
Chapter 1

Cat never felt comfortable at charity galas. She grew up with luxury, if not opulence, but the extravagance of these events always felt false and uncomfortable, like she was trying to walk in a pair of shoes that were the wrong size. This one was for one of the homeless shelters that her parents supported, and the irony of paying a thousand dollars for a ticket seemed lost on those attending. The silent auction was full of extravagant items that would—thankfully—be bought for far more than they were worth, but those who paid always seemed to be chasing the prestige of a purchase as much as seeking to help those less fortunate.

Cat was hiding behind a potted plant in an attempt to escape notice for as long as possible. She'd seen Marco and his parents arrive earlier, and they were slowly but surely working their way to where her own family stood. Of course, all of them would be attending tonight. The Yus and the Spinellis ran in the same circles, in addition to their copious business ties, and events like this were the places that people like her parents and Marco's did their best networking. That wasn't to say they weren't genuinely friends; they'd known each other

since before Cat was born. The Spinellis were her godparents. And of course, everyone knew they were not so secretly angling for Cat and Marco to tie their families together by tying the knot.

Which was exactly why she was avoiding them.

There was nothing wrong with Marco. He was a good guy. He was kind and generous, handsome and rich, had never treated Cat with anything but the utmost respect—barring the few times he held her face-down in the sandpit when they were kids. When they'd run into each other again after their respective university degrees, she was unsurprised to see that the gangly, eager boy had grown into a self-possessed and confident man with a strong mind to back him up. Unlike her, he'd followed his parents into the finance industry and quickly rose through the ranks of their company. On paper, at least, Cat could do far worse than Marco Spinelli.

On paper.

But there was no spark. She liked him and respected him, but there was nothing else between them. No draw of attraction, no desire to spend all her time with him the way her parents were always happy to have time together. Not that she'd ever had that with anyone, really, but she knew people who did. Her best friend Ivy had it with her husband, the longing to be together at all times. Joy bloomed in Ivy's eyes whenever Jared was around, especially when that also included their two-year-old daughter. The two of them were drawn to each other like iron filings to a magnet. And Cat couldn't help but want that for herself.

And maybe it was selfish to want to turn down a man she was sure could make her happy if not make her world turn upside down. But she did. She wanted the connection Ivy and Jared had. She wanted the comfortable love her parents had, the way they immediately looked to each other first in a crowd, the easy affection between them. Her parents' love had grown from a marriage arranged by their families, which went some way

toward explaining why they were so invested in arranging her own, and maybe the same could grow between Cat and Marco.

But. She wanted more. Was that so wrong? To long for a connection that superseded all others, that made her head spin and her body ache?

So, she took the coward's route and hid behind a potted plant in the corner of the room to delay speaking to the Spinellis for as long as possible. It was easy for Cat to blend into the walls; she'd been honing the skill for most of her life. She wasn't big on attention, unless it was for doing something she was good at, attention she'd earned. She'd had no hand in earning the prestige that came from being part of the Yu family, so the attention that came with it was unwelcome, uncomfortable. Half the time, it seemed to be people who wanted an introduction to her parents or someone else she knew who ran in their circles. Very, very infrequently was it because someone actually wanted to get to know *her*.

And apart from anything else, Cat was tired. She'd been up all night with a foaling horse, and honestly, she would have given a lot just for a good night's sleep, but instead, she'd pulled up her big girl pants, driven to Mansfield, and attended her parents' fundraising gala.

She knew full well that they wanted her to be included because they loved her. The youngest of four children, she was the only one whose career had not been under the umbrella of their family's company. But there wasn't much room for a vet in the finance sector, and Cat had always been more about science than maths, more people—and animals—than numbers.

Despite her best efforts, her mother spotted her eventually. A floor-length red dress would not allow her to go unnoticed for long, and the potted plant wasn't that big. She beckoned Cat over enthusiastically, gesturing toward the Spinellis with an absolute lack of subtlety. *God, the woman has no chill*, Cat thought fondly as she reluctantly left her spot in the corner.

Maria Spinelli wrapped her in a hug immediately. Behind her, her husband Dean boomed, "Stop hogging the girl. Come here, Miss Cat." He pressed a kiss to her cheek and cupped her face in his hand. "It's been far too long, Catherine. Small town life keeping you busy?"

"Lots of animals to care for," Cat agreed. "I was looking after a foaling horse last night. There are plenty of farms nearby, and all their needs are funnelled straight to me."

"Not like looking after the pampered kittens around here, I imagine," Maria said.

"Very different," Cat said. "I really like it, even though it's exhausting. And the town is lovely. You should come visit sometime."

"As long as they're not overworking you," Maria said. "You look tired, darling. Did the horses keep you up late?"

"A bit," Cat lied.

"Nonsense, Maria," Dean said. "You get more beautiful every time I see you, Cat." He turned to his son. "Doesn't she, Marco?"

Marco Spinelli shot his father a fondly exasperated look. "You look gorgeous, Cat. Beautiful dress."

"Thank you. Mum picked it up last time she was back in Shanghai."

"My baby looks stunning in red," Cat's mother cut in with an air of smugness. Linda Yu was a small but striking woman, her grey-streaked black hair swept off her shoulders to emphasise the high neck of her violet gown. Cat had her almond-shaped eyes and her thin-bladed nose, though the rest of her face was purely her father's.

"You have excellent taste," Marco said solicitously, inclining his head to her. He was always beyond respectful to her parents, which might have been part of the reason they liked him so much. Such a well-bred young man, with his courteous manner and smooth charm. He could have won over the strictest of matriarchs, but Linda had known Marco since he and Cat were

young children and had been fond of him even when they'd been little hell-raisers together, Cat getting them into trouble and Marco talking their way out of it. Linda loved him like her own child, and nothing would make her happier than Marco and Cat coming together as it seemed they'd always been groomed to do.

Cat's dad was the same. He eyed Marco with undisguised approval when the younger man shifted his compliments to Linda, and they began discussing the work Marco did at his parents' company. Though the two corporations might have been rivals, their slight differences in corporate niche meant they worked together as often as they were in competition, and the close friendship between the families had endured despite times of rivalry. Wei Yu and Dean Spinelli were as close as brothers, constantly ribbing each other, and Cat had grown up with Dean as an uncle in place of her father's brothers, who were back in China.

Maybe that was why it felt strange to be pushed toward Marco as a future life partner. They were good friends, but they'd grown up together. Would kissing him feel like kissing a brother? She shook the thought from her head, refusing to let it show on her face. She waved over a server carrying a tray of champagne and offered them around the small circle.

"Not for me," Maria said. "I'm driving these two luses home tonight."

"I did offer," Marco told Cat with a grin. "She just wants to see me drunk again."

"Do you remember the Christmas party last year?" Maria cackled. "I've never heard karaoke like that before. Of course, I want to see it again."

"I remember it in horrifying detail," Cat said with a grin. "I seem to recall you taking your place onstage as well, though."

"Thus, the reason I am the designated driver this evening." Maria laughed. She linked her arm through Cat's and drew her

close. "Now tell me about your new home. How are you liking Shepherd Creek?"

"Shepherd's Creek," Cat corrected gently. "It's a really nice town. I feel like I'm finally settling in, now that I've been around for a few months."

"And work? Are you always out helping bring horses into the world, or do you get some time with things that are a little more... fluffy?" Like Cat's mother, Maria had long been confused by Cat's refusal to restrict her practice to pampered inner-city pets, a decision that would have allowed her to set up her clinic close to their homes in Mansfield.

"I really like it," Cat said without pretence. "It's interesting to be able to apply all the skills I learned when I was studying. I had to learn horse and cow anatomy as much as I had to learn how to set a dog's broken leg, so it feels good to be able to use that knowledge."

"You don't mind when they get all gross? Birthing a foal can't be a clean experience."

"You expect it to be messy," Cat laughed. "I always have spare clothes and garbage bags in my car. You can't deal with animals all day and expect not to get peed on occasionally."

"I would struggle with that part," Maria admitted.

"My wellie boots have never seen so much use," Cat said. "They're very easy to hose down."

"This doesn't sound like the kind of conversation I want to enter," Marco said from beside Maria. Cat looked up to meet his laughing eyes. "But that never stopped me before. Hope your wellies don't get used too often, Cat."

"Only every other day," she reassured him. "I delivered triplets for a cow last week. All of them have survived so far, which is great news."

"You couldn't pay me to touch a cow... *there*," Maria said.

"It's only the bottom half of your arm," Cat said, amused by her revulsion.

"None of that, Catherine," her father interrupted from over Marco's shoulder. "This isn't the place for all your gory details."

"I did ask," Maria assured him.

"All the same," Wei said.

Maria politely changed the topic. "Tell me more about Shepherd's Creek. I want to know all about the place that has stolen our girl away."

Cat thought about the town she'd called her own for the last few months. "Well, the clinic is going very well. The man who used to run it, Dr. Barrie, had a stroke about two years ago, and he's been looking for someone to take it over because he can't manage all the callouts. He's still doing a little bit of the consulting during the daytime—the house pet calls mostly. Most of the equipment was distinctly past its best, but they delivered the new gear I ordered a few weeks ago, and I've mostly got the hang of using it."

"But what about the place?" Maria asked. "Enough about work."

"It's your typical small town, mostly," Cat said. "Tiny farming outpost on a train line that managed to absorb some of the surrounding population and keep itself on the map."

"It's the regional headquarters for the Latham Corporation," Wei put in. "Not such a small town."

"Not anymore," Cat agreed. "The son of the Lathams, Sam, is dating a friend of mine. He spends a lot of his time in Shepherd's Creek."

"I know Sam Latham," Marco said mildly. "Good bloke. Very business savvy. He owns a couple of bars."

"I'm glad you didn't decide to put your equity in hospitality ventures," Dean said to him. "It's a very risky business."

"I think Kayla said he part-owns the local bar," Cat said. "Doesn't seem to be doing too badly for himself. We go for a drink there every week or two."

"Who's we?" Maria asked, not willing to let go of her vicarious discovery of Cat's new life.

"I've made a couple of friends since I moved," Cat assured her, "And honestly, there aren't that many young people in such a small town, so everyone knows everyone. When I moved into my house, I got two welcome baskets and a housewarming cake."

"So the locals are nice, then?" Dean asked. "We don't have to save you from pitchfork-wielding townspeople yet?"

"They're lovely," Cat assured him. "One of the girls at the gym invited me to her book club, so I've made a few friends there. And you remember Ivy."

"Little Ivy Irving from uni?" Marco asked. "She's in Shepherd's Creek?"

"She was always going to move back to a small town," Cat reminded him. "She's married now. They have a little girl. Reggie's two."

"Reggie?" Linda sniffed. "Who calls their daughter Reggie?"

"It's short for Regina. She's a hell-raiser and tall like her dad. She's about two thirds of Ivy's height already."

"Seems like a bit of a waste to let a world-recognised management degree collect dust like that," Marco said.

"Because motherhood is a waste?" Maria asked, one eyebrow arched with distinct displeasure.

"No, I didn't mean that," Marco backpedalled. "Not a waste. Pretend I didn't say anything."

Cat swooped in to save him. "She owns a shop on Main Street. I'm sure the management degree is more than useful. But she does say motherhood is her first job and sometimes her worst job." She met Linda's eyes to see that her mother was laughing.

"The worst job in the world," she said, reaching out to wrap an arm around Cat's waist and pull her into a hug. "But it absolutely has the best perks."

They separated fairly quickly after that, Dean and Maria's curiosity apparently sated now they knew Cat wasn't living in a

redneck shantytown. Speaking about Ivy had sparked a discussion between Cat and Marco of other people they hadn't seen since they were at university, and they drifted away from their parents to sit down at the edge of the room. With no concern about the amount of space his long legs took up, Marco sprawled out with one arm draped over the back of her chair. Cat idly let her eyes drift over the glittery people circulating through the event as they caught up on those Marco had run into while she had been busy out of the city. The circles in which the Spinelli and Yu families ran were relatively small, with much of the new blood coming from those who entered the business realm in which their companies existed. Even though Cat had been studying vet science while Marco was doing his finance degree, they'd remained close throughout their time at university, so their circles of friends had regularly overlapped and intersected.

"Remember Frank Hodges?" Marco asked. He reached for a passing server to exchange his empty champagne glass for a full one. "He's working as a lawyer now."

"Good fit," Cat said, "argumentative little shit that he was."

"Small town life has made you sassy, Yu," Marco noted, laughing. "Does living in the sticks mean you're compulsively honest all the time?"

"It's a prerequisite," Cat agreed. "There's no room for falsity in small town politics."

"Is that as awful as it sounds?"

"Not quite," she reassured him. "I haven't really been the subject of it yet, though. Other than being stared at a bit as the new girl in town, I've flown under the radar pretty smoothly."

"Until you do something to shake up the system?"

"There was a bit of a stir when I decided to get all the new equipment for the clinic. I know it was an extravagance, but they really needed it, and I figured I have the means—why not put them to good use?"

"Was state-of-the-art really necessary for a small-town vet's practice?" Marco asked.

"Maybe not, but I'm also donating the use of it to the shelter attached to the clinic. I've started doing some work with the volunteers for the organisation that runs it, and they're benefiting from it too." She laughed. "Yvonne, my receptionist, seems to think that's why they accepted my big city attitude. The delivery truck rolling into town caused something of a stir."

"Who has enough time to spend being worried about delivery trucks?" Marco griped, but his smile was kind.

"The book club girls call them the blue rinse brigade. The little old ladies who sit in their chairs at the hairdresser and watch everything that happens on Main Street then dissect it while their hair is being blow-dried. Their counterpart is the old boys' club, who spend their afternoons on the porch of the Shepherd's Creek Hotel." She held back a smile at the memory of the grey-haired men whose beers at knock-off were so reliably timed they could be used to set a watch. The men pretended not to pay attention to anything beyond their little circle of footy score comparisons, but she'd heard them discussing her more than once when she walked past.

"I'm not surprised there's an entire gossip mafia in this place," Marco said. "Doesn't sound like there's much else to do."

"You watch your tone, Spinelli," Cat said sharply. "I really like 'this place'. There might not be a bustling financial district, but there's plenty to do for a vet single-handedly running a busy practice."

"Maybe I'll have to come visit and find out," Marco suggested. There was something in his face that she couldn't recognise, and it gave Cat pause. He continued before she could think about it. "You can show me how you birth a foal."

"You fainted watching Alex Sheehan do his blood sugar testing in year four," Cat reminded him. "There's no way you'd

get past the waters breaking without folding like a house of cards."

"Might have to find some other way to entertain ourselves, then," Marco said, and suddenly Cat was uncomfortable. She shifted in her chair, sitting more upright, and wondered if it would be rude to shift away from him. Suddenly, the heat in the room felt like too much, the air too close. Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

"They have a fair in March," she said eventually. "The colours are beautiful at that time of year. Maybe you should come then so you can see it."

"Cat," Marco said, and he had sat up when she wasn't paying attention so his face was suddenly very close to hers. She felt her eyes trapped by his own, and his gaze flicked down to her lips. *No*, she wanted to gasp. *Don't do this. Don't change everything. Marco, please don't take this friendship away from me.*

The ringing of a knife striking a glass interrupted them, and she felt herself lurch away from him like he'd burnt her. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd take your seats?" The words ringing over the crowd felt like a life preserver being tossed to Cat while she was floundering in shark-infested waters. She rose to her feet gracelessly and dropped a hand to squeeze Marco's shoulder. "I'll see you later," she managed as she fled.

She was seated next to her father, who gave her a knowing look as she took her place. "You look flustered, sweetheart."

"I'm fine," Cat said, taking a gulp of water. She managed to redirect the attention of the man on her other side and escape the task of holding up a conversation when she was feeling so confused.

She hadn't been sure that she and Marco were on the same page about the romance their parents wanted to push them into, but she'd had no indication he was particularly driven to make things romantic between them. Until now. What had that been

about? Had he really been about to kiss her? Was it possible she'd imagined the whole thing?

Surely, he wasn't on the same page that their *parents* were on, that the two of them were destined to be together and make little Yu-Spinelli conglomerate-inheriting babies? She'd never guessed he thought of her that way. And besides, his friendship was far too important for her to risk attempting something romantic between them—something she was pretty sure she didn't even want, no matter how simple it would have been to acquiesce. So, what the hell had that been about, that long look, that almost-could-have-been-a-kiss?

Cat gave up on trying to calm her thundering heart, gave her father a distracted smile and signalled for wine. It seemed she'd be needing a lot of it.