

Chapter 1

So this was Bigby farm. Madison McKay pulled into the driveway and took in the buildings around her. To her left was a sprawling yellow farmhouse with random-looking, tacked on bits that must have been added over the years. Straight ahead were a series of barns and a large parking lot. And to the right was a large field of narrow, purple flowers that looked like lavender. Though they'd passed many farms along the way that reeked of manure, this place smelled fresh, clean. A far cry from the ramshackle dump her mother used to complain about. Actually, to hear her mother speak of Bigby farm, one would think it was one of the levels of hell as described in Dante's *Inferno*. Which ring depended upon how charitable her mother was feeling toward her in-laws.

Madison didn't have very many memories of the Bigby side of the family. Her dad had died when she was young, and her mother had cut off all contact,

blaming the Bigbys for her husband's death and saying they would ruin Madison's life. They hadn't. Madison had done a fine job of ruining her life all on her own. Which was why she found herself walking up the steps of the front porch with her three children. D.J., Faith, and two-year-old Hope, the bonus baby everyone thought would make things better, but had marked the beginning of the end for the marriage. Not that it was Hope's fault. In many ways, Madison was grateful for the tiny little girl who'd given her the strength to do the right thing when she had lost her ability to see straight.

Which is why it didn't seem so crazy that she'd accepted a long-lost cousin's invitation to stay with their grandmother while she figured out how to get back on her feet after her husband ran off to an ashram in India with his yoga instructor. The kind of thing she thought only happened in movies, but now, it was real life. The problem with spending her entire adult life as a stay-at-home mom was that when her husband took all the money, leaving her with nothing but debt and three children who didn't stop growing simply because she couldn't afford to buy them new clothes, she didn't have a lot of options.

She knocked on the front door, but was met with silence. She'd told them to expect her around four, and it was five until. Maybe they were running late, and she was just a tad bit early.

"What is this place?" D. J. asked, looking around. "Is this where Dad is?"

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Every single day. She had to answer the exact same question. Where was their father? Neither she nor the kids had heard from him in nearly six months. It must have felt even longer to the kids, who didn't understand why their father was on a quest to find himself. David McKay, a solid member of the community, active in his kids' lives, and from the outside, the picture-perfect example of what a father should be. At least until the morning he didn't return from his business trip, and instead sent her an email, telling her he needed time to figure out who he was.

As many times as she'd read that email, and the few that had come since, Madison still didn't understand. So how could she get her children to?

"No. I told you. We're going to stay with my grandmother and my cousins for a while. Won't it be fun to have family around us?"

One more thing the children had no concept of. Both Madison and Dave had been only children, and Dave's parents were long gone. Madison's mother was also an only child, and the lack of connection to the Bigbys, until now, had meant that they didn't have many family connections. When they'd gotten together, Madison and Dave had planned on having a large family. D.J.'s early arrival and rushed wedding was supposed to be the start of their dreams coming true. But after Faith, Dave's career took off, and he thought everything was just perfect. All the people he tried to impress had a similarly perfect family with a son, a daughter, and a trophy wife. Little did those perfect people know, all it took to fall from the

pedestal was another unplanned pregnancy and subsequent weight gain that was a lot harder to bounce back from at thirty than it had been at twenty. At least, that's what Madison assumed had been the problem, based on all Dave's fat jokes.

The kids hadn't answered Madison's question, but she hadn't expected them to. They wore the same shell-shocked expression that hadn't left their faces since she'd told them their father wasn't coming home. How could it make sense to them, when everything had seemed fine prior to Dave's leaving? It wasn't until the bill collectors started calling and Madison started digging into their finances that she realized her husband had been leading a double life for years.

Fabulous for Dave, that he could find a way to start all over in creating his dream life. And goody for him that after years of feeling like he'd lost himself, he could now find the path to enlightenment. She just wished he'd had the guts to explain it to his kids.

She took Hope's hand. "Why don't we walk around and take a look at the farm while we wait?"

"Maybe we can find a place with Wi-Fi," D.J. said, the usual irritation lining his voice.

She'd had to give up their cell plan a few months ago, when the money had run out. No, not money. Their credit limit. What had Dave been thinking, buying the kids expensive cell phones just before he left and not leaving Madison a way to pay for it? Everyone thought she just haven't tried hard enough or was sitting around, doing nothing all day. But she

had literally never held a job. As a teenager, her mother hadn't let her work, wanting her to focus on her studies. The same for college. Since she'd left school a semester before graduation to have D. J., she'd been a stay-at-home mom. When she'd talked about going back to school and finishing her degree or even finding a job, so she could do something with herself while the kids were in school, Dave would get angry and asked her why the life he'd given her wasn't enough.

Though she'd never been one for violence, sometimes she wanted to punch him in the nose for that one. He'd left her completely alone with no options for survival because his life wasn't enough, but she was supposed to have been satisfied with the way he had left her helpless.

"I'm hungry," Faith said.

They'd passed a fast food place about an hour ago, and even though the kids begged to stop, Madison had pressed on, eager to get here, but also painfully aware that she had less than \$100 to her name and she wasn't sure how long she would need it to stretch. She'd been ashamed to explain her financial situation to her grandmother and cousin Allie. Especially since her mother said she'd brought it on herself. Her mother was another person who didn't understand why Dave had left. The perfect husband didn't suddenly decide he hated his life, so surely Madison had done something wrong.

Well, she could admit to a lot of things, but mostly she'd been wrong in blindly trusting him and

thinking they were happy. She'd thought that that's what you're supposed to do in a marriage, and had Dave given her any indication that he wanted things to be different, she would have done her best to change. But other than going on more diets to combat his snide comments about her weight, and visiting a counselor he refused to see, she hadn't known what else to do.

Fortunately, before Madison could patiently explain once again that they still had some carrots to snack on in the car, a man came around the side of the house.

All three children huddled closer to her, and as Madison looked at the man, she couldn't help putting her arms around them. If they weren't on the farm in the middle of nowhere, she would have thought he was one of those homeless men you saw on streets, begging for food. His hair was long and shaggy, and his beard wasn't the neatly kept hipster style of the men they knew back home, even though he couldn't have been much older than them. He wore baggy, dirty jeans, and a T-shirt that looked like it belonged in the rag pile as opposed to on a man's body. His hands and arms were covered in dirt all the way up to his elbows. Mud caked his clothing.

"If you're here to sell Enid something, she's not interested. Nice touch bringing the kids though." Then he paused. "It's not cookie season, is it? School's out for the year, but..."

She opened her mouth to explain who she was, but didn't get the chance.

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He looked them up and down. “Oh, wait. I forgot the youth group is doing a fundraiser for camp. I’m sorry. I should have guessed that with you bringing the kids, that was the case. You must be the new family to town. Sorry we haven’t had a chance to meet, but I’ve been gone the past couple of weeks.

“Wade Ellis.” He held out his filthy hand.

Madison must’ve given him a funny look, because he looked down at it, then groaned.

“Sorry about that,” he said, brushing his hand on his equally filthy pants. “I’ve been transplanting lavender for Allie all day, and I didn’t pay much attention to my appearance coming out to see who was on Enid’s front porch.”

At least now, things were starting to make sense. Her cousin Allie used Bigby farm to run a lavender operation. She grew lavender and made all kinds of products out of it that she sold at various farmers markets and regional boutiques. This man must be a migrant worker she hired during her busy season.

“I hope I didn’t offend you too much with my comments about you guys trying to sell us something. A lot of people want to take advantage of an old woman living alone, and I get a little protective. Still, I’m always happy to support the youth group.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. “What fundraiser did they decide on? None of the other kids have hit me up yet, but I’m always happy to donate to everyone.”

Was it weird to like someone so immediately? The guy might be a migrant worker, but to be willing

to donate to every kid going to camp was pretty special. He reminded her of Mrs. Sanders, who lived down the block from her growing up. Even though the old widow had no money, any time any of the kids came by with the school fundraiser, she always pressed a quarter into their hands, telling them it wasn't much, but she hoped it would help. People like this Wade guy and Mrs. Sanders always made her feel ashamed for how she and Dave used to live. They'd had plenty of money, and while they gave their requisite tithes to the church, it certainly wasn't the kind of sacrificial giving she saw here.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, but we're not here for a donation. I'm Madison McKay, Enid's granddaughter, and we're here for a visit."

Wade's eyes widened. "Allie said you weren't coming until the fifth."

"Today is the fifth." She tried not to sound rude in her answer, especially because this guy was trying to be helpful.

He shook his head, looking disgusted. "I'm so sorry. I should pay better attention to the calendar. Allie is going to kill me when she finds out." Then he grinned. "But she'll get over it as soon as she meets you. I don't know who was more excited, Allie or Enid. I guess I don't need to tell you how much Allie has enjoyed emailing with you."

This man sounded much more familiar with the family's inner workings than a seasonal migrant worker. But as Madison mentally went through the list of family members she remembered Allie dis-

cussing with her, she couldn't recall hearing about a Wade.

"I'm looking forward to it," Madison said. "We're just waiting for them to get home."

Wade laughed. "Oh, they're home, all right. Enid was baking up a storm this morning. I'm sure they're in the kitchen waiting for you. No one uses the front door, which is why I thought you were a salesperson. Come on. Let's go say hi to everyone."

It would have been nice for Allie to warn her that no one used the front door, but as they walked around the back of the house, and she saw all the cars parked there, it would have been clear to Madison that's where she should have gone.

Before they got halfway down the walk, the door opened, and an older woman, with white hair and sparkling eyes, came rushing out. Though she looked far too young to be in her eighties, Madison knew that this was her grandmother.

A strange sense of peace filled her as Enid wrapped her arms around Madison, and the older woman whispered, "Thank you God, for answering my prayers."

Madison had gone to church her whole life, and she had never experienced such a genuine confession of gratitude as she did now. Funny, considering she saw Enid as an answer to her prayers, rather than the other way around. And yet, as she remembered Wade's words about people wanting to take advantage of an older woman, she felt slightly guilty. Though it was true Enid was offering her a place to

stay to get back on her feet, Madison was also grateful to reconnect with the side of the family she didn't know. Hopefully, no one would think that the only reason she was here was for money.

She squeezed her grandmother tight. "And thank you for being an answer to mine."

Enid pulled away. "None of that. We're family. This is what family is for. Now let me meet those great-grandchildren of mine. Since everyone else around here is being stubborn about giving me some, at least now I have some youngsters to enjoy."

Madison nudged her son. "This is David Junior, but we all called him D.J. He's eleven, and he loves computer games."

She had to sell his game console a couple of months ago to help pay the electric bill. He still hadn't forgiven her, but she'd already sold everything else of value she had. At least that was one thing Dave had done right. Every holiday, he'd given her some expensive piece of jewelry or some other useless bauble that she hadn't much liked, but she'd dutifully accepted. Those had been easy to sell off. Her final act of desperation to get here had been hiring an estate sale company to liquidate everything else they had in her home, which hadn't been much since there weren't many valuables left. Now, all they had left was what she'd been able to fit in her car.

"Those things will rot your brain," her grandmother said.

D.J. scowled. “You don’t know anything. My dad says I’m going to be a computer programmer someday and make a gazillion dollars.”

Would Dave have left it he’d known just how much his son looked up to him?

Ignoring the temptation to argue with her son, Madison nudged Faith. “This is Faith. She’s nine, and she loves animals. I think it’s going to be great for her, living on a farm, where she can interact with them.”

“My dad says farm animals are dirty and carry disease,” Faith said, looking smugly at her brother. Before Dave left, Faith had always argued with her father on this point. But now, the kids seemed to desperately cling to everything he’d ever said as if they thought it would somehow bring him back.

If only.

It wasn’t that Madison wanted Dave back. Honestly, after everything he’d put her through, leaving her alone to figure out how to take care of her family while he found himself, she wasn’t sure how she would ever be able to trust him again. Besides, the yoga instructor wasn’t the first affair. It was just the first she’d found out about until she’d started going through his records.

Wade stepped forward. “They definitely can, which is why we take a lot of precautions for cleanliness here. Once you get settled in, I’ll be happy to demonstrate.”

Was he joking? Caked in dirt, the man was hardly the poster child for hygiene.

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“You don’t look like you’ve had a bath in months,” Faith said. “How do I know we’re not going to get a disease from you?”

She hadn’t raised her children to speak to adults like that and it made her heart hurt to see the disgust on her daughter’s face.

“Faith! That was rude. Apologize to this nice man right now. He’s just trying to help.”

“Our father said homeless people are a scourge on the earth and deserve everything they get,” Faith continued, ignoring Madison’s request completely. “Maybe, if they made better choices, they would have better lives.”

She had never been ashamed of her children before. But the smug expressions on their faces made Madison want to cry. She’d had enough of protecting the man who’d turned such sweet human beings into monsters.

“Then take a look in the mirror,” Madison said. “Because technically, you’re homeless. So you get back to me on how to make better choices for your own life.”

Tears filled Faith’s eyes, and Madison regretted her harsh words. D.J., however, turned and glared at Madison. “You were the one who made bad choices. You made our dad leave. And maybe if you weren’t lazy and got a job, we would still have all our stuff.”

Dozens of people had said the same thing to Madison, including her own mother. Which was why Madison was here, dependent on the kindness of relatives she’d never even met. Everyone thought that

Madison had to have done something wrong to have made her husband leave the way he did. No one understood why she didn't just get a job that miraculously made everything all better. But given that they'd gone from Dave's six-figure salary to nothing and the best Madison was qualified for was flipping burgers at a local fast food place that barely paid above minimum wage, it wasn't even enough to pay the utility bill. Not that they would hire her. She'd tried.

Wade took a step toward D.J. "That's enough, young man. I might look like a homeless person to you, but I would never speak to my mother like that. I don't know you folks, and I don't know where your dad is. But if I were your dad, I'd have a good talking to you about treating people with respect. Your mother's done a good thing by bringing you here. The Bigbys are the finest people I've ever known, and I hope that a little time with them will teach you about common decency."

For a moment, everyone was silent. Madison struggled with the emotions welling up inside her. She hadn't once cried in front of her children. Not even when the man from the bank came and started taking pictures of their house to sell it out from under them. It's what happened when your husband stopped paying the mortgage months before leaving and didn't tell you. But she supposed her son was right. She'd made a bad choice in trusting that Dave was taking care of everything the way he'd said he would.

Enid cleared her throat. “It’s all right, Wade. I’m sure the boy didn’t mean it. It’s got to be hard, losing everything the way they did, and children don’t understand the ways of adults.”

Tears filled the older woman’s eyes, threatening to break the dam holding back the emotions Madison had been stuffing down for months. She bent and picked up Hope.

“All right then, moving on.” Madison pasted a smile on her face as she gave her little girl a squeeze. “This is Hope. She’s two, and an absolute delight.”

“No, she’s not,” Faith said. “She still wets the bed.”

To nine-year-olds, a bed-wetter was a terrible thing. But they had struggled with potty training, and with all the uncertainty over the past few months, it seemed more difficult than ever.

Enid held out her arms. “That’s all right. I’ve known a number of bed-wetters in my time, and I know she’ll outgrow it. I’ve got tea that will help.”

Madison had no idea how tea would help with bed-wetting, but at this point, she was willing to give it a try.

“Now that we’ve met everyone,” Enid said. “Let’s go inside and have a snack. I’m sure you’re all starving after your trip.”

The kids perked up at the idea of food. Wade had said Enid had been baking all day. Maybe a few tasty treats would have them warming up to the situation.

When they got into the kitchen, the spread laid out before them made Madison’s heart sink. One

platter had an array of fresh vegetables, including the carrots her children were starting to dread. They were an inexpensive snack, so Madison often used them to fill hungry bellies between meals. Another platter was filled with various fruits, that Madison suspected also came from the farm. She remembered her cousin telling her about how they preferred to use local and in season produce and grew much of their own food. Before their lives had been turned upside down, Madison prided herself on preparing only local and organic meals for her children. But as she saw the expressions on her children's faces, she realized that the children were not as impressed.

At least Enid held out a tray of freshly baked cookies to the children. They'd had to give up sweets because they'd been too expensive. The children eagerly took a bite of their cookies. Then promptly spit them out.

"Gross! What's in this?" D.J. said, making a face and sticking out his tongue.

Faith glared at Madison. "This tastes like the time you put salt instead of sugar in our muffins."

She'd only done it once, right after Dave had left, and she'd been baking to try to make herself feel better. Except when you're using the baby's nap time while the kids were at school to do so, sometimes you find yourself sobbing too hard to read the recipe properly. It was the only opportunity Madison had to cry. But children didn't understand that.

"We don't use sugar here," a woman's voice said. Madison looked up and saw her cousin Allie entering

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the room. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you, but I had a conference call with a boutique chain interested in carrying my products and it went a little long.”

Allie gave her a warm hug, and Madison was once again comforted with the feeling that she’d come home. Maybe she had made a lot of really bad decisions, but they’d all brought her here, to this place, and this moment, where she finally felt like maybe everything was going to be all right.

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