

Chapter One

"Excuse me!" Lily hurried down the street at the tiny town center, hoping to catch the man's attention before he drove away. "Excuse me, sir? Do you know if the diner here has Wi-Fi?"

The man rolled the window of his truck the rest of the way down as Lily approached, and when she called out her question, he paused, lips twitching, then climbed out to speak to her. Lily was startled as he unfolded from the truck's cab, for even with the short heels on her boots, he was a full head taller than she, and she had to shift her gaze up to meet his. He leaned back against the truck. "I don't believe they do. Though, Maggie does make a 'wifi pie.' It's a special pie she sells to all the tourists who come through and ask that. There's a McDonalds about a hundred miles east," he added helpfully.

Lily was annoyed. "I'm not a tourist," she snapped. "My aunt, Pauline McAuliff, died last week. If you live here, I suppose you knew her. I'm here to clear out the old house, and they haven't hooked up my internet yet. I need to ask a client a question, and I can't get a damn signal anywhere. My phone might as well be a couple of tin cans out here."

At her words, all his rather sardonic composure crumbled rapidly, and he pulled his hat off. "I beg pardon, ma'am, I... I didn't realize. I'm so sorry. Pauline's—that is, your family's little house and pastures are right on the east edge of my spread. She was a good lady, and we'll miss her. You're her niece, you said?" Though he was, Lily decided, fifty if he was a day, he blushed in his discomposure. It was an odd, and intriguing, hint of vulnerability in the stoic facade, and Lily decided she liked him.

"It's okay—I... it's okay. I'm Lily Amis. Pauline was my mother's sister. My mother... she's not with us anymore, so when they found her, I was the closest relation. I've got to get the house cleared out so it can be sold. So I'm sorry to be descending on you like a harpy looking for wireless, but I've had a hell of a week already, and it only seems to keep getting worse."

Maybe not entirely worse, Lily thought. The man's dark hair, though streaked with silver, was thick and full, and her artist's eye took note of the rugged contours of his weathered face,

and the full, humorous mouth beneath his moustaches. Having never been one for pretty boys, Lily entirely approved.

"I'm Rob Elgar, Miss—Mrs.—Amis. Real pleased to meet you." He held out his big hand, and Lily's eyes drifted down to the way it enfolded her own slim hand.

Smiling slightly, Lily lifted her gaze back to his face, enjoying the sight of his rather deep-set, dark eyes. "I'm not married. But, please just call me Lily. I'm glad to meet you."

"Lily." He smiled a little as he repeated her words, and Lily wanted to blush almost at the way he was regarding her. But then she thought she must have imagined it, for he turned to point down the road. "Well, Lily, if you'll allow me to make amends for my little fit of jackass there, I'm just the next turn past the drive for Pauline's place. If you'd like to follow me back, you can use my internet, though I don't have any wireless."

"That's fine—that's wonderful!" Lily said, brightening. "I really appreciate it. I only got in yesterday, and I asked for the internet service to be added last week, but...."

"But that means next week at the soonest, up here," he chuckled. "Well then, follow me, Lily. You can use my office just as long as you like." He climbed in the truck, and Lily hurried over to her weathered but well-loved jeep to follow him. Certainly, she couldn't have gotten lost. There was one service road branching off the main road, but that was all. She followed him up the road, turning down a rutted lane after him. He parked near a big, low ranch house, and was out of his truck and at the door of her jeep to open it before Lily had time to get out.

The little attention took Lily aback, and she was blushing again as she climbed down. She shook herself mentally. What would he think of her—a woman in her forties acting like a naïve schoolgirl! But, something in the way his dark eyes lingered on the fine, still smooth lines of her face made her think he didn't mind it at all. "Thank you," she said breathlessly.

He nodded briefly, and then led her into the ranch house. It was old, Lily could tell from the way it sprawled out rather aimlessly, one generation after another having added rooms—or knocked them off—as they saw fit. It was a place with history, a place with personality—the kind of place Lily had always liked, but never lived in. Pauline's house was like that too, and sometimes, Lily liked to just press her palm to the walls and wonder about all the people, her ancestors, who had lived there before, and what they would think of the fading blonde in skinny jeans standing there now, trying to imagine them.

The office was stacked high with papers on almost every surface, and Rob gave a little, apologetic groan. "You'll have to excuse the mess. I guess a man's bound to hate a room he never comes in 'cept to pay bills and taxes."

She laughed, nodding. "It's fine," she said. "Thank you. I can't tell you what a help this is." She was already digging in her laptop bag for a cable.

"I can see you know what you're doing, so I'll let you work. I'll be down in the pasture behind the house if you need anything."

She murmured her thanks again, but was already distracted as she opened up her laptop and set to downloading three days' worth of unread email. Lily was an artist, though her humility always made her say "graphic" artist. Her family had always asked her what she meant to do with that art degree besides smoke cigarettes and date the wrong kind of boys, but Lily had shown them. Though it had taken a long time, her creative, quirky illustrations, strong work ethic, and native savvy now meant that she had as many clients as she could handle. More, usually.

She'd only meant to email her client for the information she needed to complete her assignment, but she couldn't ignore the new messages, and one thing led to another as she scrambled to manage her correspondence, schedule her business's social media, and revise her to-do list. Before she knew it, two hours had past, and a crick in her neck and the beginnings of a headache reminded her that she hadn't moved in that period.

Lily finally closed her laptop, rubbed her neck, and fished an aspirin out of her purse to swallow it dry. She packed up her bag, then went out the way she'd come in. She couldn't see Rob, but it seemed wrong to just take advantage of his generous hospitality and leave without a word. This was the country, as he'd so sarcastically reminded her, and they were neighbors. Country neighbors didn't act like that. Remembering his directions, she moved behind the house, cursing the heels on her boots as they sank down into a deep patch of mud. She needed some shoes more appropriate for this place. Pauline hadn't been a hoarder, exactly, but there were generations of things there, and Lily couldn't bear the thought of throwing out some treasure carelessly. It would take at least a couple of months to do the job right.

She found the fenced pasture and discerned his shape stooping to work on a bit of fencing. Lily straightened, tucking her hair behind her ear unconsciously as she approached. "I didn't mean to be so long," she called out, when she was near enough.

Rob straightened. He smiled a little when he saw her, but then he looked past her, frowning sternly. "I hope you didn't mean to leave that gate open either," he said, moving to correct it.

"I'm sorry—I didn't think. I didn't see any animals?" Lily trotted after him, given much ado to keep up with his long legs. "Nothing got out, did it?"

"Not the point," he grunted. "Out here, you open a gate, you close it. Don't matter if you're staying here a week or a year, you'd best learn that."

"I'm sorry," Lily repeated, and if she'd thought she was blushing before, it was nothing to the flaming hue her face took on as he pulled the gate into place and latched it. "I won't ever do it again."

"Best not," he said tersely, but his face softened as he took in her real agitation. "It's all right," he said finally. "You're right, the pasture is empty, since the bull tore a hell of a hole in the fence the other day. But it's a habit you'd best pick up sooner than later—when it could mean a day of someone's work rounding up a stray herd."

"I understand," Lily said, trying to keep her voice steady, even though his disapproval shook her deeply. "I'm so sorry."

He nodded, letting it go. "Did you get everything you needed done? I'd thought you already left."

"No—I mean, yes, I did get everything done, but I wanted to say thank you. You're very kind."

"If only all kindness was that easy," he grinned, and Lily relaxed hopefully into the sunshine of his pleasure. "You're welcome to come over any time you need—I guess they'll get you set up eventually, but the company men hate comin' so far out, so they leave it as long as they can."

"Good to know. Maybe... maybe I could repay you with dinner one day."

"Now, I might take you up on that—just me and a couple of my hands out here. Between us we can make beans, burgers, coffee, and flapjacks all right, but we eat more sandwiches than any man should have to endure." His eyes traveled over her slim frame. "But you're a trim thing—I bet you don't eat more than a couple lettuce leaves a day."

"My perpetual diet appreciates the compliment," Lily laughed, feeling pleasantly self-conscious under his gaze. "But I've—I was married for fifteen years. I can fry a steak tender and cook an eggplant parmesan that could make even an Italian weep."

"Divorced?" he said, after an awkward pause.

"Yeah." Lily smiled tightly. "You marry a man at twenty-five, and you wake up at forty and realize you wouldn't even talk to him voluntarily for five minutes if he weren't your husband. People change. Who would have thought?"

She tried to sound light about it, and a part of her brain couldn't help comparing Rob to Brian. Brian who had been an *artist* when they married—a serious painter—had somehow turned into an insurance agent who bored her silly. Rob wouldn't be like that, she thought. Not that she imagined he'd be a big one for dinner conversations about Matisse, but he wouldn't change like that. Rob wouldn't lure her in with shining promise and then reveal himself as something other. He was what he was.

Lily regrouped, rubbing her hand over her face abruptly. "I'm sorry—I'm chattering. I only came to thank you, but I do mean it about dinner. I'd love the company. You can bring your hands if you like. It sounds like they could use a square meal too."

Rob laughed. "I guess they could, but they can shift for themselves for a night." He looked down at Lily, his gaze warm and alluring. "I'd like to get to know you better."

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Rob gave Lily his number in case she had any problems—Pauline *did* have a phone, it just had no long distance service—and promised to come to dinner the following evening. Lily's practical mind lasered in on what she would make. She'd said steak or Italian to show she could make hearty dishes, but now they'd be uninventive, looking like she hadn't troubled to really think about him. And though Lily refused to admit to it consciously, she was very much thinking about him. She was thinking about his tall body, and how small she would feel pressed against it, and the way his low voice might sound husky with desire. She was thinking about that exciting sternness on his rugged face as he'd scolded her for leaving the gate open, and she was thinking about how his moustache would feel against her face if they kissed.

And so, after trying, unsuccessfully, to bury herself in sketches and compositions for a couple of hours, Lily gave up and decided to go to the grocery store. She had no clear idea what she would buy, only that it would have to be just right. Filling and manly so he wouldn't think

she hadn't taken trouble for him, but not so heavy as to resemble a digestive blunt instrument. Lily was a good cook, though she had seldom bothered for herself in the three years since her divorce, except to make up big pots of soup when she wanted something comforting. Otherwise, cheese sandwiches formed a depressingly large part of her nutritional intake. She didn't like to eat much when she was working.

But as Lily was about to leave the house, she saw a cloud of dust from the long drive that told her someone was coming. Could it be him? Her heart gave a maddening flutter at the thought, and when a battered Audi came out of the cloud instead of his pickup, she laughed ruefully. *Where were you on all those blind dates?* Her friends had tried to set her up, with increasing frequency, since her divorce, but Lily had... not given up. Giving up sounded like there was something she wanted and couldn't get. And that was just the thing. She didn't want those men. She didn't want any of them.

Now, the rebellious stirrings of long-buried desire surprised her, even as they worried her. Because the investment banker who'd taken her to a gallery and a wine bar hadn't stirred them. And neither had the journalist who bought her Korean barbecue and told her a hundred fascinating stories, but never once asked a single question about her. But this... this cowboy had all her senses on high alert, had captured her thoughts effortlessly. What was this? Some kind of escapist fantasy? A longing for her very own Marlboro Man?

Lily banished these irritable internal inquiries as a woman climbed out of the car. She looked about seventy, but not in any sense of fragility. She was thickset, with sharp blue eyes and steel-gray hair bobbed chin length. "Good afternoon! You're Pauline's kin?"

Lily descended from the porch steps. "Yes. I'm Lily Amis, her niece, though I didn't know her very well, I'm afraid."

"I guess I'll save the condolences for them that need 'em, then. I'm Harry Olsen, and I was as close as Pauline had to a friend. I saw you in town earlier. Thought I'd stop by and see if you needed anything." She gave Lily a vigorous handshake.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm all right, thank you. I cleared out one of the spare rooms the first day. I hadn't—it's going to be a bigger chore than I expected. I guess I'll be here a couple of months."

Harry snorted. "I guess it'll take you that just to get through the first floor. I told her she ought to clear some of that stuff out, but Pauline didn't listen to anyone, and she never threw

anything away. But, I guess if I'd starved through the Depression, I'd be the same way. I brought you a few things, though you'll have to decide if they're help or hindrance."

Lily made conventional noises about the kindness, but Harry brushed them off. "I know Pauline didn't want a funeral, because she showed me her will once. But when folks die, people out here cook. Lily—you're from Seattle, right? The artist?"

Lily blinked at that description of herself. "I do graphic design," she said, diminishing it to something manageable. "But yes, I'm from Seattle."

"Huh. She had a picture you sent her, though. Hanging in the back parlor, last I recall."

Lily rubbed her nose, perplexed, searching through her memory. "Oh... oh, I remember now. I did send her a picture I painted back when I was in college. Goodness, I was full of myself. I don't think I've even been in the back parlor. You'll think me terribly lazy, but I haven't even been through all the rooms yet. I've just been trying to clear space in the kitchen and such."

"Just as well," Harry grunted, hoisting a box of supplies out of the Audi's trunk and refusing all offers of help as she moved towards the kitchen. "You'd probably kill yourself eating half the stuff in those cupboards anyhow. I always told her shelf stable don't mean it's good forever."

"Harry, you're not helping me feel properly guilty for not visiting her. She sounds like a crank." Harry's bluntness emboldened her from her usually more cautious speech.

Harry hooted. "Good! You shouldn't be. She was, at that. Country life makes folks cranky, or at least gives 'em space to let their weird fly free. My grandma lived to be a hundred and five and shot three sheriff's deputies." She nodded at Lily's surprised face, as though it were a tribute. "Truth. It's printed in her obituary."

"Was she a criminal?" Lily ventured.

"Just a little overzealous with the shotgun," Harry corrected her. "One came to check on her after a storm, and another broke a window and climbed in cause the house smelled so bad the neighbors thought she was dead. Third came out with a tax notice. He was smarter than the rest, yelled before he came up, said he was a deputy, but she said that was just what a burglar would say. When she died, my daddy gave every penny she left him to police charities. Said it was only right."

Lily couldn't help laughing, and her thoughts, which had been tangling and turning on themselves as she fought her emotions, seemed to clear in the brightness of Harry's plain talk.

She liked the old woman very much, and it made it easy to accept the covered casseroles, the garden fresh strawberries, and quivering puddings. The simple care and friendliness warmed her, and soon the two women were sitting together at the table while green tea steeped in an old, cracked china pot.

Harry leaned forward to whiff at the steam. "Smells good. I like the matcha, though. You ever have that?"

Lily blinked, having more expected to have to reconcile the old woman to the stuff than be criticized for its tameness. But an inquiry revealed that Harry was rather an ardent admirer of Japanese culture, and soon the two were talking with the animation and ease of old friends.

"You don't wear a wedding ring," Harry observed. "Divorced, or too modern?"

"Divorced. I'm not really very modern. He..." The light, practiced answer she'd given Rob earlier wouldn't satisfy Harry, she knew. "He never made me feel safe. I suppose that's as un-modern a thing to want as anything."

Harry rubbed her nose. "Maybe, but what else is a man for? My husband, George, is just like a big, furry, old bear. May be a little gray now, but let anyone come near and watch his hackles rise!"

Lily looked a little wistful at that. "Brian, he... I don't know. I didn't mind everything else. Or I did, but I could have lived with it. But... his boss felt me up at his company's Christmas party. And when I told him...."

"Well, what? Did he blame you for it?"

"No, not that. He didn't blame anyone. He, uh... wondered out loud if it would help his chances for promotion if I fucked the man. He pretended he was joking, but I couldn't believe he was. And it was sad enough that he'd do that to himself, but to think that he'd use me like that... well. I couldn't even stand to look at him after that."

"Well, you're at an age where a lot of men are in the same boat like you are. I bet you could find another husband easy if you wanted one. God knows if I had an ass like that I'd take it out on the town for a little fun."

Lily blushed and couldn't help saying, "Maybe. What about Rob Elgar? Is he divorced?"

"Oh!" Harry looked rather tickled. "Met Rob, have we? Ain't he handsome? No, Rob isn't divorced. He could have had any girl around here easy, but he never paid anyone much

mind. I guess he ran around some when he was younger, but he was too slippery to ever get caught. You got your mind set that way?"

"Not set—and certainly not set on catching anyone! But, he is coming over for dinner tomorrow," Lily confessed.

Harry gave a wide grin. "Yeah, but what are you going to cook him for breakfast?"