

Chapter 1

Every single terra- cotta pot was smashed.

Laurel Stone blinked quickly, annoyed at the sting at the back of her eyes as she stared at the mess. She was angry. Furious. Most people would rant or turn red in the face. But not Laurel. When she got mad, she angry- cried. And right now she was so infuriated that she could barely see through the hot tears.

She'd come in early to do some watering and deadheading before starting the weekly stock order, but discovered the gate hanging limply from its hinges, its lock busted. She immediately took out her cell and called the cops, working extra hard to keep her voice from shaking. Falling apart was not an option. She'd made it through a lot of life changes lately and had kept it together. This time was no different.

Now, as she waited for the police, she swiped at her face and bit down on her lip. It was only six thirty in the morning and she hadn't even had her first coffee yet. The brew sat cooling, forgotten in her ladybug print travel mug.

Normally she hummed away to herself, unwinding the hose in the cool morning air. Not today. Today she had to deal with the fact that crime actually happened in quiet, idyllic Darling, Vermont.

And that left her shaken.

The Ladybug Garden Center was her pride and joy, her foray into building a new life for herself. There'd been little incidents in her first few weeks of opening, but she hadn't thought much of them. The parking lot had been messed up a bit where someone had pulled doughnuts with their car. Two lilac bushes from the bed by the store sign had been stolen. She'd sighed at the inconvenience, but chalked it up to simple mischief.

This time the intent was obvious. Deliberate. And it felt personal.

All the pottery was in shards on the floor. Six- packs of annuals had been pushed off their tables, spilling dirt and crushed blossoms. Hanging baskets had been carelessly dropped, so that the planters cracked and split. Tomato and pepper plants were strewn everywhere, broken and wilting. The lock on the little safe had been smashed, and they'd taken the small amount of money set aside for a float.

Laurel was sweeping shards of pottery into a dustpan when she heard the gritty crunch of tires on gravel. She stood up and braced her hand on her hip as the cruiser crept slowly up the drive and into the parking lot. Might as well get the report over with, and then get on with the cleanup and the call to the insurance agent.

The cruiser door opened.

Damn, damn, damn.

She'd forgotten, though she wasn't quite sure how she could have since Darling was such a small town. Aiden Gallagher. One of Darling's finest, complete with a crisp navy uniform, black shoes, and a belt on his hip that lent him a certain gravity and sexiness she wished she didn't appreciate.

The last time she'd seen Aiden, she'd been home from school, barely twenty- one, and he'd flashed her a cocky take- a- good- look grin, all the while parading around the Suds and Spuds pub with some girl on his arm. Not that she'd expected any other sort of behavior from him. But still. Ugh.

Aiden approached the gate and she took a deep breath. He was a cop answering a call. Nothing more. And that was how she'd treat him. She definitely wouldn't acknowledge

that they'd known each other since they were five years old. Or that he'd once had her half-naked in the backseat of his car.

"Laurel," he greeted, sliding through the gap in the fence. "Looks like you've had some trouble."

She would do this. She would not cry again, especially not in front of Aiden. She had too much pride.

"A break-in last night." She opened the gate a bit wider so he could get through. He passed close by her, his scent wafting in his wake. She swallowed. After all these years, he still wore the same cologne, and nostalgia hit her right in the solar plexus. He took off his cap and she saw his hair was still the same burnished copper, only shorter and without the natural waves, and his skin showed signs of freckles, but nowhere near as pronounced as they'd been. He wasn't a boy any longer; he was a man.

He looked over his shoulder, his gray-blue eyes meeting hers.

Definitely a man.

"Wow." He stopped and stared at the carnage. "They made a real mess. Was anything taken?"

She shrugged, focusing on the issue at hand once more.

"Inventory-wise, I won't know until I get things cleaned up and do a count. But I doubt it. The float for the cash is gone, but that's only a few hundred dollars. Mostly they just made a mess."

Laurel bent over and righted a half-barrel of colorful begonias, purple lobelia, and million bells. Her gaze blurred as she noticed the crushed, fragile blossoms and pile of dirt left on the floor.

"Laurel?"

She clenched her teeth. If he saw her with tears in her eyes . . . today was upsetting enough without adding humiliation to the mix.

"Laurel," he said, softer now. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She bit out the words and pushed past him, going to the counter area. She could stand behind it and the counter would provide a barrier between them. "You don't need to worry about me, or take that soothing-the-victim tone. What do you need for facts?"

She sensed his withdrawal as he straightened his shoulders, and she felt momentarily sheepish for taking such a sharp tone. But she was angry, dammit. Hell, she was angry most of the time, and starting to get tired of hiding it with a smile. This was truly the last thing she needed.

"Do you have a slip or anything with the amount of the float?" Now he was all business. It was a relief. She took a piece of paper from beneath the cash drawer in the register. "This is our rundown for what goes in the float each night. It's put in a zip bag in the safe. Like a pencil case."

He came around the counter, invading her space, and knelt down in front of the cupboard. "This is the safe?"

"I know. It's not heavy-duty . . ."

"It looks like they just beat it open with a hammer."

Great. Now she was feeling stupid, too. "It's Darling. I didn't expect something like this to happen here."

He stood up and gave her a look that telegraphed “Are you serious?” before stepping back beyond the counter again. “Something like this happens everywhere, Laurel. What, you didn’t think crime happened in Darling?”

Well, no. Or at least, not until today. The fact that she’d already come to this disappointing conclusion, and then he’d repeated it, just made her angrier.

Coming home was supposed to be peaceful. Happy. The town was small, friendly, neighborly. Even after years away, many of her customers remembered her from her school years and recalled stories from those days. Darling even had a special “Kissing Bridge” in the park. There were several stories around how the bridge got the name, so no one really knew for sure. But the stone bridge and the quaint little legend to go with it brought tourists to the area and made Darling’s claim to fame a very romantic one. In a nutshell, those who stood on the bridge and sealed their love with a kiss would be together forever.

She should know all about it. Her picture— and Aiden’s— hung in the town offices to advertise the attraction. Just because they’d only been five years old at the time didn’t make it less of an embarrassment.

“I’m not naïve,” she replied sharply. “Is there anything else you need or can I get back to cleaning up?”

“Can you think of anyone who might want to give you trouble? Someone with a grudge or ax to grind?”

Other than you? she thought darkly. This was the first time they’d actually spoken since she’d poured vanilla milkshake over his head in the school cafeteria in their senior year. “No,” she replied. “I can’t imagine who’d want to do this.”

“I don’t suppose you have any video cameras installed.”

She shook her head, feeling inept and slightly stupid. Maybe she was a little naïve after all. She hadn’t lived in Darling since she was nineteen— nine years. Things had changed in her absence. New people, new businesses.

“I’ll have another look around. It looks like a case of vandalism more than anything. Probably some teen agers thinking it’s funny, or after the cash for booze or pot, and smashed some stuff for show.” His gaze touched hers.

“Kids can be really dumb at that age.”

Her cheeks heated. He hadn’t had to say the actual words for her to catch his meaning. “You never know. They might have been dared to do it. Or some sort of stupid bet.”

He held her gaze a few seconds longer, and she could tell by the look in his eyes that he acknowledged the hit.

He’d kissed her because of one of those bets . . . more than kissed her. They’d been parking in his car and he’d rounded second base and had been headed for third. And then she’d found out about the wager and lost her cool. Publicly. With the milkshake.

The only thing she regretted was saying yes to going on that drive in the first place.

“So you still haven’t forgiven me for that.”

Laurel lifted her chin. “To my recollection, you haven’t asked for forgiveness.”

Aiden frowned, his brows pulling together. “We were seventeen. Kids. That was years ago.”

Which didn’t sound much like an apology at all.

“Yes, it was. Now, I have a lot of mess to clean up. Is there any more information you need or are we done here?”

He stared at her for a long minute. Long enough that she started to squirm a bit at his continued attention. Finally, when she was so uncomfortable she thought she might burst, she turned away and retrieved the broom and dustpan from where she'd left them.

"Do you want some help with this?"

She didn't want him to offer. The idea of spending more time with him was so unsettling that she immediately refused.

"No. Don't you have to get back to work? Besides, I have someone coming in at eight. You go do what you need to do, Officer Gallagher."

"Officer Galla . . . oh, for Crissakes, Laurel. Is that necessary?"

She pinned him with a glare. He was standing with his weight on one hip, accentuating his lean, muscular physique, one perfect eyebrow arched in response to her acid tone.

She wasn't the kind to hold a grudge. Not generally. Heck, she'd forgiven Dan months ago, and that was for something far bigger than a silly teenage bet. Why did Aiden get under her skin so easily?

Maybe it was because he'd been so callous, even after the fact. If he'd shown any remorse at all . . . but he hadn't. He'd taken the paper cup the milkshake had been in, and fired it across the cafeteria floor before charging out. And he'd never once spoken to her again. Until today. And despite the change in circumstances, she felt much the same as she had that night in the backseat of his car. Out of her depth, over her head, and at a distinct disadvantage.

She looked away. "Sorry. I just want to clean this up and get ready to open."

She picked up the broom and began sweeping the little bits of broken pots and dirt into the dustpan. She saw his shoes first; big sturdy black ones that stopped in front of her. Then his hand, warm and reassuring, touched her shoulder. She'd been rude and brusque, and he was being kind. Damn him. Emotion threatened to overwhelm again. Couldn't he see that gentle compassion was harder for her to handle than cool efficiency?

"Are you afraid to stay here alone this morning?" He throat tightened. "No, of course not."

"I'm on duty until this afternoon. I can check in from time to time."

"I'm fine." She looked up at him and set her jaw. "I can take care of myself. I'm a big girl."

He stepped back. "All right. But if you think of anything or anything else happens, call right away."

"Okay."

She kept sweeping and listened to his footsteps walk away across the concrete floor. The building always smelled delicious thanks to the flowers, but this morning the scent was even more pungent because many had been crushed and mangled. She sighed and rested her weight on the broom handle. He was just doing his job. And she was pissed off—at the state of the garden center and the fact that the one person in Darling she didn't really care to see was the one who'd been sent to help.

"Aiden?"

He turned when she called his name, but his expression was neutral. She wished she could be that way. Unfortunately she always seemed to wear her emotions all over her face.

"Thanks for your help this morning."

He nodded. "Just doing my job."

He walked to his cruiser and got in while Laurel stood there with a flaming-hot face. Once he'd turned to exit the driveway, she kicked a plastic bucket that had been abandoned in the middle of an aisle, sending it spinning away with a loud clatter. No sooner had she decided to extend an olive branch than he came back with a line that deflated any sort of possibility of amity. He was just doing his job, like he'd do for anyone else. She was no one special. Never had been. The knowledge shouldn't have cut, but it did.

Anyway, the bigger issue was the problem at hand— getting the store ready to open in just a few hours. The Ladybug Garden Center was her baby now. She'd invested all of herself into it, and she was determined to see it succeed, not only this spring and summer but into the fall and winter. In order for that to happen she would have to take steps to ensure this sort of thing didn't happen again.

Just as soon as she cleaned up the mess.

And stopped thinking about how Aiden hadn't changed that much, either. In good ways and in bad.

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