

# Chapter 1

A truck engine cut out in Marley Montgomery's driveway. She peeked out the window and inhaled a sharp breath.

A logo on the white truck read SCRAPS, with the words Spokane County Regional Animal Protection Service surrounding it. Oh, no. What was animal control doing here? She had a mighty good guess, and there wouldn't be any evidence by the time the officer finished gathering her things, exited the truck, and rang the doorbell.

Marley dashed out the backdoor into the wildflower-infested yard. Chickens. Where were the chickens? She had too many for the city's bylaws, but she hadn't been able to resist the adorable Silkies. She hadn't been able to bear the responsibility of parting any of them from their friends.

At least the hens had friends. Marley didn't. Not anymore. But she'd make new ones here in Bridgeview, if only she didn't run afoul of the laws. She took a swipe at Bianca and tossed her over the nearest fence. She'd figure out how to get her back later, hopefully before the homeowner returned.

Chloe followed, then Deirdre. She just needed to find two more. Any two.

The front doorbell chimed, the sound barely audible through the house.

She had mere seconds left. Where was Gloria? The Buff Orpington loved the deep shade in the far corner, close to the fence. Marley reached into the spot behind the compost bin, felt fluffy feathers, and snagged the bird. She pivoted and let Gloria fly.

“Good afternoon!”

Marley wiped her hands down her ragged jeans and eyed the uninvited — and unwanted — visitor who stepped into view beyond the chain-link fence at the opposite corner of the house. Hopefully she hadn’t seen that little maneuver.

The woman was around her own age with red-gold hair in a long braid over one shoulder. A duty belt emphasized her uniform with its spray can and a radio. If she wore a gun, it wasn’t visible.

“Hi.” Marley approached the gate, pushing her guilty conscience aside and managing a smile.

“Hi. I’m Eden Riehl, and I work for Spokane County Regional Animal Protection Service.” The woman touched the logo on her dark blue shirt. “I’m here to investigate a grievance that this property is housing more poultry than zoning allows.”

“I’m sorry to hear there’s been a complaint.” Marley kept the smile in place. Which neighbor? The

old man on the east, or the houseful of apparently single men on the west? She needed to start offering free eggs to both sides now that the hens had settled in and were laying again. Only now it would look like bribery.

The officer angled her head and raised her eyebrows. “Are you?”

Marley blinked. “Am I what?”

Ms. Riehl sighed, pulled out a digital pad, and tapped the screen, which she scanned. “This city lot is fifty feet wide and one hundred feet deep, which makes it five thousand square feet. Regulations stipulate you may house up to five chickens *or* two small livestock *or* one small livestock and two chickens.” She tapped her stylus and eyed Marley. “How many chickens live on this property?”

“Um...” Marley’s mind raced. Honesty might be the best policy, generally speaking, but what was she supposed to do with her extras? Her stepdad would have laughed and said, ‘soup pot,’ but a girl didn’t eat her friends. “I thought the property was longer.” She waved up steep hillside behind the house. “The pegs are way up there somewhere. Surely it’s bigger than you said.”

“How much bigger do you think it is?” The officer’s shaped eyebrows angled upward.

Marley wasn’t admitting anything. “I, um, thought it was quite a lot bigger.”

“Ms... I’m sorry. I don’t believe I got your name.”

“Marley Montgomery.”

“Ms. Montgomery, it’s your duty to learn the local laws for animal husbandry, the specific regulations for your particular lot and neighborhood, and then follow them.”

Hard to argue with that. She nodded cautiously.

“Are you the homeowner here or a renter?”

“In transition.” Marley swallowed hard, tears welling in her eyes. “Gram Renton is still the owner, but she’s in a nursing home now with advanced Alzheimer’s.”

The officer’s stance softened. “I’m sorry to hear that. Do the chickens in question belong to Mrs. Renton?”

Marley stared at her bare toe poking at the too-long grass. “No.”

“I hope you understand I need to investigate the complaint. May I enter the yard?”

Zephyr was often hidden in a back corner, and only two or three were likely to rush to Marley’s side. After her little cleanup operation, she was only one bird over. It would probably be okay. She nodded and shifted away from the gate.

Ms. Riehl stepped through it and looked around. “Wow, you’ve got a lot going on here.”

“No one has cared for the yard in several years, so it’s a bit overgrown.” A bit. Now *that* was an

understatement, but Marley loved the crazy wildness of it. She and Gram Renton would have gotten along great if they'd ever had the opportunity.

"I see that. I never met the previous owner." Ms. Riehl moved down the overgrown path, peering under bushes.

That was an odd comment. Spokane was a city of several hundred thousand people. Most residents never met. Unless the animal control officer meant no one had ever complained about the owner before. Figured Marley'd be the one to get this address registered in the complaint book.

"Oh, she's sweet." Ms. Riehl bent and patted Bella. "I have a Silkie who looks a lot like her. And she loves attention just as much."

Huh. What was the appropriate response? Marley couldn't think of one.

The officer glanced over at her, but then her gaze went beyond, turning quizzical. She straightened, all her attention now focused on the yard next door.

Marley pinned her smile in place.

"Since when do Alex and Peter have chickens?" The woman muttered as she strode over to the fence, hands on her hips.

Uh oh. Marley swallowed hard. *Be sure your sins will find you out.* That was definitely somewhere in the Bible, and the truth may have just caught up with her.

The officer plucked a black feather off the top of the chain-link fence and turned to Marley, eyebrows raised. “Would you happen to know anything about this?”

In the yard next door, Deirdre fluffed her feathers with gusto in a raised garden bed amid tidy rows of bush beans. Marley held in her gasp. She needed to get her hens back in her own yard before they did any irreparable damage. It was always best to be on good terms with the neighbors.

“Ms. Montgomery?” The woman’s voice turned chilly.

“I, um...”

“Are those your birds?”

Marley squeezed her eyes shut then met the officer’s gaze. She was so, so sunk. “Maybe? Yes?”

Ms. Riehl’s lips tightened. “I suggest you catch them and return them home, and then we’ll discuss your infraction.”

Not good. Why, oh why had she thought the city bylaws were more like suggestions? Thought no one would care if she was a couple of birds over? They were sweethearts, and they’d been raised as chicks together. She hadn’t had the heart to separate them. Didn’t girls need each other?

Not that Marley knew for sure, since she’d been on her own most of her life. But *if* she’d had the

chance to be part of a flock like her hens, she'd have been devastated to be separated from them.

Marley caught sight of Ms. Riehl striding for the gate. Better follow. Better obey. She wasn't cut out to be a rebel. Not really.



Alex Santoro pedaled his commuter bicycle up the steep incline into his carport and swung off. He removed his briefcase from the rear rack before lifting the bike to its hooks under the rafters. Then he picked up the briefcase and headed for the back steps, unclipping his bike helmet as he went.

The squawk of a chicken and a flurry of activity assailed him. What on earth? Eden Riehl grabbed for the legs of a white and black bird, who flapped her wings and sidled away. The new next-door neighbor, whom Alex had seen a few times in her backyard, picked up another one and tossed it over the fence. There were at least two other chickens loose in his yard.

Was there a hole somewhere? But then why was Eden here, in uniform? He'd seen her work truck parked in the drive next door but hadn't thought anything of it.

The garden bed nearest the fence was a shambles with uprooted plants and mounds of black earth where

it had been flat, smooth, and weed-free this morning.  
A model garden.

No more.

Alex set his gear on the bottom step. “What’s going on here?” he demanded.

Eden and the other woman straightened, pivoting toward him.

Alex skewered the new neighbor with his gaze then slowly raised his eyebrows.

“Hi.” She swept her long blond tangles away from her face, revealing a pretty face, younger than he’d assumed.

But wide-eyed innocence wasn’t going to cut it. Not when her fowl created havoc in the gardens he and his family depended on for their business, Bridgeview Backyards. Well, mostly his cousin Peter, since Alex had kept his day job in an air-conditioned office, while their other partner, Alex’s sister, Jasmine, was due to have her first baby any day now. The fledgling business had hired a couple of teenage boys to help Peter through the coming busy summer.

The woman still stared at him while the hen that had escaped Eden flapped toward the house.

Alex shook his head and reached for the bird. He caught it easily, dangling it upside down from his hand. “Eden? What do you want me to do with this?”

Eden speared a nasty look at the still-unnamed woman. “I’ll take her to one of the truck kennels.” She

snatched the bird out of his hand and headed to the carport.

“No, please!” The other woman’s gaze toggled between Alex and Eden. “You can’t take Bianca. She’s been with her sisters all her life.”

*Bianca?*

Eden’s lips tightened as she shook her head slightly and continued on her way.

The other woman ran after her, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Alex stepped in front of her. “Who are you, and what is going on here?” She tried to dodge past him, but he shifted sideways. “You’re on my property. I think the least you can do is explain.”

She turned imploring eyes toward him. “But... Bianca!”

“Who. Are. You?”

She gathered her long hair over her shoulder then her gaze ricocheted off his. “Marley. Marley Montgomery.” She thumbed to the ramshackle house on the east side of Alex’s. “I moved in there a few days ago.”

“Are you a relative of Gram Renton’s?”

Her eyes dropped, and her bare toe scuffed in his freshly mown grass. “Sort of?”

“How can you be sort of related to someone?”

She bit her lip, and a pretty pink lip it was.

Alex gave his head a quick shake. He was not here to admire a woman's lips, especially not this woman's. Not someone who did not respect fences and boundaries but interfered with his well-ordered life.

Marley peeked up. "She was my biological father's foster mom for a couple of years."

He took a step back, slamming his calf against the wooden step. Wow, those words had been packed with a lot of anguish. Drama he knew little about, thank the Lord, coming from middle-class parentage. He was fourth of five siblings and had been raised in a solid Christian home with his Italian nonna and most of his uncles, aunts, and cousins living within a few blocks. He'd had it good. He knew that.

But it wasn't reason enough to let his neighbor run roughshod over him or make a play for his sympathy. "Get your chickens out of here and patch the hole in the fence." Had that been too rude? "Please," he added.

Her spine straightened and her eyes skewered his. "There's no hole."

Alex raised his eyebrows. "So how did they get into my yard, then? They're your birds, and it's your duty to keep them contained."

From beside him, Eden spoke in a wry tone. "And it's my duty to make sure the property is left with no more than five birds. So, if you'll round up that one,

please, I'll put her in the kennel, and we'll go count what's remaining next door."

Marley's eyes filled with tears. "But you can't."

"Honey." Eden's voice sounded like Marley had gotten on her last nerve. "City regulations are clear. You have too many chickens, and I'm removing some of them. It's my job."

"What will happen to them?" Marley's lips quivered.

Lips again. Alex jerked his gaze away. Either his new neighbor was the ultimate drama queen or she truly felt deeply for those stupid birds. Could she really be this good an actor?

"Hopefully we can find a good home for them." Eden sighed. "Would you please grab that hen?"

"You said you had chickens of your own. Surely you understand." Marley's gaze brightened. "Maybe you could take them yourself."

"My lot is the same size as yours, and I'm maxed out with a goat and two hens."

Those blue eyes widened. "You have a goat?" she asked in breathless wonder.

She couldn't possibly be performing. "Eden's goat's name is Pansy," offered Alex. "Good milk."

"You know each other." It wasn't a question.

"Bridgeview is a tight neighborhood. Everyone knows everyone." And Alex liked it that way. It was uncomfortable for people who had things to hide,

though Alex's brother Basil had managed to mask a drinking problem before running a police roadblock nearly two years back and getting slapped with a DUI. After his jail time, he'd moved to Seattle, claiming Spokane was too claustrophobic. Other than that Basil had left Bridgeview Backyards in the lurch, Alex was glad to see his brother gone.

"Please help me find a home for them," Marley pleaded. She turned to Alex. "Maybe you? I can take care of them here. You don't need to worry about a thing."

His jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me? Have you seen the mess they made? We're running an organic food box program. I'm not giving you an easy out."

She swallowed hard and looked down. "I understand."

Everything she thought flew across her face. He hated being manipulated, but, man! How could he say no to her? Yet, he had to stand firm. His business depended on it.

## *Glimpses of Gossamer*

An Urban Farm Fresh Romance Book Eight

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