

Chapter 1

Ruth Baxter dropped her suitcase on the gleaming dark wood floors and pushed the front door closed before sagging against it. Home? What had Naomi been thinking? From somewhere in the depths of Ruth's enormous purse, her cell rang. She dug around, her fingers closing around the device just as it stopped. She dragged it out and glanced at the screen. Jonah. Of course it was Jonah. And her other two brothers were probably in the room with him. When their parents died more than ten years ago, the four of them had become inseparable. Until now. The phone chimed with a request for a video chat.

Stifling a groan, she swiped across the screen and tapped accept. "Hey. I just got here."

Jonah grinned and stepped backwards. The faces of Malachi and Micah joined his in the camera's eye. "And? How's your inheritance?"

Ruth flipped the phone around so they could see the foyer with its gleaming antiques. "This is as far as I've made it."

"Not really your style, is it?" That was Micah.

Ruth flipped the phone around and shrugged. "No. But then, I'm having a hard time seeing Naomi choose these, either. Neither of us ever loved all things Victoriana. Maybe it suits the clientele? Or maybe it's an opportunity to start over, put my own mark on things."

"That's my sister. Always the optimist." Jonah made a goofy face.

"Have to be, with you three around. No pithy comments, Malachi?" Ruth locked her gaze on the youngest of her three brothers. Though Micah had only beaten him into the world by five minutes, the older twin never let it go.

Malachi's hands flashed as he signed a response.

Ruth laughed. "That's more like it. And yes, as the eldest of the four of us, I am closest to being an old lady. But I still hope I never get this obsessed with crocheted... whatever these are all over the tables. That said, a cat isn't necessarily a bad idea. It'd at least be company."

"It's not our fault you pulled up stakes and moved west." Jonah frowned. "I still say you should've just sold the thing. What was Naomi thinking, leaving you a bed and breakfast in her will? A bed and breakfast in *Idaho*. Why was she even in Idaho?"

Ruth knew the answers to all of those questions, though they made little sense most days. Her best friend since kindergarten had tended toward eccentric even then. Losing her parents had pushed her right over the edge. "I'm pretty sure Idaho was the only possible place where Jaden wouldn't follow. I'm also fairly certain Naomi didn't plan to die."

Micah frowned. "Sorry. But why couldn't you wait for one of us to be free to come along?"

"Because she's booked through the spring. And the people coming to experience the wonders of nature available within an easy drive of Arcadia Valley shouldn't have to change their plans simply because cancer..." Ruth's throat closed around the rest of her sentence and her eyes filled. She breathed in and blinked. No more crying. She gulped. "Anyway. We've been

through this. I'm staying. At least through the spring and summer. Then, I guess we'll see."

Malachi tugged on Micah's sleeve and he signed rapidly. Ruth squinted at the screen, but her youngest brother wasn't fully in range. Micah grinned, nodding. "Mal has a great idea. He's got some vacation that he's owed. As do I. We'll come out and help. What do you think?"

"Really? You're sure?" Her heart leapt in her chest. Having her brothers here, even if it was just two of the three, would be amazing.

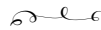
"We're sure." Micah punched Jonah's arm. "What about you? Got any time saved up?"

Jonah nodded. "Yeah. I'll talk to my boss tomorrow. Be careful, Ruth. I don't like this."

"Worry wart. It's gonna be fine. Naomi loved it here."

"You two were always so similar... I guess you probably will, too." Jonah's shoulders slumped. "Don't be a stranger."

"You either. Come soon, okay?" Ruth stared at her brothers standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the tiny screen. They were her walls of support. When they weren't making her crazy. She blew them a kiss and hit end.



After stowing her luggage in the small owner's suite and running into town for a few groceries, it was time to get down to business. Armed with the instructions from Naomi's attorney, Ruth perched in front of the computer that had been stashed in the back corner of the kitchen. Why it wasn't in the rooms set aside for the owner of the B&B was something she didn't understand, but she could worry about that later. For

now, she needed to get into the reservation system and the email to make sure she had the dates right for her first set of guests.

Something banged against the back door. Ruth jolted.

Heart pounding, she leaned back and eyed the window. The mostly sheer and entirely too-frilly curtain barely hid the shape of what was absolutely a man. Fixing a polite smile on her face, she crossed to the door and pushed aside the curtain. Her eyebrows lifted and she raised her voice, praying it would carry through the glass.

"Can I help you?"

The man frowned. "Who are you?"

"I own the B&B. Who are you?"

He shook his head. "Where's Naomi? Go tell her Corban's here, would you?"

How did he not know? Ruth flipped the dead bolt and tugged the door open a crack, leaning her weight against it so she could slam it shut if she needed. Not that it would be much defense when the top half of the door was glass. But it might give her a few seconds to grab her phone and run. "How do you know Naomi?"

"I'm her neighbor. I live over there." Corban gestured vaguely toward the farm across the road. But she hadn't seen a farmhouse and had assumed it was just a set of fields that belonged to someone who lived elsewhere. However farms worked. "Not that you need to know, but I've been in Florida settling my parents' estate. Naomi knows all this. Could you either let me in or go get her? I brought her the citrus she asked me for, and some avocados that she didn't ask for, but I remembered she loves them and these are huge."

Ruth sighed and opened the door. "You'd better come in. Why don't you go through to the parlor, Corban, was it? I made some lemonade."

He bent, his muscles flexing under his shirt as he lifted a crate off the step with what appeared to be no effort whatsoever. "Where should I put the fruit?"

"Um. On the counter, I guess. Lemonade?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Why not? You never said who you were."

Ruth took two tall glasses down from the cabinet by the sink. She filled them with ice at the refrigerator, poured the lemonade, and then decorated the rims with a transparent slice of lemon. "Let's go sit."

Another frown etched lines in his forehead, but he strode out of the kitchen. Ruth followed. Even frowns couldn't mar his good looks. He was older than her by several years, if she had to guess. But not more than forty. At thirty-three, that wasn't too much. Oh, good grief, what was she thinking? He'd probably had an eye on Naomi and now Ruth was going to have to break his heart.

He accepted the lemonade, his eyebrows lifting as he took a sip. "That's good. Thank you."

She couldn't miss the implication that he hadn't expected it to be good. Rude man. Ruth cleared her throat as she sat. Maybe it was better to blurt it out and be done. "Naomi passed away three weeks ago."

Corban stared at her, his mouth open in a tiny *O*. Slowly, his lips came together and the furrows in his forehead deepened. He set the glass down with a *thunk* on the antique table by his elbow, completely missing the lace doohickey that would protect the wood. "I'm sorry. What?"

Ruth's fingers itched to move the glass but she willed herself to stay still, perched on the edge of the settee. "She had cancer. And apparently never told anyone. I've been her best friend since kindergarten, we talk every week, and she only told me she was sick when it was clear that treatment wasn't a viable option. Her obituary was in the local paper."

"I told the guys watching the farm to read and recycle them. Nothing ever happens around here that's worth saving a newspaper. I'm not even sure why I still subscribe, except that Ernie's been a family friend for so long. She'd been acting odd. I knew I should have pushed."

"You two were close?" Ruth watched his face. He looked shocked, certainly, but not as destroyed as a man in love should be.

"Not like you mean." He offered a slight smile. "Though there were plenty of old ladies at church who were hopeful. No, Naomi was like a little sister to me. When she bought this place so my parents could move south, it seemed natural to keep an eye on her at first. And then..." He shrugged. "Then we were friends."

"Naomi could make anyone into a friend." Ruth's heart cracked open a little wider. How was she supposed to go through life without her? "I'm sorry you had to find out from me."

Corban nodded and stood. "I'll be on my way. I... my number's in her book. If you ever need anything, just give a shout."

"Thanks." He probably hadn't heard her, given that he'd been striding into the hall before she'd managed to get the word out. The kitchen door slammed.

'Loaves & Wishes' by Elizabeth Maddrey

Ruth sagged against the back of the stuffy little couch and took several long swallows of her lemonade. She was going to make a success of her friend's business. She had to. For Naomi, and for herself. And handsome, abrupt neighbors weren't going to get in her way.

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