

Chapter 1

"In the spring, at the end of the day,
you should smell like dirt."

— Margaret Atwood

Charlotte McGregor pressed the last tomato seedling into the dark earth and knew with a soul-deep conviction that this garden was going to prove, once and for all, that she knew exactly what she was doing with her life.

She sprinkled a little water around the base of the tiny plant and sat back on her heels, letting out a sigh of pure happiness. The late morning sun was strong for May, but not as strong as it usually was in Fresno. As much as she missed her church family and her best friend, getting out of that concrete jungle was one of the best decisions she'd ever made. Five years of commuting on an eight lane highway was more than enough for one lifetime. She decided it would be easier to peel off her own shadow than keep denying that she was born to live in the country. Now she was here, in her little garden, the smell of good dirt on her hands and the warmth of the sun on her face. Life couldn't be better.

Except for that one small, irritating problem of her garden being nibbled to pieces by some wild animal.

Dusting off her knees and picking up the watering can, Charlotte headed back to the porch. Her vegetables had suffered almost daily attacks in the three weeks since she'd

arrived. She'd lovingly seeded them in little pots lined up in her kitchen window, then just as lovingly planted them into the soft, rich soil but so far, she'd lost more than she'd ever grown.

Charlotte wasn't the type of girl to give up her dreams without a fight. As much as she loved the nearness of the Idaho wildlife, she was going to protect her crops. She'd prayed, put up a scarecrow, and even tried a couple of late night stake outs. No luck in catching the culprit. This creature had some varsity-level, world-class nibbling skills.

Settling into a deck chair, Charlotte poured herself a glass of ice water from the pitcher. When she'd rented the little yellow farmhouse on Donovan Road, she'd been thrilled with the idea of having her own garden and a flock of Ameraucana hens. Now that she'd settled in, she'd decided the best part of her new home was the incredible view. The Snake River Canyon stretched out beyond the edges of the property, framed by cottonwood and Russian olive trees. The rock walls of the canyon rose far above the dark green ribbon of water as it flowed westward toward the Columbia, then onward to the Pacific Ocean. Charlotte felt a deep sense of peace as she watched the sun shimmer off the water far below.

Or she did until her gaze settled on her garden.

Other people might not take a few rows of missing plants so personally, but she'd been dreaming of this garden for years. Her last boyfriend had never passed up a chance to mock her idealized future. Of course, Jarrod liked to mock a lot of things she thought were important and she'd been glad to break things off.

Her cell phone rang and Charlotte smiled to see Sahil Neerav's number on the display. Her best friend had been

calling for daily updates, certain that Charlotte was going to be eaten by wild animals before the month was out.

"Still alive," Charlotte said as a greeting.

There was the sound of rushing air. "Big relief. You've survived another day. How's the garden?" Her lilting accent was layered with her trademark dry humor.

"Still being ravaged by some vicious creature, but I will prevail." Charlotte could almost see how it would be in a few months, full of tangled tomato vines, swaths of squash plants, eager sunflowers stretching toward the sky. "I'll never give up. Like Rocky. But without hitting anybody."

"How about the mysterious neighbor?"

"Still a mystery. And that's okay. Maybe they just like their privacy. Sometimes I can hear a little kid playing nearby but the bushes are too thick to see through."

There was only one house on the long dirt road besides the one owned by Marjorie Martin, her landlady. The first week she'd arrived, Charlotte had made cookies and walked down the long driveway to the white farmhouse. The shrubs were trimmed neatly, white picket fence freshly painted, and the front porch had several pots of flowers. She'd smiled at the plaque hung beside the door that read *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*. She had the same little sign hanging in her kitchen.

"Have I told you lately how much I admire you?"

"Because I tried to bring my neighbor some cookies?"

"No, because you're a kind person. Genuine. Real. I want to be more like you."

Charlotte was touched by Sahil's words but felt her description was a little too rosy. "Well, don't try too hard. Remember I almost broke my mother's heart."

Her mother had bragged about Charlotte's position at the Henry Madden Library. The big office with the even bigger glass windows that looked out over the CSU campus seemed to prove that a single mother could still produce a successful child.

When Charlotte said she was leaving to be a children's librarian in an old Carnegie library, her mother's grief had gone through several of the classic stages, including denial and anger. She'd recently moved on to bargaining, calling Charlotte every few days to offer anything she could think would reverse her decision.

When her mother came to visit in a few months, Charlotte would show her how she'd made the right choice. She'd prove that she hadn't been running away, but was choosing a fuller, richer life. *I came so that you might have life, and to have it more abundantly.*

"I admire that, too. Not the heart-breaking part but I'm serious about the rest. You decided you didn't need the title or a big office or the fancy loft apartment—"

"I never wanted that apartment," Charlotte reminded her. "Jarrod thought I should get it. Not that I can blame him for my signing a lease. That was my mistake."

"See? That's what I mean." There was another long sigh. Charlotte knew that sound. Sahil struggled to fit in with the ambitious city crowd as much as Charlotte had. There was a reason they'd become friends, despite being from opposite ends of the country and working in different areas of academia.

"How's the ivory tower? Anyone steal your work today?"

"No, but not for lack of trying. Some days I just want to pack up and..."

"Move to Idaho? Come on over. There's plenty of room."

"I think my parents would have more of a problem than your mom did," Sahil said, and all the laughter was gone from her voice.

"I think you're right," Charlotte agreed. The Neeravs were both professors at Cornell and their vision for their daughter's future included tenure at an Ivy League university, not tending a little spot of green under the wide open sky. "But then again, I think they handled your announcement about picking your own husband pretty well."

"True. And going to church."

"You know, maybe we're underestimating them. If they can accept you becoming a Christian *and* not marrying the person they choose for you, why wouldn't they accept your decision to live a quiet life in the country?"

There was a short silence as they both considered the possibility, and then they spoke in unison. "No, they wouldn't."

Charlotte would have laughed but she understood Sahil's pain too well. "But come visit. I'm serious. You come at the end of summer, I'll be able to feed you dinner right out of my garden."

"Sounds delicious but I'm supposed to be attending that conference in Philly."

"Just think about it. My mom's coming in late July so any time after that. I really want to show you my... giant white rabbit!"

"Your what?"

A snow white creature had slipped under the lowest bar of the old wooden fence on the northern end of the garden. She would have said it was a dog, as large as it was, except for the enormous ears and distinctive hopping. Charlotte felt her eyes go wide as the rabbit came closer, moving down the rows until

it was barely fifteen feet away. She wondered if Lewis Carroll had seen a rabbit like this before sending Alice to Wonderland.

Charlotte dropped her voice to a stage whisper. “Big white rabbit. Eating my plants. Must go.” Sahil was laughing as she disconnected.

The rabbit peered around, then set to nibbling her tiny lettuce plants. Charlotte jumped from the porch. Waving both arms, she shouted as she ran toward the big rabbit. She expected the bunny to leap in a panic, but it didn’t. It fixed her with one eye, and went on nibbling. Charlotte slowed to a stop. It wasn’t afraid of her. It was tame. It was someone’s *pet*.

She turned to her neighbor’s property and glared at the ramshackle wooden fence bordering her garden’s north side. In an urban neighborhood, the fence would have provoked complaints from the home owners association, but out on the outer banks of the canyon, Charlotte thought it was as charming as the rows of lilacs that edged the rest of her property. Now she saw the fence in a whole new light. It was responsible for letting in this voracious bunny that was standing between her and her dreams. Charlotte reached out a hand and stroked the back of the rabbit. Yes, definitely a pet, and if the direction it entered the garden was any indication, she knew where the rabbit belonged.

Read ‘Spring’s Blessing’

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