite, I had to admit it was the most delicious burger I'd ever tasted.

As I munched on my burger, I wished that I had thought to bring a book with me. I pulled up my phone, intending to browse the online bookstore

when a familiar figure walked past my table. I watched him as he made his way confidently toward the bar. He was obviously a regular, by the way he greeted the staff. Tilting my head, I observed him, marveling at how different he seemed from the man I had met a few days ago. So intrigued by him was I, that I missed Ellie coming back to my table.

“You okay, darlin’?”

I jumped, my cheeks heating at being caught staring. “Oh, yeah. I’m fine.”

Ellie chuckled. “How was the burger?”

“It was delicious! Thank you for suggesting it. Though I think I’m going to need a to go box. It was bigger than I was expecting.”

Ellie smiled, leaning toward me and lowering her voice. “I can bring you a box for the burger, but I hate to tell you, the man won’t fit in it.”

I blushed deeper, feeling my eyes go wide. “What? No, no, no, no, no. I don’t... Not with *him*.” I immediately regretted my words when I saw Ellie’s brows raise. The tell-tale look of ‘*why not him?*’ Blowing out a breath and closing my eyes, I held up a hand. “We ran into one another earlier, and it did not go well.”

Ellie pulled out a chair, lowering into it and folding her arms on the table. “Ran into him where? I assumed you were just passing through.”

I shook my head. “Sweet Rose Creamery? It belonged to my Uncle Beau, and when he... When he passed, he left it to me.”

I pressed my lips together, swallowing as I dropped my gaze to my plate. It felt weird to say it out loud. He was gone. Really gone. I would never get another letter. Never have another phone call. Unbidden tears blurred my vision, and I sniffled and tried to wipe at my cheeks without drawing too much attention.

“What’s your name, hun?”

“Lemon Wilder.”

Ellie smiled, reached across the table, and gently placed her hand over mine. “Well, Lemon. I knew your uncle, and he was a good man. Something tells me he’d be really happy that you’re here.” She looked over her shoulder before bringing her gaze back to mine. “And don’t let Wade get to you too much. He’s a bit rough around the edges, but he’s got a good heart.”

I lifted my brows, clearly not believing her, but not wanting to argue with her either. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

She patted my hand, rising from the table and pushing her chair in. “I’ll get your bill and that box.”

I looked past her toward Wade once again, torn between my own impressions and the words of a stranger.

Chapter Four

I put off going by the house for as long as I could before I realized I was being idiotic. I had holed myself up in the room, throwing myself into work and chatting with my friends from back home. But I knew I needed to suck it up and face reality. And I needed to keep my meeting with the contractor.

Once again, I tracked Carol down to ask to borrow her car. I had looked up a few local listings for reasonably priced vehicles and planned to go check them out after I met with the contractor. It was past time for me to get my own mode of transportation.

I had also spent the morning researching how to run an ice cream shop and had even signed up for a few online classes. If I had to be here for a year, I was going to turn this shop into the best ice cream parlor Haven had ever seen. Even if it was the *only* ice cream parlor in the small town.

I felt as if I held my breath the entire way down the long driveway. It was pitted and full of holes that needed to be filled, something I tucked away for later. The faded yellow plantation style house drew a soft gasp from me. It was exactly as I remembered. Tall, round white columns stretched from the wide porch to the second floor balcony above. The front door was a faded blue, as if everything about the home had faded once Beau was no longer on this earth.

Swallowing deeply, I turned off the car and climbed from it, looking up at the home. Two live oaks framed the front, their thick limbs offering shade. I rolled my thumb over the key, my heart pounding in my chest. *Just go inside, Lemon. It's yours now.*

Shaking my head slightly, I sniffled and closed the car door behind me. My sneakers crunched over the gravel of the front drive. The wooden steps creaked beneath my weight. Two sun worn rockers sat on the porch, a

gossamer spider's web strung between them. An odd reminder that even when it feels as if everything has stopped, life still goes on.

Blowing out a breath, I slipped the key in the lock and stepped inside. It was just as I remembered. The front door opened to a hallway leading to the back of the house, the stairway to the upper floor. To the right was the formal living room, and to the left sat the dining room and kitchen. Stepping into the living room, my breath hitched in my chest. A large painting of my Uncle Beau stood above the brick fireplace, his wide smile warming my heart. Shoes squeaking against the wooden floor, I crossed the room and stepped into the covered porch.

Wilted plants begged for attention, and I automatically began looking for a watering can. Faint memories pulled at the edges of my mind, begging me to remember. Swallowing against the lump in my throat, I moved back through the living room and headed upstairs.

It was as if all the air had been pulled from my lungs. Pictures lined the stairway: my mother at various ages, my grandmother and cousins, even pictures of me. I trailed my fingers over the dusty glass of a broadly smiling Beau, a tray full of cups of ice cream in his hand, the blurred heads of children in the foreground.

I walked through the other rooms, memories guiding me. I studiously avoided going into Beau's room. Someone had come through and covered up the furniture, but I wasn't ready to go through his things. The house didn't feel like mine. Everything in it was *his*. Eventually, I would have to see it all sorted. But not today.

Stepping out of the house, I locked the door and slid the key into my purse. The sound of tires on gravel had my brows pulling together as I looked out toward the road. A white truck pulled up beside Carol's car, dust kicking up behind it. My heart sank as I recognized the blond head that emerged.

Oh, great.

Forcing a smile to my face, I lifted a hand in greeting as I descended the porch. "Mr. Tucker, what brings you out here?"

The sound of the truck door closing echoed in the otherwise quiet morning air. Wade looked around before his eyes met mine. Backlit by the sun, I was forced to press my hand to my brow to keep my gaze on his. My brows lifted as he shook his head and strode toward me.

"I live here," he snapped.

Shock and surprise rushed through me. “You live *here*?” I gestured to the house behind me.

“What? No. I live in the guest house.” Wade frowned, his eyes moving over me, as if judging me. Despite my t-shirt and jeans, I suddenly felt naked in front of him.

“Oh, I... I didn’t know.”

“Guess ol’ Jim forgot to mention to that, huh?”

I paused, confused. “Jim? You mean *James*, the lawyer?”

“You mean his legal name isn’t Jimbo?” Wade snarked, his hand coming to his chest in mock shock.

I felt my jaw clench at the sarcasm in his tone, my chin jutting upward. “Yes, that does seem to have slipped his mind. But I also haven’t had a chance to read over everything he gave me.”

“Beau left me the guest house. I have a copy of the will if you need proof.”

I stared at him, lowering my hand. “I’m not saying he didn’t, Mr. Tucker. Just that I simply hadn’t been made aware of it. However, things have been moving rather quickly...” I shook my head and forced another smile. “I’m sure the property is large enough that we won’t be on top of one another.”

Wade’s brow shot upward. “On top of one another?”

I nodded. “When I move in. It wasn’t the original plan, but now that I know the house is here, there’s really no need for me to stay in the Inn for the year...”

It seemed as if his brows were stuck; I didn’t think they could go up any higher. Once again, I felt his eyes move over me. Weighing me, judging me. Shaking his head, he let go a derisive chuckle. “You living here? You don’t know how to keep a place like this running.”

My head jerked back as if I’d been slapped. *Just who does this guy think he is?* Folding my arms over my chest, I narrowed my eyes at him. “Excuse me, but how do you know what I am capable of?”

“Call it intuition. You’d be better off at the Inn; this place is too much for a city girl like you.”

Before I could form a reply, he turned and strode toward his truck, not even bothering to look back at me. I felt like a fish out of water, gasping for breath as I struggled to come up with a rebuttal. All of my other experiences with the people of Haven had left me vastly unprepared for dealing with

Wade Tucker. The man was crass and rude. And I decided right then and there that I would never like him.

Pursing my lips, I looked down as my phone chirped, signaling a message.

Ryan Mcallister: Meet you in forty-five

Sliding my phone back into my purse, I glanced toward the truck as it pulled down a second driveway I hadn't noticed before.

Shaking off the odd encounter, I headed to the car to go meet the contractor.

Pulling into the parking lot of the creamery, I let the car idle, the radio playing softly as I stared at the building. All at once, I was struck with a memory. It was fuzzy and faded, but I remembered standing outside this building. I had worn a bright yellow dress, and I remembered Uncle Beau laughing and swinging me in circles, his large hands clasped tightly around my forearms, my feet swinging in the air as I laughed in glee.

Shaking my head, I wiped at my cheeks. Would I ever stop crying? Grabbing for my purse, I found a crumpled tissue and dabbed at my cheeks, checking my makeup in the mirror. The sound of tires on gravel pulled my attention as a blue pick-up truck pulled in beside me. After checking my reflection, a final time, I climbed from the car and put a smile on my face.

"Good afternoon," I called, lifting my hands to shield my eyes from the midday sun.

"Afternoon. So, you taking over this place?" Ryan Mcallister asked as he came around the truck.

"Oh, well, that's the plan. Sort of." I smiled, giving an awkward shrug.

"Huh. Well, let's go have a look around, shall we?"

I nodded, producing the key I'd obtained from the lawyer and leading the way inside. Unsurprisingly the door was unlocked. I sighed, making a mental note to have that fixed.

Ryan followed me around, listening intently as I pointed out problem areas, things I thought could use replacing, adjusting, or complete removal. He moved around the building, taking measurements and nodding to himself from time to time. I did my best to stay out of his way, watching

him intently, one arm wrapped around my body and gnawing nervously on my thumbnail. It was a terrible habit I couldn't manage to kick.

After what felt like forever, Ryan turned to me, his face serious as he looked around the building once more. "The repairs and changes you want are doable. However, it's not going to be cheap."

I nodded, stepping toward him as he leaned against the counter, laying a notebook in front of him. We went over the numbers, Ryan patiently answering every question that popped into my head. After everything had been discussed as far as we could crunch it, I straightened and held out my hand to him.

"Well, Mr. Mcallister, thank you very much for your time. I look forward to working with you."

"Ryan, please. And I look forward to the same."

Before I could say another word, the shop door opened. I turned around, eyes widening as I recognized Wade filling the space, backlit by the brilliant sun outside. I blinked rapidly against the brightness and had opened my mouth to speak when he cut me off.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Any pleasantry I might have been trying for evaporated like moisture in the desert. Narrowing my eyes, my arms crossed tightly over my chest, I lifted one brow. "Excuse me?" My tone was icy, though it didn't seem to affect him one iota.

Ryan cleared his throat, gathering up his notebook. "I'll be in touch, Ms. Wilder."

My eyes locked on Wade, though I gave Ryan a stiff smile. The second the door closed behind him, I let loose.

"Just who do you think you are? How *dare* you speak to me like that!"

Wade scoffed, brows shooting up into his hairline. He jabbed at his chest, disbelief coloring his tone. "How dare *I*? And as for your other question, I'm the guy who's been here. Where the heck have you been?"

I gasped as he stalked toward me, backing me into the counter. He leaned over me, his blond hair falling into hazel eyes. Eyes that were hot with annoyance. He wore a grey tank top that clung to his body in a way that should had been deemed as sinful. I looked up at him, gritting my teeth and jutting out my chin, refusing to be intimidated by him.

"I don't know who you think you are, but I suggest you back off. Now!" I kept my gaze locked on his, though it wanted nothing more than to dip

down. To follow the strong line of his jaw, the curve of his neck, the ridges and valleys of his chest...

Knock it off, Lemon!

"I told you who I was. The name's Wade Tucker, and this is *my* place. I'm the one who's been here. I'm the one who put in the time. *I'm* the one Beau should have-" He broke off abruptly, swearing softly under his breath as he backed away, drawing a hand over the lower half of his face.

"The one he should have left everything to. That's what you were going to say, isn't it?" My hands balled into fists at his lack of reply, my entire body seeming to vibrate with rage. "Isn't it!"

"Of course it is! Who are you to sweep in here, with your fancy city clothes and try to change everything? As if you have any idea what Beau would have wanted! What he cared about!" Wade roared, storming toward me once more, though keeping some distance this time. "I've been here! I worked with him!"

My heart sped in my chest, my nostrils flaring as I struggled to breathe against his rage. It was as if a lightning bolt went off in my head. Something suddenly clicked within me, and all the righteous anger I'd been building vanished.

"Listen," I said, holding up my hands, palms facing him, doing my best to keep my voice as calm as possible. "It's obvious that Beau was very important to you. And you're very angry about his decision. However," I lifted my hand higher as he was about to speak, "the only way I can see through this, is if we work together. As I'm sure you deduced, I've spoken to Mr. Mcallister about fixing up the place, because, let's be honest, it needs it."

When he didn't say anything, I licked my lips and pressed on. "You're right. I don't know anything about running an ice cream shop. I'm a book nerd, but all the books in the world don't stand up to practical knowledge, so, do you think maybe, just maybe, we can table the hostility and try to work together? If you care about this place so much, then help me make it the best darn ice cream shop Haven has to offer."

Wade stared at me, his chest rising and falling heavily. I wanted to squirm under the intensity of his gaze, but I forced myself to remain calm. It felt as if he were weighing me, judging my worth. Finally, he sighed, and a breath I didn't realize I was holding exploded past my lips.

“Fine. But I want you to understand something.” He strode toward me, pointing a rigid finger at my chest. I licked my lips, realizing his eyes had darkened to a deeper green with his anger.

I shook my head, once again trying to shove the wayward thoughts out of my mind. Jerking my chin higher, I squared my shoulders. “What’s that?”

Wade stared at me, and I watched the moment the rage subsided. “I’m not doing this for you,” he spat, then turned on his heel and marched out the door, slamming it behind him.

“Neither am I,” I whispered.

Chapter Five

I arrived at the creamery bright and early the next morning, only to find myself alone. Checking my phone, I sighed and leaned my head back against the seat. We hadn't technically agreed on a time, but as the sign on the shop claimed they opened at nine, though it was currently closed to customers. I had assumed arriving an hour earlier would be my best bet.

But apparently Mr. Wade Tucker did not agree.

With each passing minute, my annoyance grew, and by the time an hour had passed, I was ready to give him a piece of my mind. When ten o'clock rolled around and he still hadn't shown up, I shoved myself out of the car, needing to pace off my anger.

"No good, good for nothing... Who does he think he is? I'm not made of time!" Checking my watch, I shook my head, pulling my keys from my purse and marching toward the door. "Fine. I'll do it myself."

Just as I shoved the key in the lock, I heard the crunch of gravel under tires. I didn't even bother to look, just pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

My anger only rose as I looked around and wondered for what felt like the millionth time when the shop had last had a good, deep clean. I decided that was the first thing we would tackle.

Setting my purse on the counter, I made my way into the back, groaning at how cluttered it was. Had it always been like this? How had Beau worked like this? How did Wade?

Rolling my eyes, I set about finding cleaning products and buckets. After a quick search, I found a half empty bottle of floor cleaner, some window cleaner that looked like it had been there a while, and a bottle of bleach. I dumped it all into an empty five gallon bucket and declared it a

good enough start. With a grunt, I hefted the bucket and waddled back to the front of the shop, vowing to pick up a gym membership as soon as possible.

Wade stood in the middle of the room, taking a long drink from a plastic water bottle. His brows rose as I came in, curiosity coloring his features. He was wearing yet another tank top, this one blue. Did the man not own any other clothes?

“What are you doing with all that?” he asked, replacing the cap on his bottle.

“This place. Is. Disgusting.” I huffed, dropping the bucket. Goodness, if I was finding it this heavy, how was I going to move it once I had water in it?

Wade rolled his eyes, coming toward me and grabbing the bucket easily with one hand. “Give me that.”

I bit back my retort, inhaling deeply. He smelled of the sun, lemon, and soap. It was oddly pleasing, and I found myself wanting to take another deep breath. Then I did.

“Did you just...?”

My eyes went wide, and I felt the heat creep up my neck. *Did I just sniff you? Yes. Yes, I did.* “No. I mean... What?”

Wade stared at me, looking me up and down before shaking his head and pulling the bottles of cleaner out of the bucket. “There’s a spicket outside. I’ll go fill this up.”

“Does it have hot water? Because hot water cleans better.” I wasn’t looking at him as I spoke but felt the weight of his eyes on me. “What?” I turned, crossing my arms over my chest as I prepared for the fight.

“Hot water cleans better?” He seemed dubious, his head tilted to the side, blond hair falling in front of his eyes in an annoyingly attractive way. Why didn’t he just cut it?

“Yes. Studies have shown that hot water kills germs. Or are you going to argue with science?” I lifted my chin, staring him down.

Wade didn’t say anything. Simply shrugged and moved toward a large sink in the back of the room. With a rougher flick of his wrist than was necessary, he turned on the hot water tap and stuck the bucket underneath the faucet.

“Okay. So, um. I thought we could start with the walls and windows. We’re going to need to move things out of here so that Mr. Mcallister can

get in here to make his repairs--”

“Wait a minute.” Wade held up a hand, cutting me off. “You want to clean this place up, only to have Ryan come in here and mess it all up again?”

I barely bit back my sigh of annoyance. “If we clean up, it will give me a better idea of what we can keep and what needs to be replaced.”

“We?”

“Yes, Wade, *we*. Do you have a problem with that?” I snapped, hating how quickly this man could get under my skin. I had never met someone who could so easily annoy me with little more than a look.

He shook his head, exhaling heavily. “Oh, no. I wanted to spend the day cleaning.”

“Wonderful,” I chirped, ignoring the sarcasm in his tone as I went back to looking at the cleaner bottles. “Are these the only cleaners you have here? Most of these are expired.”

Wade set the half full bucket of water on the floor in front of me, his brows pulled together. “Cleaners expire?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The scowl that turned his lips only made me laugh harder. “Yes, cleaners expire.” I shook my head. “Where’s the closest store? We’re going to need to get supplies.”

“You couldn’t have come to that conclusion *before* I filled up the bucket of water?”

I winced, glancing down at the bucket then back up at him, biting my lower lip. “I’m sorry?”

He shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “Come on, then. Grab what you need.”

Without waiting for me to answer, he strode from the shop, his long strides helping him easily cross the space in no time.

Sputtering, I grabbed my purse and jogged after him. “Excuse me. Where are you going?” I blinked as I stepped outside, lifting my hands to shield my eyes from the midday sun.

Wade stood beside his truck, the passenger door open, resting his forearm against the top of the door. “*We* are going to get cleaning supplies. Get in.”

I lifted my brows but decided against arguing and moved to climb up into the truck. I watched him jog around the front of the truck and climb in.

The large vehicle rumbled to life, and I secured my seat belt, leaning my head back against the seat.

We drove in silence for a time, with only the low murmur of the radio filling the space between us. I shifted in my seat, observing his profile. He had a strong jaw, and an angular nose. It was a pleasant sight. Licking my lips, I cleared my throat and sat up straighter.

“So, have you always lived in Haven?”

His hands flexed on the steering wheel, drawing my eye. Was this a touchy subject? Or was it just the fact that *I* was asking?

“Yeah, born and raised,” he said after a long pause.

I stayed quiet, waiting for him to elaborate. But he didn’t. Sighing, I fought the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. “How long have you been working at the shop?” I tried again.

This time he glanced my way, once brow lifting before turning his attention back to the road. “Since I was a kid.”

Again, I waited, frustration building in my stomach. “And?” I pushed, not hiding my annoyance.

He sighed heavily through his nose, his hands flexing on the wheel again. Good, he was annoyed too.

“I used to go there all the time when I was a kid. One night, I didn’t want to go home, so I begged Beau to let me stay. He put a broom in my hand, and that was that.”

“Why didn’t you want to go home?”

He fell silent, his focus on the road intensifying. I exhaled, resigning myself to the fact that he wasn’t going to answer. I stayed silent as we pulled into the parking lot of the general store, shifting in my seat to unbuckle after he’d turned off the engine. I had just reached for the handle when he spoke.

“Cause it was more fun being at the creamery than being at home.” He shrugged, pushing open the door and exiting the truck. “You coming? I don’t want to get yelled at for picking the wrong products.”

I rolled my eyes and got out. Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I marched past him. “I wouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“Oh, really? So, what was all that before?” he asked, his longer legs easily catching up with me. Inching in front of me, he pulled the door open, holding it wide for me.

Eyeing him suspiciously, I slipped past him and into the general store. “That was you being very rude. But I’m willing to move past that in an effort to work together.” I turned on my heel, looking up at him. “Do you think you can handle that?”

His crooked grin was quick and devilish, blond hair falling into his eyes as he leaned toward me. “Sweetheart, I can handle anything.”

Issuing a sound of disgust, I rolled my eyes and turned my back to him, studying the signs above the aisles as I searched for the cleaning supplies.

“This way,” Wade said with a chuckle, brushing past me and leading me in the right direction. Pulling faces at his back, I followed him.

After completing our purchases, which I was more than a little surprised that Wade had offered to pay for, we headed back to the shop to dive into cleaning. Wade produced a radio and tuned it to the local country station, turning it up loud enough that casual conversation would have been an issue. I didn’t entirely mind, however. Music motivated me, and the beat was steady enough to keep me going. I claimed one of the smaller buckets we’d purchased, filled it with hot, soapy water, and set to task.

In a strange way, we worked really well together. There wasn’t much need for talking, and we both instinctively gravitated toward cleaning the same things, which only made the job go faster.

After a few solid hours, I was sweating like a sinner in church, but the walls and counters were shining like they were brand new. Wiping my forearm across my brow, I smiled as I looked around.

“This is awesome. We’re doing great. I think we should wait on the floors though, yeah?” I glanced at Wade as he gave a grunt of approval, lifting my brows in question. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one sweating.

A dark stain dipped in a deep V on his chest, and the back of his shirt clung to him like a second skin. I tried to swallow, my throat suddenly dry as I moved toward the counter to get a glass of water.

Wade moved toward me, pressing past me as he too filled a glass. Inhaling sharply, I was flooded by his scent, my cheeks warming at his closeness. Clearing my throat, I slipped past him, ducking my head. “So, uh, I think now might be a good time to break for lunch?”

He downed his glass in three gulps, half turning to fill it up once more before nodding. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

I waited for him to say more, then sighed. “Do you have any suggestions on where we could get lunch? Since you’re the longer resident here?”

Turning, he stared at me, leaning back against the counter. He was silent for a time, occasionally taking a drink from the glass. It was all I could do not to squirm in frustration. Was he being purposely obtuse? Or was he just *that* deep a thinker? I doubted it was the later.

I winced at the thought. *Be nice, Lemon. You barely know the man.*

“We could order from Betty Ann’s. She’s got a delivery boy now. Bring it right to the shop,” Wade said finally, pushing away from the counter and moving toward the back.

Lifting my brows, I followed him, leaning against the doorframe as he rifled through a desk I hadn’t noticed before. It was covered in papers, old wrappers, and receipts. Sitting in the corner was a small picture frame. I gasped softly as I recognized the image. Moving away from the door, I lifted the picture, running my thumb over the dusty glass, clearing the faces held within.

“I can’t believe he kept this,” I whispered, my throat tightening as I studied the image.

I had to have been about six. My hair was in pigtails, with huge bobbles holding each tail tightly. My smile was so wide, it looked like it would split my face in two, and ice cream stained my mouth and chin. I sat on top of Beauregard’s shoulders, the plantation house in the background, both of us caught forever in laughter. What we had been laughing about, I couldn’t remember. He looked so young in the picture. Young, yet old at the same time.

Wade glanced up and over, straightening with a paper in his hand. I felt his eyes on me, studying me. “That’s you?”

I nodded mutely, setting the frame back on the desk. “Yes. It was one of the few times we visited. I hardly remember it.”

“Well, you look pretty young there,” Wade muttered, clearing his throat and thrusting a take away menu at me. “Here.”

I took the menu, blinking as he stalked off. What had I said wrong now? Gritting my teeth, I balled my hands into fists and marched after him.

“Hey! What the heck is your problem?” I snapped, planting my hands on my hips and staring him down.

He kept his back to me for a time, then turned and shook his head. “Just hungry. Did you look at what you want?”

Narrowing my eyes, I shook my head. *Pick your battles*. Slapping the menu on the counter, I looked it over

“I want the turkey club with fries and extra mayo.”

Wade looked at me, one brow lifting as his lips curved upward. “Extra mayo?”

“I like to dip my fries in it...” I muttered, fighting the urge to scuff my toe.

His smirk holding, Wade placed the order and we puttered around at some light cleaning while we waited. We didn’t have to wait too long before there was a knock on the door, and, to my surprise, a familiar face popped in, smiling brightly.

“Did y’all order delivery?”

I smiled brightly, crossing toward her and happily taking the food from her. “Daisy! I wasn’t expecting you to show up.” Hadn’t Wade mentioned a delivery *boy*?

Her smile held. “Well, when I saw the delivery address, I couldn’t help myself! I’ve been pretty curious about how things are going over here since it closed down.” She looked over my shoulder and raising on her tiptoes, trying to see past me. “Didn’t expect to see you here, though!”

“There ain’t much to see yet,” Wade chuckled, and surprised me when he pulled out his wallet and paid for the entire order. Maybe he had a gentlemanly bone in his body after all.

Daisy pouted slightly, though it didn’t last long before her smile returned. “That’s okay. I’ll be first in line on opening day. You can count on that. See ya, Lemon. Come by and see me, I mean it!” She waved, then bounced out of the shop.

After separating out our orders, Wade and I ate, the silence soon getting to me.

“Are you always so quiet?” I inquired, popping a fry into my mouth. It was probably one of the best fries I’d ever tasted, and I was only more surprised when Wade had informed me that they were made by hand every morning.

Wade’s head popped up, his eyes curious as they found mine. “No?”

“Oh, so I’m just the lucky recipient of your perpetual cold shoulder, then?”

Wade rolled his eyes, sighing and wiping his hands off on a napkin. “What do you want to talk about?”

I shrugged, dropping my gaze to the table. “You said you’d worked here since you were a kid.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, what was Beau really like?” I almost whispered the question, but he heard me.

“What do you mean?”

“I only met him in person a few times, it was hard for him to leave the creamery, and with my parents’ schedules, traveling wasn’t always easy. I knew him through his letters, but... I wondered if he was different in person. That’s all.”

“He was a good man. He loved this place.” He paused, glancing around, as if remembering what it used to be. Leaning back in his chair, he chuckled, that crooked grin popping out once again. “He just loved this town. And everyone in it. No one was a stranger to him. Need help? He’d offer it, no matter what it was or how little he actually knew about it. He’d figure it out or find someone who could do it for you.”

I shook my head, toying with a fry. “I wish I had known him like that.” I swallowed deeply, trying to force down the emotion that choked my words. “I miss him. It’s so hard to be here. To know he’ll never be here again...”

I closed my eyes, my breath all but stopping when I felt a warm hand cover my own. Lifting my lashes, I watched Wade’s thumb caress the back of my hand, fighting against the shivers that rose up and down my spine. Could this be the olive branch we both needed?

Looking up at him, I offered a small smile, wondering if I was finally managing to break away at the chip on his shoulder, brick by brick.

“Wade, I would really like it if you would show me how to run the shop. It would mean a lot to me.” I licked my lips, meeting his gaze.

He jerked his hand away from mine, clearing his throat as if he’d done something wrong. He studied me for a long moment before nodding. “Well, as it seems I won’t be rid of you, I might as well show you how to not screw this all up.”

Chapter Six

It took longer than I'd originally thought to get everything up to par. Ryan Mcallister and his team had made all the repairs and updates I had asked for over the course of the next four months. While I waited, I went through the accounting books to acquaint myself with the inner workings of the creamery. I had gone over them multiple times, but still noticed something strange.

"Wade?" I called, moving into the formal living room. I'd divided the room in Beau's house to function as both a living room and an office for the duration of the remodel at the creamery.

He grunted, hunched over the desk.

Biting back the urge to roll my eyes, I cleared my throat and stepped up beside him. "I found an anomaly when it came to our lemon orders. More so the lack of payment for them. Care to explain?"

I lifted my brows as he straightened, looking up at me in confusion. "What?"

This time I did roll my eyes. "Where are the lemons coming from, Wade? They're listed on all the purchase orders, yet there's no receipts. Are we stealing lemons?"

Wade dropped his pen with a chuckle, running his hand over his face. "No, we're not stealing lemons. There's no receipts because they come from the grove."

"What grove?" I closed the book, perplexed.

"*The* grove. The lemon grove." He spoke slowly, as if afraid my brain was not actually capable of understanding his words. At my continued look of confusion, he sighed and leaned back in the chair. "You didn't know Beau had a lemon grove?"

I shook my head as he stood, stretching out the kinks in his back. It was only then did I realize how long we'd been going over paperwork.

"Come on," Wade said, gesturing for me to follow him as he left the room.

Blinking in surprise, I hurried after him. "Where are we going?"

Wade looked at me over his shoulder, his expression clearly screaming '*really?*'. I bit my lower lip, feeling the blush heat my neck and cheeks. I paused at his truck, looking at him when he pulled open the passenger door for me. When I didn't move, he made an exaggerated gesture, that crooked grin popping out.

"Well? The day's not getting any younger."

Rolling my eyes, I moved past him and climbed into the truck, watching as he jogged around the front. It was all too familiar, and I couldn't help but think back to the day we'd cleaned the creamery. After having such a rocky start, things between us had seemed to change that day. We'd actually been able to put aside our differences and work together. I was hoping the trend would continue through the rest of the year.

After a short drive down a road I hadn't noticed before, we pulled off into a small dirt parking area. Leafy lemon trees spread out in picture perfect rows before us, and I couldn't help but stare. There had to be about two hundred trees, maybe more. Shaking my head, I turned toward Wade.

"I never knew this was here," I murmured, moving toward a waist high fence that surrounded the grove. "The few times I came to visit, we always stayed by the house and never really explored the property."

Wade chuckled, stepping up beside me, leaning against the fence. "Well, it's been here since before I started working for Beau. Once I showed I was good at sweeping floors, he brought me out here. Showed me how to work the irrigation system, care for the soil, and check the leaves for pests. I spent most of my summers out here with the trees."

I glanced toward him, swallowing at our closeness. If I shifted, just a little, our arms would be touching. Heat filled my cheeks, and I bit my tongue to keep from laughing at myself. It was so juvenile. *Oh, our arms are touching!* I shook my head slightly, returning my focus to the conversation at hand.

"You mentioned that you started working for Beau because you didn't want to go home one night... Why didn't you want to go home?"

Wade didn't say anything for a long moment, simply stared out at the trees. I watched him, taking the time to really study the man. He was such an enigma to me. Constantly hot and cold, I never knew what to expect from him on a given day.

"My father was not a nice man."

His words were so soft, I almost didn't catch them. Shifting against the fence, I turned to face him better, listening intently. Sighing, Wade looked down at his clasped hands, drawing my attention to them. Small scars were scattered over his knuckles and the backs of his hands.

"He liked to drink. A lot. And when he drank, he got mean. Meaner than when he was sober."

"Wade," I said, my throat choked with emotion. Taking a risk, I reached out and gently placed my fingers on his arm, waiting for him to shake me off. He didn't.

"No, it's okay." He exhaled, glancing at my hand before lifting his eyes to mine. "It just kept escalating, you know? As it does. That night, at the creamery, I just couldn't go back. I begged Beau to let me stay, and it all came out. My father's abuse. Beau took me to the hospital. The police came, took pictures, asked me a million questions. But I never had to go back. One of the deputies went and got my things, and I stayed with Beau until I was old enough to move into the guest house."

Licking my lips, I shook my head, fighting against the tears that threatened to overwhelm me. "You really have been here. I'm so sorry. The words seem so inadequate, but... I am really sorry you went through all that."

Wade flashed me his signature grin, straightening up. "Beau turned me into the man I am today. He showed me that I was worthy of being loved." He shrugged, rubbing his hands together, gaze dropping, as if realizing he'd said too much. "He was like a father to me, Lemon."

Swallowing hard, I reached for his hand. "Thank you. For telling me this. For... Sharing him with me." Lifting a hand, I gently touched his cheek, feeling the rough stubble beneath my fingertips. I pressed my lips together as I lowered my hand. He hadn't pulled away.

Our eyes met, held. Fire burned low in my belly, and I felt my breath catch in my chest at the intensity of his stare. This time I didn't feel weighed. Judged. This time, I felt hunger. Wanting. "Wade..."

I closed my eyes, my heart pounding in my chest as I leaned forward. This was it, this was the turning point. I had wondered if the attraction was one sided, but after his long stare, I was certain I was right.

I jerked back as I felt his fingertips brush across my cheek, my eyes flying open when he cleared his throat.

“You, uh, had an eyelash.” He cleared his throat again, stepping back and rubbing at the back of his neck.

Awkward didn’t even *begin* to cover it.

Blinking rapidly, I forced myself to swallow, cheeks flaming. Letting go a soft little squeak, I darted around him, running toward the truck. As soon as I reached it, I wished I had driven myself. Climbing inside, I sunk down in the seat, crossing my arms over my chest and curling into myself. I wanted nothing more than to disappear.

After a few agonizing moments, I heard the door open and felt the truck shift as Wade got in. Thankfully, he said nothing, simply shifted into gear and drove me back to the main house.

I stared at the glove compartment as Wade pushed the gear shift into park, though he didn’t turn off the truck. The scene ran through my head over and over. How had I misjudged it all so badly? Sure, if I was honest with myself, I was more than a little attracted to the man. Who wouldn’t be? He was gorgeous. And he was all the more tempting when he wasn’t being a bristly grump.

“So, uh...” Wade started, shifting in his seat. I squeezed my eyes closed, praying he would just let it go. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

I nodded, still not able to meet his gaze. Keeping my head down, I fumbled for the door, all but falling out of the truck as I murmured a hasty, “Goodnight, Wade.”

It took everything within me not to run up the steps and into the house. Once the door was firmly closed behind me, I pressed my back against the wood. I listened as the truck idled for longer than necessary, then finally pulled away. Covering my face with my hands, I let go a cry of frustration before pushing away from the door and heading upstairs.

How was I supposed to face him tomorrow? How would it not be horribly awkward? Exhaling heavily, I grabbed one of my most comfy pairs of pajamas and headed to take a shower. Maybe the water would somehow wash away the embarrassment.

Chapter Seven

I had stayed away from the creamery for a few days after the encounter at the grove. I was a coward, and I knew it. But I just couldn't face Wade yet. I had hoped that putting some distance between us would make things less awkward when we saw each other again.

I had run the gamut of emotions: certain he had caught my awkward lean in, positive he hadn't. But mostly praying that he'd just ignore my little slip up and let it all go, never speaking a word of it again.

I knew I couldn't stay away from the creamery much longer. I'd busied myself making fliers and placing ads about the reopening. My goal was to hype up the town as much as possible, and really make the event a huge hit.

Blowing out a breath, I climbed out of the faded yellow Volkswagen Beetle. Yet another of the seemingly endless things Beau had left to me. I was starting to worry just what "other properties" truly meant.

I had laughed and cried when I'd come across the car, the license plate proudly reading LMNGRV. Lemon Grove. Beau had certainly been proud of his business. And I honestly couldn't blame him. I was more than a little pleased with how things had been coming along.

I looked up at the building, smiling at the newly painted exterior. Wade and I had argued to no end over the colors for the creamery, finally settling on a pale yellow exterior with white trim. A rose and white awning shaded the door, and two small circular tables offered outdoor seating, their umbrellas matching the awning. A new sign for the door had been ordered, and I felt my throat close up as I looked it over. The words Sweet Rose Creamery curved in an elegant script, a fully bloomed rose sitting in an ice cream cup beneath the words. The new logo was modern, while still holding onto the past. The perfect blending of old and new.

I had just reached for the door when it opened, Wade leaning out with a crooked grin. “You just going to stand out there staring all day?”

I laughed, playfully pushing past him. “I was taking it all in. Ryan and his team really did an amazing job--” I stopped short, all but gasping as I looked around the interior. It was like a whole new shop. Black and white parquet flooring shined under the new lights, somehow warm and inviting, despite the monochrome colors. The new coolers were a glossy black with pale rose accents. The walls were also a pale rose, pinstriped with the pale yellow from outside. I was all but giddy as I looked around. One glance at Wade said I wasn’t alone in my mood.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, throat tight, hands pressed to my lips. Excitement coursed through me, forcing me to hold in the sudden urge to dance.

“It really is. I wasn’t sure about the colors, but somehow, they work. You’ve got a good eye for this kind of thing. Look here.” Heat crept up my neck as Wade gently touched my lower back, guiding me toward the back of the shop.

We had opted to expand the back area, offering more storage space, a small office area, and more room for the newer machines and appliances that Wade had selected. We’d argued over that, too. In the end, I had deferred to his hands on knowledge, but held that the same knowledge could be learned from books. And I planned to prove myself right.

Placing his hand on the small of my back again, he led me toward the wall where four brand new machines stood. Each one seemed to sparkle, begging to be turned on. Like a giddy school boy, Wade reached out, placing his hand on top of the nearest machine.

“These are amazing, Lemon. They’re the best on the market, with a lifetime warranty. If anything breaks, we send it back and bam! They fix it right away.”

My face hurt from smiling so much. “They’re beautiful. Do you know how they work?” I moved forward, my fingers itching to touch and play.

Wade snorted, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the side of the machine. “Of course I do.”

I glanced up at him, a smart response on my tongue when I blinked. “You’re not wearing a tank top.”

In all my excitement, I hadn’t realized he’d dressed up a touch. Well, what I assumed was dressing up for him. A dark blue polo covered his torso, the buttons undone. His long legs were clad in dark wash denim, and

he wore dark brown boots. I swallowed the sudden pool of saliva quickly and dropped my gaze. If I studied him any harder, I might actually drool.

“Nah, thought I’d mix it up a little today. Is it Lemon approved?” His smile didn’t falter, but his tone dropped just enough to have shivers darting up and down my spine.

Clearing my throat, I tucked my hair behind my ear, my cheeks flaming as I caught sight of his knowing grin. “You...You look nice.”

“Thank you.” Wade chuckled, pushing away from the machine and getting impossibly close. “Now, I’m going to need you to pay attention.”

I tried. Lord knows, I tried. But his scent filled my nose with each breath. Citrus and salt. Fresh, clean, and so darn alluring. Through the racing of my pulse, I could hear his muffled words as he spoke about the machine. But try as I might, I couldn’t make out a darn thing he said.

“Is there a user manual?” I asked suddenly, my words made sharper from the overwhelming emotions I was battling.

Wade blinked at me, straightening up with a frown. “Yeah, of course. The books are in the office, but I figured--”

“I learn better if I can read how things are done,” I blurted, my eyes widening slightly at the blatant lie. Wade stared at me, his brows raising slightly. It was obvious he didn’t believe me. But he didn’t argue, simply shrugged.

“Alright. I’ll go grab one of the books.” He studied me dubiously before turning and disappearing into the office.

Covering my face with my hands, I pressed my back against the wall and wished I could scream. If I couldn’t get my hormones in check, this was never going to work. But I would have sworn, right hand on the Bible, that he’d been flirting with me.

So, it wasn’t all me. Was it?

I jerked and smoothed my shirt as Wade came out of the office, pasting a smile on my face as I turned to him and took the book. “Thanks. This’ll be great.”

“Uh huh,” He murmured, tucking his thumbs into his belt loops. I could feel his gaze on me, trying to figure me out.

“Oh! I almost forgot.” Turning on my heel, I moved swiftly into the front room of the shop. Much to my relief, Wade followed me. Opening my purse, I pulled out a small black notebook, bound together with ribbon and rubber bands. “Look what I found.”

Brow furrowed, Wade reached out for the book, gently sliding off the rubber bands. "What is this?"

"It's Beau's recipe book. I found it at the house." Rising on my tiptoes, I leaned toward him as he opened the book. My heart clenched at the familiar script flowing across the pages.

Wade jerked his gaze toward me, and I gasped, pulling back. I hadn't meant to get so close. He held my gaze, his lips quirking upward. "I never knew he had a recipe book."

Licking my lips, I reached over and turned a few pages. "I thought this recipe could be good for the reopening. What do you think?"

"Lemon sorbet?"

"Yeah. I just figured, we have the lemons, and, well... My name..." Biting my lower lip, I glanced up at him. "Is it stupid?"

He shook his head, tracing over the recipe with his finger tip. "No, it's not stupid. Not at all."

Excitement leapt in my heart and I clapped my hands together before wincing. "I'm sorry. I was just so afraid you'd tell me it was a dumb idea."

"No reason to be sorry." He smiled, closing the book and setting it on the counter. "Why would you assume I'd think it was dumb?"

"Well, you've been pretty hot and cold with me." I decided to be blunt.

Wade winced, rubbing the back of his neck. "It wasn't anything personal." He chuckled at my raised brow as he lowered his arm. "Honest. I just don't do well with people trying to take control."

Instantly I flashed back to the conversation we'd had at the grove. Of course. It all made more sense now that I understood his background. Beau had been the closest thing he'd had to a true father, and then I'd shown up, taking away everything he'd worked for his whole life.

"Wade..."

"So, about the reopening," Wade cut me off, clearing his throat. "I had an idea about that."

"Oh?"

He nodded, shifting to face me. "You're so certain you have all you need to run this place. Because you read a few books."

I held up a hand, scoffing. "I read more than a 'few' books, thank you."

My argument only made his grin grow wider. "Right. So, you with all your book knowledge, and me with my having worked here since I was a kid..."

“Go on,” I said warily, my stomach tightening.

“What if we made it a wager?” He leaned toward me, until our noses were all but touching. “We each make a batch for the reopening. Serve samples to everyone who comes. Let the people vote on who’s best.”

I blinked rapidly, brow furrowing. A bet? I had never expected something like that. “And what would the winner get?”

“Aside from bragging rights?” He licked his lips, looking around before spreading his arms wide. “Winner gets the creamery.”

I stared at him, my jaw dropping slightly. He wasn’t serious. Was he? No, he couldn’t be serious. And yet...

“Are you kidding?” I blurted, an almost hysterical laugh bursting from me. I slapped a hand over my lips at the hurt that darted across his face. It wasn’t that the thought was funny. It wasn’t by any means. Though it did terrify me, if I were honest with myself.

He gave a rough shrug and closed in on himself, dropping his gaze to the floor as he folded his arms across his chest. Effectively shutting me out. “Yeah. Is it such a crazy idea? I love this place, Lemon. It’s home to me. I don’t want to lose it.”

“Why do you assume you would lose it? I never said anything about not keeping you on staff...” I frowned, brow furrowing. “You’re a hard worker, that much is obvious. And it’s very apparent Beau thought so too, since he made you the manager.”

The sardonic laugh that burst from him had my lips pressing together in a firm line. “Is there something wrong with what I said?”

Wade sighed, shifting to look at me, his eyes hard. “Do you think that’s what I really want with my life? To just be a staff member here the rest of my days? I want more than that, Lemon. I want to run this business. I’ve put in the time. This has been my dream.”

I studied him, heart pounding in my chest. I should have known. Of *course*, he wanted the creamery. He’d already expressed his shock that Beau hadn’t left it to him in the first place. All the pushing and pulling over the last few months had been leading up to this. He’d been testing me. Testing my resolve.

Well, Mr. Wade Tucker had no idea how competitive I could be.

Squaring my shoulders, I thrust my right hand out, chin jutting upward. “Alright, you’ve got a bet. But I should warn you,” I leaned toward him, lowering my tone, “I only ever play to win.”

His large hand closed over mine, grip firm and tight. His smile was dark and delicious as he closed the distance between us.

“I like a woman with spirit. Don’t worry, maybe you’ll impress me enough to let you stay on staff... *When* I win.”

His words made my spine stiffen, even as my stomach tightened and my knees threatened to dissolve into nothing. Confusion and excitement warred within me as he released my hand.

With everything I was working toward on the line, I knew I had to win. But in winning, did I risk losing everything?

When I returned to the house, I brewed a pot of coffee and curled up on the couch to study the user manual for the ice cream machines. I read the book cover to cover, then pulled out my laptop and spent the rest of the afternoon geeking out as I read over different recipes and watched videos on how to make ice cream. It was fascinating, in a way, how it all came together to make a delicious treat. From my research, I’d discovered that most places started with a base mix, then added flavorings, syrups, and mix-ins from there. I made a mental note to ask Wade where our base came from. I loved the idea of sourcing from one of the local dairies.

With a yawn, I finally closed my laptop as my stomach let out a loud rumble. Blinking, I winced at how stiff my muscles were. Rising from the couch, I groaned loudly as I stretched, glancing around and gasping as I caught sight of the clock. I had been researching for hours. I had to chuckle at my abject nerdiness. Put a book or something new to learn in front of me, and I was gone.

Rubbing at my stomach, I padded into the kitchen, deciding to make a sandwich and head to bed. My head felt full of knowledge, and my confidence in my ability to craft the perfect ice cream was bubbling.

Humming to myself, I built my sandwich, my excitement growing, my mind full of ice cream recipes and dreams of the reopening. Things finally felt like they were falling into place.

Leaning against the counter, I looked around the kitchen, warmth filling me. I couldn’t believe that I’d already been here for four months. Everything had moved much faster than I had expected it to, and yet everything about being here felt *right*.

I'd had my doubts when I first arrived. All I had wanted to do was sell everything and go back home to D.C. Staying somewhere alien to me certainly hadn't been high on my list of things to do. But since I'd arrived, things had seemed to click easily into place. Everyone here was just so nice and welcoming, and even things with Wade were smoothing out.

Stifling another yawn, I plated my sandwich and decided to go against my normal rules and eat in bed. It would be a long few days before the reopening, and I needed to make sure I was well rested.

Chapter Eight

As Summer relinquished her hold to Fall, thunderstorms rolled in. I'd lived through winter storms growing up in D.C., but the thunderstorms of Haven were something to be seen. Howling wind and almost endless rain seemed to plague our little town.

Rain or shine, the day before the grand reopening grew close. Excitement and nerves filled my stomach at the thought of finally making my first batch of ice cream. Wade had offered to come in and help me with my batch, but I had turned him down, telling him that was cheating. I had no intention of helping him to make his, so it was only fair. He didn't seem sold on the idea, even going so far as to express his concern over the new machines. I didn't know why he was so worried, and I told him so. I had read over all the books and been studying how to make ice cream for weeks. It didn't seem that hard.

But now the time had come to put my plans into action, my confidence was waning, and the rain certainly wasn't helping. Groaning loudly, I zipped up my rain coat, beelined out the door to the carport, and jumped into the yellow Volkswagen beetle. Slamming the door, I panted, listening to the rain beat down on the aluminum roof of the carport. A low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, a sure sign that the rain was going to turn into more.

Starting the car, I carefully backed out into the rain. The wipers scraped against the windshield as I drove. Wincing, I made a mental note to have them changed.

The parking lot of the creamery was little more than a puddle, and I had to fight back another groan at the thought of trudging through the depths. *Mental note, buy rain boots.* Gritting my teeth, I threw open the door and

ran toward the creamery, yelping as my suede boots slid on the black and white floor. Getting my balance, I pushed my damp hair from my eyes and set my purse on the counter before calling out.

“Wade?”

I hadn’t seen his truck outside, but I had been more focused on getting out of the rain. Leaning around the counter, I looked toward the back of the shop, calling out again.

“Wade?”

Again, I was met with no response. Certain he wasn’t there, I reached into my purse for a hair tie and Beau’s recipe book. After putting my hair in a ponytail, I made my way toward the back, pausing briefly to turn on the radio we had installed. Country music filled the store, something I was growing more and more fond of the longer I stayed in Haven.

Bopping my head to the music, I chuckled as I saw a line of canisters sitting on the stainless steel metal table we’d installed beside the machines. A piece of notebook paper was tucked beneath one of the canisters.

Pulling the paper free, I smirked as I read the note. “May the best recipe win. -*Wade*.”

Shaking my head, I set the paper down, opening the recipe book over top it. “Oh, don’t you worry. Mine will.”

I read over the recipe once more, nodding to myself. We had a base mix made, but since I was making a sorbet, I would need to do one myself. And I wasn’t about to call Wade out for “assisting” me in laying out the ingredients I would need.

Taking a deep breath, I rubbed my hands together and got to work. Looking over the machine, I flipped the appropriate switches and pressed the buttons to get them going. Humming along to the song, I reached out and grabbed ingredients, listing them off in my head as I went.

Sugar, water, lemons, lemon zest.

It certainly seemed easy enough.

With care, I measured out each ingredient, pouring it into the bucket to mix together. Biting my lower lip, I lifted a perfectly yellow lemon, looking at Beau’s recipe once more. In his beautifully classic script, it read, “*Add two tablespoons of rosewater **before** mixing. Allow to settle, then mix.*”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Uncle,” I muttered, carefully slicing the lemon and removing the seeds. Holding it over the bucket, I

squeezed the juice out, yelping and giggling as the pulp shot everywhere. *Whoops*. I was going to have to clean that up, but I didn't mind.

Using a large wooden spoon, I gently stirred the mixture ten times clockwise, then ten times counter clockwise. After studying his recipe for so long, I pretty much knew it by heart.

Licking my lips, I lifted the bucket and gently poured the mixture into the machine. It flowed like silken water, and soon the bucket was empty.

Setting the timer, I glanced back at the recipe, wrinkling my nose as I had done every time I read it. *To make the candied rose petals...* It just seemed like such an odd ingredient to me. Not feeling confident in my ability to do that, I'd opted to forgo the rose petal garnish. I stood in silence, my mind lost to memories as the hum of the machine mixed with the music on the radio, lulling me into an almost trance-like state.

A loud boom of thunder made me yelp and jump back. The storm, it seemed, had finally caught up with me. Stepping away from the machine, I moved toward the front of the shop, shocked to see how dark the sky had gotten. Leaning forward until my nose was all but pressed to the glass, I let out another little shriek as a brilliant bolt of lightning ripped across the sky, followed rapidly by a deafening roar of thunder.

Then everything went dark.

An undignified scream tore through me as I spun around in the darkness. It was as if the day had been plunged into darkest night. I couldn't see a thing.

Another bolt of lightning illuminated the room for a second, and I stumbled toward the counter, grabbing for my purse and fishing out my phone. The light of my phone blinded me as I pulled up my contacts, and with a shaking hand I pressed the phone to my ear.

"Need my help now, do you? Sorry, it's not gonna be that easy. You wanted to figure it out on your own, remember?" Wade's warm voice flowed down the line, drawing a slight smile to my lips even as my heart pounded in my chest.

"Wade, I'm at the creamery. I think the storm knocked out the power." I looked back over my shoulder, into the darkness, finally realizing the sudden and terrifying quiet. "The machines have stopped."

"That usually happens when the power goes out." Wade's lack of concern was less than comforting.

“My sorbet isn’t done yet!” I cried, pacing the dark front room. “All we’re going to have for the reopening is sorbet soup!” His light chuckle at the other end of the line had my frustration growing. “This is a disaster, Wade! How are we going to fix this?”

“One, maybe *you’ll* have sorbet soup. But my ice cream is already finished. Consider that your first lesson - always think ahead.” My hope of receiving any help from Wade was quickly plummeting. “And, two, I’m surprised you didn’t find anything in your books that would help you out. Power outages suck, but I don’t see a problem from where I’m standing. People have made ice cream since before there was electricity.”

“But--” I tried but was quickly cut off.

“Goodnight, Lemon.” He sounded much too smug as the line went dead.

Turning my back to the window, I growled and tightened my grip on my phone, resisting the urge to throw it. Wade knew he’d beaten me. All because of some stupid storm! It wasn’t even within my control - I *knew* I’d done it right! But unless I could MacGyver a rather large hamster wheel and spend the whole night running to keep the power on, all hope seemed lost.

Letting loose a heavy sigh, I pressed my back to the cool glass and slid down to the floor. It was a stupid bet, I knew, but why had I ever taken it? I should have known I’d be too far in over my head. But I had been confident I could learn it all from books. Positive I could make this business thrive on theory alone. It seemed mother nature had felt the need to put me in my place.

This was all a huge mess.

It was obvious to me now that I didn't belong here. Why had I even come in the first place? To appease my mother? She should’ve known I’d never be able to handle anything like this. For all I knew, she’d just wanted to get me out of the city for a few months. And yet, she’d been so enthusiastic about it all, so determined I should try.

I found myself absentmindedly flipping through the contacts on my phone once more, my thumb pressing the one labeled ‘MOM’ before I had a chance to reconsider.

“Lemon? Are you alright, sweetie?” The gentle concern in her voice had my throat tightening and tears welling.

“Mom, do you know how to make ice cream without a machine?” I croaked, barely able to get the words out.

“Oh, sweetie. No, I don’t. What happened?”

“It’s a disaster, mom. A complete failure.” I hiccupped, covering my face with my hand as I clung to the phone, wishing more than anything that she was here with me now, holding me. Comforting me.

“I’m sure it’s not all that bad.”

“But it is,” I cried, tears spilling down my cheeks.

“What happened?” My mother repeated the question, unrelenting.

“The power’s gone. Storm knocked it out. The machines won’t work. And I have no idea what to do about it. The reopening is tomorrow. And I’m up to my ankles in sorbet soup.”

To my mother’s credit, she didn’t laugh. A soft sigh floated down the line, and I could almost see the wheels turning in her head. “Well, maybe the power will come back on before the reopening, and you can just try again?”

I shook my head, letting it fall back against the rain washed glass. “No, mom. It’s too late. I... I did a stupid thing. And now it’s all over. I just want to come home. I don’t know what I was thinking. This is all just... Too much. I’m done. I just want to come home.”

“Lemon-”

“I made a bet, mom. I bet the I could make the better recipe. I bet the creamery. And now I’ve lost. It’s done. He’s won. Just let me come home.” Quiet sobs shook my shoulders as I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arm around them.

She didn’t say a word. Just let me cry until the sobbing subsided. My skin felt tight where the tears had dried, and I sniffled, wanting nothing more than to curl up into a ball and be done with the whole thing.

When she spoke again, her voice was whisper soft, and I wasn’t immediately certain I’d even heard correctly. “Your grandfather would be so proud of you, Lemon.”

My brow furrowed, confusion distracting me. “Bopee? Why would he be proud?”

The soft gasp had me straightening, my back stiffening as I went on high alert. “Mom?”

Her breath shuddered, her words hesitant and slow. “Lemon... I don’t mean Bopee.” She took another shuddering breath, as if preparing to rip off an emotional band aid. “I mean my *real* father. The man you knew as your Great Uncle Beau.”

My heart stopped, breath seizing in my chest as she continued. Apparently, Beauregard hadn't always been a bachelor. On the contrary, when he was younger, he fell very much in love with a young woman. Their love was hot and fast, and soon they found out they were with child.

Neither were ready for the burden of a child, both barely children themselves. And they came to the decision that adoption would be best for their baby girl. Luckily, Beau's sister had been having difficulty conceiving and offered to take in the baby. Probably for the better, as it apparently hadn't worked out between Beau and his lady friend.

The woman I had known as my grandmother was really my great aunt. And the man I had known as my Great Uncle was my grandfather. All those years. All those letters.

All that wasted time.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I whispered, my tone harsher than I meant.

"I don't know. At first, I wasn't sure. We didn't have the best relationship, Beau and I. And then I had you, and he loved you so. I named you Lemon for him, for his beautiful lemon grove. He begged to be in your life. I wanted you to make your own decisions about him, so I made him promise not to tell you until you were ready. But the time never seemed right, and it never came up..."

"Why would it? *How* would it? All that time, my whole life. And you kept it from me... How could you let me come here not knowing?" Rage filled me, burning through me white hot. I wanted to throw something. To hear it shatter. I wanted to scream, to empty myself of the confusion, the pain, the fear.

I looked around the dark shop, barely listening to my mother as she begged for me to understand. The brand new logo rested proudly on the back wall. Sweet Rose Creamery.

"He named the shop after you," I whispered, cutting her off. "All his recipes have the same secret ingredients: rosewater and lemon. Everything he did was for us. And I never knew."

It finally all made sense. Why he had left everything to me instead of Wade, who was the obvious better choice. He'd spent my whole life trying to love me, to get to know me as best he could. All while hiding my mother's secret.

Gritting my teeth, my gaze locked on the logo, and I knew I wouldn't be leaving Haven anytime soon.

Chapter Nine

I jerked awake to the sound of a bang and a soft curse. Blinking in confusion, I sat up with a groan, frowning as a soft, plaid blanket fell away from my shoulders. Rubbing at my eyes, and searching for my glasses, I tried to piece together how I'd come to be sleeping on the floor of the creamery.

Glasses found, I rose as another bang and curse sounded from down the hall. Stretching out my sore and stiff muscles, I shuffled forward, running my fingers through my hair and praying I didn't look as bad as I felt.

"Wade?" I croaked, rubbing at my throat and wishing I had stopped for a glass of water. He had his back to me, filling a large silver tub with ice cream. A glance over his shoulder and he shot me a quick smile, his eyes moving over me.

"Well good morning, Sunshine. Sleep well?"

I groaned, leaning against the wall and pressing my fingers to my temples, rubbing firmly. "I don't even remember falling asleep."

"You were knocked out when I got here. Didn't have the heart to wake you." I watched as he filled the tub with ease, taking the plastic bucket to the large sink and filling it with hot water, rinsing it clean in seconds.

"Last night was... an adventure," I muttered, unable to look away as he moved back toward the work table. He wore jeans again, a lighter wash this time, and a dark brown belt with a wide silver buckle. A white tank top was tucked into his jeans, holding perfectly to his body and momentarily distracting me.

"Well, I hope you're ready for another adventure." He chuckled, lifting the silver tub and turning toward me with a wink, then walking past me to the front cooler.

Clearing my throat, I shook my head and pushed away from the wall, following him. "What do you mean?"

Wade glanced at me, his smile delicious and annoying. "The reopening, remember?"

I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest. "Of course I remember. But it doesn't really matter now."

Wade turned toward me, his brow furrowed as he planted his hands on his hips. "Just what the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"You won, Wade," I cried, throwing my arms out to my sides. "The storm knocked out the machines. I've got nothing to serve today. So, you win." I swallowed deeply, feeling the familiar prickle of heat along my eyes. I bit my cheek, refusing to cry in front of him.

His confusion fell into an almost stern look as he stared me down. "You just gonna give up that easy?"

I scoffed, shaking my head. "What am I supposed to do? Serve sorbet soup? Because that's all I've got." I shook my head again, pressing my fingers to my forehead. "You were right, okay? I didn't prepare in time, and now I'm screwed."

A sharp sob broke past my lips, surprising us both. Spinning on my heel, I pressed my fist to my lips, fighting against the tears, willing away the emotions. Now was neither the time nor the place for this. I would mourn my loss later, when I was alone and in private.

A heavy sigh sounded behind me, and I all but jumped when warm hands closed over my shaking shoulders. "Sorbet soup. You sure about that?"

Shifting, I glanced over my shoulder at Wade, doing my best not to sneer. "I know what happens when the machine doesn't finish its cycle, Wade."

With a gentle squeeze, he moved around me, shrugging. "Well, maybe you should check the machine. That's all I'm saying."

I stared at his back as he walked away, confused but intrigued. I forced myself to stay where I was for a moment, not wanting to appear too curious or eager.

Swallowing deeply, I did my best to nonchalantly walk toward the row of machines, my palms sweating as I drew closer. Pausing before the one I'd been using last night, I glanced toward Wade, who was studiously

ignoring me. Biting my lower lip, I lifted the lid and gasped. Where I had expected to see soup and goo, I saw a beautiful mound of yellow sorbet.

I jumped back, the top falling into place with a soft clang. I stared at the machine a moment before darting back and opening the flap again, staring at it in wonder.

“How? How did this happen?” Whirling on my heel, I pointed at Wade accusingly. “You! What did you do? Did you do this?” I demanded, jabbing my finger toward the machine.

He turned slowly, looking from me to the machine and back again. “Did I do what?”

“Oh, stop that. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Did you make the sorbet for me?”

Wade chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest. “Now, why in the heck would I do that? We had a bet, remember? All I did was turn the machine on when I came in.” He shrugged, turning and grabbing a tub, offering it to me. “Don’t want to leave it in there too long.”

I took the container from him, watching him in awe as he turned, grabbed another tub of his ice cream, and carried it easily to the front. I shook my head, setting about filling my bucket with the sorbet.

Carrying the filled tub to the front, I set it in the cooler, and then went about getting everything ready for the reopening. Nerves rode my stomach hard, but there was excitement too. This was it. The final countdown. The moment where I proved myself to this town. To Wade. To myself.

My mother’s revelation hung like a dark cloud in the back of my mind. No matter how hard I tried to focus on the task at hand, my mind kept wandering to her words. Beau had been my grandfather. It was like losing him all over again, knowing I would never get to spend time with him with the knowledge of who he truly was to me.

I only hoped he had known just how much I cared for him.

Before I knew it, it was time. A decent sized crowd had formed outside, rising on tiptoes to see over the heads of those in front of them as they tried to peer through the windows. Wade and I glanced at one another, both of us all but vibrating with nerves.

“You ready?” he asked, glancing toward the steadily growing crowd.

“As I’ll ever be.” I swallowed deeply, reaching up to fix the bright yellow bow I’d placed in my hair. Blowing out a breath, I folded my hands in front of me and gave a small nod. With a chuckle, Wade moved toward the door, glancing at me before flipping the lock and pulling the door open.

“Welcome to Sweet Rose Creamery!” he called, throwing an arm out and stepping back.

I gasped as people surged inside. Eyes were everywhere, and soon the small shop was all but overcrowded with people. Luckily, I had the forethought to slip behind the cooler before too many people had crowded inside.

Hands of all ages reached for the sample trays we’d set out. Everyone took one of each, our cups color coded. Green for Wade, yellow for me. I leaned against the counter, watching as people began to try the samples. My stomach fell as each one winced and coughed as they tried mine. A young boy shook his head, coughing as he passed the cup back to his mother.

Every single person who tired a yellow cup spat it out. It was like a nightmare come to life. I watched, unable to move, as ticket after ticket were dropped into Wade’s bowl.

Tears spilling down my cheeks, I grabbed a sample of each and ran toward the back room, ignoring Wade calling out my name.

With shaking hands, I set the cups down on the work table, grabbing the tiny spoons and lifting them in turn to my lips.

Wade’s was perfect. Creamy, and smooth, just the perfect blend of vanilla and just a hint of bourbon. It was warm, and cool, and screamed southern. It was easy to see why everyone had been enjoying his.

I gagged when I took a bite of mine. If I hadn’t been crying before then, I certainly would have as the overwhelming flavor of roses and salt hit my tongue. Coughing, I lunged for the sink, flipping on the tap and pulling water toward my mouth with my hands, sucking it down quickly.

“Lemon, what’s wrong?” Wade asked, his hand gently resting against my back.

“It’s terrible. I don’t know what I did wrong. It’s horrible. No wonder everyone hates it! It really is a disaster!”

“Come on now, it’s not that bad.” He moved around me, lifting a spoon and taking a bite of my sample. His eyes went wide, and I could tell he was doing his best to hold back his coughing. Lifting his fist to his lips, he cleared his throat, shaking his head with a chuckle. “Oh, it’s bad.”

I slapped at his arm, “I *know* it’s bad! You don’t have to rub it in!”

He laughed, playfully jumping back away from my slapping hand. “Easy, easy. I know what you messed up.”

I blinked, my hand dropping to my side. “You do?”

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “You used salt instead of sugar.”

I stared at him silently for what felt like forever, before a tiny laugh bubbled up my throat, breaking free and turning into an almost hysterical laugh. I clapped my hands over my lips, my eyes widening as I shook my head in denial.

“Yeah. Salt, not sugar.” He chuckled, reaching out and ruffling my hair. “Don’t worry. Beau did the same, and worse, before.” He winked at me, turning to head back to the front of the room.

“Really? Huh.” I turned to look at the tiny sample cups. “Must run in the family,” I muttered.

“What did you say?” Wade asked, turning to face me again.

“Oh...” I bit my lower lip, looking at him. “I said... Must run in the family. Like grandfather like granddaughter, apparently.”

“Lemon...”

Inhaling deeply, I met his eyes. “Turns out, Beau was my grandfather.”

To say that Wade was shocked by my admission was an understatement. We stared at each other for a long while before Wade licked his lips and pointed a finger at me.

“Get through the reopening, then you and I are going to have a long conversation.”

I nodded, wringing my hands. His tone hadn’t been angry, more confused. *Welcome to the party*. I blew out a breath before I made my way back out front, quickly collecting the samples of my ruined sorbet, apologizing to everyone and offering them another small cup of a different flavor.

Chapter Ten

The hours flew by, and before I knew it, I was turning the closed sign and locking the door behind the final customer. Turning and pressing my back against the door, I let loose a sigh and chuckled as Wade stepped into the room, drying his hands with a towel.

“You survived.” He grinned, tucking the towel into his back pocket.

I chuckled, pushing away from the door and moving to sit at one of the tables. “I guess I did. Is it always like that?”

Wade nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Sometimes it’s worse.” He cleared his throat, scratching at his chin with his thumb. “You want to get dinner?”

I blinked at him, my lips curving up into a sudden smile. “With you?”

“No, with the dog down the street.”

“Oh, well...”

“Lemon.” He sighed, shaking his head.

“What? The dog was a solid contender.” I smirked, then nodded. “Yes. I would like to go to dinner. With you.”

“Get your stuff, then.” Wade grinned at me, turning and heading to the back room.

I watched him disappear, then moved to grab my purse and jacket. My heart sped in my chest. He’d asked me to dinner. Was it just something casual? I’m sure that’s all it was. A celebratory dinner for the reopening. Nothing more. Right?

“Ready?” Wade asked, pushing open the door.

“Yeah.” Sliding my purse over my shoulder, I smiled as I slipped past him, waiting as he locked up behind us. I didn’t even question what car we

would take as I moved to his truck, quietly thanking him when he opened the door for me.

The drive to the restaurant was pleasant, though we didn't talk much. The radio filled the silence, and my mind drifted toward what my mom had told me.

The noise of the busy restaurant was comforting as we stepped inside. It was almost like being with a minor celebrity with the amount of people that called out to Wade as we made our way toward a free table. I chuckled and shook my head as even the waitress greeted him warmly, commenting to us both on the success of the reopening.

Narrowing my eyes, I twitched my lips to the side. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"A little bit." He flashed me a bright smile before moving to sit beside me. "I'm proud of you."

I felt my eyes go wide, my head pulling back slightly. "What?"

He smirked, rubbing the back of his neck as he leaned back in the chair. "I said I'm proud of you."

"No, I heard you. I just... Thank you?"

"You held your own today. You came back from your little disaster, and you worked the crowd really well. Everyone seemed to have a good time."

"You sound shocked," I teased, drawing invisible patterns on the table with my fingers.

"I am, a bit. I was expecting you to fall on your face. Especially when you retreated into the back." He leaned forward, his eyes locking onto mine. "I'm glad you bounced back and surprised me."

Swallowing, I licked my lips and dropped my gaze to the table. "You know, I had a feeling you wanted me to fail. Perhaps even a worry you'd try to sabotage me or something." I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. "That's part of the reason I didn't accept your help."

"Of course, I did. You were an outsider in the way of something I wanted." His face grew serious. "But I *never* would have intentionally been the cause of that, Lemon. I don't play like that."

"And how do you feel now?" I asked softly, titling my head to the side as I looked up at him. My throat tightened, my stomach full of butterflies. Suddenly, I wished I hadn't asked, as his response had the ability to make or break me.

“Now, well... I don’t mind you so much anymore.” His eyes were warm as they locked on me, only making my heart rate increase. After an intense stare off that spoke volumes, he cleared his throat. “So, Beau was your grandfather?”

I nodded, taking a long drink of my water, brain struggling to switch gears. “Yes. My mother let it slip last night. After the power went out, I was done. I just wanted to leave... Then she said ‘your grandfather would be proud of you,’ and it sort of all came out from there.”

Wade shook his head, a crooked grin turning his lips. “I never would have guessed. Though, now that I know, I should have.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re a lot like him, Lemon. Determined and proud, but fearless. You dug your toes in, even though I didn’t make it easy on you. You had a plan, and you made it happen. And I admire that.”

The familiar heat of a blush flamed up my neck and into my cheeks. I shook my head, laughing softly. “Never in my life would I have ever thought to hear those words coming out of you, Wade Tucker. I was certain you hated me.”

Wade’s grin held as he reached across the table, covering my hand with his. The warmth of him flowed through me, causing a shiver of delight to dance up and down my spine. “Well, it’s a good thing that certainties can change.”

The rest of the night was filled with subtle flirting, to the extent that I was all but positive my blush would never cease. After our meal was done, we drove back to the creamery so I could get my car, and then Wade followed me home.

I felt like a giddy school girl as I climbed the steps of the porch, turning to look at him when we reached the door.

“Thank you for dinner. I had a really good time.”

He smiled brightly, hands tucked into his pockets as he nodded. “I did too. A really good time. We should do it again.”

Swallowing deeply, I nodded before dropping my gaze to my hands worrying the strap of my purse. “Wade... There is something we need to talk about...”

“Yeah?” I could hear the curiosity in his tone.

Inhaling deeply, I looked at him. I'd been trying to figure out how to talk to him about this all night. Knowing what I knew now, it hurt to bring it up. But a contract was a contract, verbal or otherwise.

"We need to discuss the terms of the bet. You won, therefore..." My voice caught in my throat, and I gave a small shake of my head, forcing myself to continue. "Therefore, the creamery--"

I gasped when he leaned in, pressing his fingers to my lips. "Lemon, what kind of man do you take me for?"

Brow furrowing, I looked up at him, pulling away from his fingers and licking my lips, tasting him. "Wade--"

"I'm not going to take away something that your grandfather left for you. I told you, I don't play that way. 'Sides, Beau would skin me alive to know I'd done you like that." With a chuckle, he moved closer to me, his long lashes shadowing his eyes in the growing darkness. "Plus, I've been thinking about something."

"Oh?" I squeaked, unable to look away from him. My heart beat like a drum behind my ribs, and I was positive he could hear it.

"Well, it's a fact that you and I work pretty well together. And, as I said, you held your own today. And you seem to have a pretty good brain for the books, which is something I've always struggled with."

I nodded, waiting for him to go on. When he didn't, I pressed. "And?"

"Well, what would you said to us being partners?"

Partners. I liked the idea of that. Working together, getting to know him more. I felt the muscles of my lips twitch as the smile started slow, then spread wide across my face. Beaming up at him, I nodded vigorously, throwing myself at him and wrapping my arms around his neck.

"Yes! Oh, Wade, thank you!" Clearing my throat, I pulled back, cheeks flaming, and thrust out my hand. "I mean, I accept your business proposal, Mr. Tucker."

Wade grinned, slapping his hand against mine, giving it a hearty shake before pulling me against him. I yelped as our bodies collided, his arm snaking around my waist. Hands pressed against his chest, I looked up at him in shock.

"You know," he murmured as he inclined his head closer, his other hand cupping my cheek. "I always did like lemons."

Any response I might have had died in my throat as he closed the distance between us, pressing his lips against mine.

Fireworks exploded in my head as warmth washed through me. With a soft moan, I wrapped my arms around his neck, answering his kiss with one of my own. There wasn't an inch of space between us, arms locked tightly around the other, tongues tangling until we were breathless.

With a giggle I pressed my cheek against his chest, listening to the rapid beating of his heart. Good, it wasn't just me. Inhaling deeply, I closed my eyes, wrapped in his warmth, in his scent. And in that moment, more than any other, I felt it. The thing I had been looking for my whole life.

Home. I was finally home.

Epilogue

I acclimated to country life much faster than I had ever expected. Once I had decided to stay, that is. Nothing was going to stop me from making Haven my home.

Day by day, Beau's home became mine. Wade was more than willing to come over and help with minor repairs, and a few major ones. For everything else, I called on Ryan Mcallister. After a few months, the home had been updated and revamped, and was most certainly mine.

Wade had made subtle touches and suggestions that were all his. And a secret part of me was thrilled for it. To myself, I could admit that I might have doodled *Mrs. Wade Tucker* a few times on scrap paper when I was trying to think. Though I made sure to shred them. I didn't need to explain *that* yet. We'd agreed it was better to take things at our own pace and test the waters before we dove in too deep to anything other than a business relationship.

As fall shifted to winter, I began making plans to go to D.C. for Thanksgiving. While I was making Haven my home, I missed my family and friends. After double and triple checking with Wade that he would be okay at the creamery while I was away, I was off to the airport. Anxiety and excitement coursed through me the second the plane touched down.

"Lemon!" my mother called, letting go a soft cry of delight tinged with relief, as I fought through the crowd of people exiting the terminal. I'd known she would be worried from the moment my flight took off, no matter how much I tried to soothe her fears.

I ran toward her, both of us giggling like loons as we collided into one another. Her arms wrapped tightly around me, and for a time, we simply stood and hugged one another.

"I've missed you." She breathed against my ear, stroking my hair before pulling away.

"I missed you too, mom." We smiled at one another before she took my hand. "I told you you didn't need to worry about me flying."

"Oh, Lemon," She waved a hand at me, shaking her head before looping her arm through mine. "Let's go home."

I took a deep breath as we arrived at my parents' house. I hadn't realized until then how much I had missed it. I was really looking forward to spending the holiday with them. After emptying my bag and putting away my things, I came downstairs, lured by the scent of coffee.

"Oh, you do love me." I moaned, swinging into the kitchen with outstretched hands and taking the steaming mug my mother offered me.

"Of course I do. Come into the living room, I want to hear all about Haven."

We snuggled down into the couch, laughing over the last six months of my life. She asked about Wade, and I told her all that I knew, though I kept our kiss to myself for the moment. I wasn't even sure why, other than I wasn't ready to share it yet.

"Mom." I lowered my mug to my lap, shifting to curl my legs beneath me as I looked at her. She was a beautiful woman. Her dark brown hair, so like mine, pulled back into a low ponytail at the base of her neck. "Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

Her smile fell slowly, and I watched her shift to set her mug on the coffee table. "Oh, sweetheart..."

"I just don't understand why you kept it from me for so long." I lowered my eyes, staring into the depths of my mug. I'd rehearsed this conversation over and over again in my head. I knew we would need to confront this. She had kept a huge part of my life from me, and because of that we hadn't spoken much since she'd dropped the bomb the night before the reopening.

My mother sighed, reaching over and resting her hand on my knee. "I wanted to tell you, Lemon. I learned about it just before I got pregnant with you. Things were not good between Beau and I for a while. I was angry with him, with my adoptive parents. I suspect I felt the way you're feeling now."

I met her gaze, but I didn't say anything, quietly waiting for her to continue.

"After I found out we were expecting you, something changed. He wanted to be in my life. To make amends for everything that came before. He sent money, toys, clothes... He begged to be a part of your life. A part of our lives. And I wanted to, so badly. But I was still so hurt... And I already had parents, amazing parents." She paused, drawing a shuddery breath as she looked at me, squeezing my knee. "And I was afraid you would get confused. So, I made him Uncle Beau. I looked for ways to tell you. Then I

told myself I would when you were older, when you were ready. But *I* was never ready. And then it was just easier to hide it.”

Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Lemon. I didn’t mean to steal that time from you. I would give anything for you to have it back.”

Tears streaming down my own cheeks, I set my mug aside and wrapped my mother in a hard hug. I felt her tears dampening my shoulder as we cried together, both of us finally releasing years of pent up emotion. My face was raw and tight with dried tears when I finally pulled away. I couldn’t help but smile as my mother ran her thumbs across her cheeks, brushing away the remnants.

“I love you, Lemon.”

“I love you too, mom.”

“Now!” she exclaimed as she slapped her hand on my knee. “Tell me about the sorbet disaster.”

The morning of Thanksgiving was a delightfully rushed affair as we made final preparations for dinner. My parents’ modest house was soon full of family, laughter, and love. I had been chatting with a cousin when I glanced over, my attention drawn to my grandparents. Excusing myself, I rushed over to greet them, hugging them each tightly in turn.

“Lemon! We’re so happy you’re here. Your mother said you were in Haven.” My grandmother said, shooting a wary look to my grandfather. Before I could say anything, my mother placed a hand on her shoulder and nodded softly.

“It’s okay, mom. She knows.”

My grandmother’s tear-filled eyes met mine, and with a soft gasp she pulled me into a hug so tight, I would have believed her if she’d said her arms were made of steel. “Finally!” she uttered softly.

More tears were shed, followed by delicious food. As the turkey came out of the oven, my grandfather wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

“Are you going back, Lemonade?”

I smiled at the nickname, reaching up to hold his hand. “I am. The will states that I have to be there for a year. So, I have another six months to enjoy Haven.” I wasn’t yet ready to admit it, but I was quickly growing certain I’d stay a lot longer than that.

My grandfather smiled, leaning in and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “Good girl.”

A soft smile curved my lips as the thought sunk in. Six more months in Haven. Plenty of time to explore what exactly that kiss Wade and I had shared meant. Six months to learn more about the town Beau had loved so much. Six months to make a life for myself.

When we were all sat around the table, my grandmother rose, lifting her glass of sparkling cider. “I would like to ask a favor of everyone. As many of you know, my brother Beauregard passed away earlier this year. I would like to dedicate this night, this day with family and loved ones, to his memory. Please, honor him, by eating and drinking your fill. To Beau!”

Glasses were raised, clinking against one another as a chorus of ‘To Beau!’ filled the room.

I lifted my glass, smiling as I took a sip. To Beau, who had known exactly what I needed, even when I didn’t.