

Chapter 1 Wednesday Morning

The beauty queen's solemn brown eyes showed indifference to the crowd around her. Instead of striking a victorious pose for her admirers, her jaw moved steadily, grinding the mouthful of food she had snuck before the beginning of the photo shoot.

I raised one arm and snapped my fingers, hoping to catch her attention and get a headshot that my crusty editor wouldn't criticize too much. When she turned the other way, I lowered my camera and sighed. Weighing in at well over a thousand pounds, Peggy Sue, the supreme champion dairy cow of the Walworth County Fair, had more sass and attitude than a sugared-up contestant at a child beauty pageant.

The black and white Holstein stomped a hoof against the straw-covered concrete floor of the Dairy Barn and shook her massive head impatiently. Her handler, a freckle-faced teenage girl in long braids and faded jeans, ignored the beast and continued chatting and giggling with the runner-up's handler, a girl a few years younger. As I focused my camera on the uplifting picture of great sportsmanship, the runner-up cow stretched her thick neck forward, curled her lips back, and bit Peggy Sue's hind leg. The supreme champion fought back, kicking the poor loser in the chest with the nipped leg. Both cows bellowed, and then, with the runner-up on her tail, Peggy Sue took off lumbering through the crowd.

As the runner-up passed, I reached for her bridle, but my fingers only raked across her smooth side. The cow juked to the right, and her hefty hindquarters knocked me onto my bum and into a pile of straw.

And that's how Grace Warner found me.

“Emma Moore, get off the ground. You'll catch something.” My best friend since college and former coworker at the *Chicago Tribune* covered her nose, leaving the job of breathing to her mouth. It was a wise move, as the Dairy Barn stunk.

I wasn't a country girl by any stretch of the imagination, but Grace was a “big city girl” through and through. Raised in Chicago's high society, she hadn't had many opportunities to get up close and personal with farm animals, and our trip to the Walworth County Fair was a first for her.

I stood and craned my neck to check for any damage to the backside of my linen shorts.

“You've got something brown right there.” She waved a finger at me before moving away as if the cow poo might magically leap onto her and ruin the mini-dress she was wearing.

“Ugh. Let's find a bathroom. Then, I have to track down Peggy Sue's handler. I still need a quote from her.” I dusted the straw from my palms and blotted the sweat on my forehead with the corner of my shirt. The Dairy Barn felt like a sauna despite a fan in every stall and a few hanging from the ceiling.

“Who's Peggy Sue?” Grace asked. “Is she performing at the Grandstand? I don't remember seeing her name.” She pulled out a folded schedule of events from her purse and squinted at the day's listing.

“She’s the champion cow I was taking pictures of.”

Both of Grace’s perfectly maintained eyebrows shot up. Usually, she only arches one when I’ve said or done something that she can’t believe, so I braced myself for whatever scolding was coming my way.

“You realize you used to work at the *Chicago Tribune*—a major newspaper.”

“Yes, and now I work at the *Lake Geneva Regional News*.”

She folded her long slender arms and tucked her chin, the sides of her jet-black bob sweeping her high cheekbones. Her ice-blue eyes looked sadly into mine. “And now you interview cows instead of sports stars.”

“The cows treat me better.”

She spun me around by the shoulders and pointed at the stain on my rear end. “Really?”

Almost a year ago, we visited the Geneva Lake area for a story Grace was assigned, and I fell in love with the idyllic scenery and a certain detective with the Fontana Police Department. Six months later, I rented an apartment so close to Fontana Beach that I could see where the sand met the water if I stood on my tippy toes at the kitchen window.

Leaving Chicago and my best friend to be a reporter for a small-town newspaper had been the hardest decision of my life, but so far, even with cow poo on my favorite pair of shorts, I didn’t regret it. Sure, some of the stories were hokey, but I was learning so much about all aspects of the news business that the few negatives were worth it.

However, I missed Grace despite several short weekend visits over the past months, so I asked her to spend a few of her precious vacation days with me to hang by Geneva Lake and

soak in some late summer sun. The county fair wasn't on our to-do list, but the stomach flu infested my newsroom, and I was the only reporter left standing.

“Come on.” I gestured at the exit with my chin. “I have a five o'clock deadline.”

We walked out into the stifling August heat, and the sweet and salty aroma of cotton candy and popcorn from a nearby food wagon replaced the manure smell of the barn. Ignoring the rumble in my ever-hungry stomach, I steered through the stream of stroller-pushing parents and bouncing kids to the nearest restroom.

After I did what I could to clean myself off, we headed back to the Dairy Barn, but before we reached it, Grace stopped me with a touch on my arm.

“Isn't that your police detective?” In case I didn't pick up on her teasing, her fingers formed air quotation marks around “your police detective.”

Ryan stood with Officers Conway and Lewis, the two uniformed officers of the Fontana Police Department, and a German shepherd in the shade of one of the random trees that dotted the fairgrounds. My heart did a little flip as it always did when I saw “my police detective.” He looked particularly delicious in blue jeans and a fitted apple green T-shirt that contrasted nicely with his caramel-colored skin and showed off the muscles of his chest and arms.

Deciding Peggy Sue could wait, I changed direction and joined the men.

“Hey there, officers. And how are you, Gunner?” I scratched the police dog behind his ears, which usually got a happy tail thump out of him, but instead, his nose went straight to my stained backside. I nudged his head away, hoping he was the only one who could smell what was on my shorts.

“Are you here on official business?” I kept my tone casual even though I desired something more exciting than a champion cow to pursue.

Ryan squinted at the side of my head and then pulled a piece of hay from my strawberry-blond hair. Ignoring his amused smile, I searched for any more remnants from the Dairy Barn with my fingers before gathering the frizzy mess into a ponytail.

“Are you a reporter or my girlfriend right now?” he asked.

“Which role will get me a scoop that will impress my editor?”

Grace made a coughing noise behind me.

Ryan took a step to the side and eyeballed her. “Hi, Grace. Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

My friend regarded him coolly. “Doesn’t say much about your professional skills, *Detective O’Mara.*”

Now, my boyfriend’s father was Irish, and his mother was Jamaican. Usually, Ryan is a laid-back, water-loving, Caribbean island dude, but Grace loved to bring out his feisty leprechaun. It was a game they played, and I chose to ignore their banter unless one of them crossed the line. Then I stepped in to call a truce.

His eyes narrowed, and his mouth opened to snap back at her, but I laid a finger on his cheek and shifted his focus to me.

“Official business?” I asked with a lilt of hope in my voice.

He nodded reluctantly. “But you know, Emma, I can’t tell you anything in advance. You’re going to have to wait until after the arrest.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “Of course. I know the drill. But you know, if I bring my editor a breaking story on top of my champion cow one, I might get to resume my vacation. And wait—” I struck a pose and pointed my finger at him. “Didn’t you say you had the weekend off? For the first time in two months?”

It was only Wednesday, but I hoped he missed me as much as I missed him.

Ryan chuckled. “Meet me by the housing trailers on the north end in fifteen minutes, and you’ll have your story.”

Though it was unprofessional and would embarrass Ryan in front of Conway and Lewis, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. Before I released him, he whispered in my ear, “Find Luke. He knows what’s going on.”

I met Luke Talbot on one of my first assignments while working for the *Tribune*. He was pitching for a minor league baseball team that was having a terrible season. Luke was the only player who would give me an interview, and I was forever grateful for his kindness. We became fast friends, and since he was new to the area, Grace and I were happy to introduce him to Chicago.

After an injury ended his baseball career, Grace’s dad, a Chicago real estate mogul, offered him a job. He tried it for a while, but the corporate business world didn’t suit him. So, he bought a building in Fontana and opened LT’s Performance & Fitness Center, a gym that catered to athletes.

Ryan turned to the two police officers. “Ready?”

Before they even disappeared into the crowd, I sent Luke a text message. Biting my thumbnail, I waited for his reply.

“What’s going on?” Grace asked. “Don’t we have to find that cow?”

My phone vibrated, and I read the new message. “In a minute. First, we have to go to the Poultry Barn.”

“Oh, Emma. You know birds scare me. I hate their beady little eyes. Ever since that pigeon attacked me on Michigan Avenue, I can’t go near one.”

I grabbed her elbow to get her moving. “That pigeon was going for your french fries, not you. And we don’t have to go into the barn. Luke’s meeting us by the entrance.”

“Luke? You didn’t tell me he was here.” She ran a hand over her sleek hair, though not a single strand was out of place despite the summer humidity.

I silently groaned. During Grace’s last visit, I noticed a change in their friendship. From the day they met, Luke’s attraction to Grace was evident—at least to me. However, Grace was oblivious and had dated every loser in Chicago and had her heart stomped on multiple times. But now, it seemed Grace had wised up, though so far, neither of my friends had dared to take the plunge and ask the other out on a proper date.

“Ryan told me to talk to Luke. He must have something to do with the person they are arresting.” We had reached the Poultry Barn, and I waved to Luke, who was pacing in front of it with his hands shoved deep into his khaki shorts.

“There you are.” He greeted us with quick hugs and an extra smile for Grace.

Feeling the tension in his body through his polo shirt sped up my reporter's heartbeat. Whatever was going on had to be something big.

The ends of his wavy brown hair were wet with sweat, and he shoved impatiently at a cowlick that had fallen over his gray eyes. "We need to hurry. I don't want to miss the action."

We hustled to keep up with his long stride as he set off for the carnival rides section of the fair. When we reached the Ferris wheel, he had us hide behind a ticket booth. In the distance, a tall, skinny teenage boy, dressed in sports shorts and a muscle T-shirt, stood next to the operator of the ride, a rough-looking man in his early twenties. The operator yanked at his low-slung, ripped jeans before clapping the teenager on the back and flexing his tattooed biceps in a bodybuilding pose. He whistled for a coworker to take over the Ferris wheel, and the man and the teenager headed away from the carnival rides and toward a small village of trailers.

"Come on." Luke took off again, though he stayed a healthy distance behind so as not to be seen. "It's working just like Ryan said it would."

"What's working?" I asked. "And isn't that Dillon from your gym? Why is he hanging out with a sketchy carny guy?"

His face formed a rare scowl. "That guy came into the gym three days ago and asked if he could buy a week's pass. He said he wanted to work out while in town with the carnival. No problem, right? Then, Dillon and a few other kids told me the guy offered to sell them steroids. You know how I feel about that crap."

I did. When Luke blew out his elbow pitching, it eventually ended his baseball career. But while rehabbing the injury to keep his major league dreams alive, a coach offered him

steroids. He refused, but other players didn't. During his time in the minors, he witnessed more than one promising career destroyed by drugs.

“Ryan set up this sting using Dillon,” Luke said as the three of us weaved through the section of the fairgrounds that housed the workers. “The carny must be taking Dillon to his trailer.”

My news reporter adrenaline kicked up another notch. This was much better than the cow story. “So, not only will he be arrested, you'll get his drugs off the street.”

He nodded grimly. “And out of my gym.”

“What about entrapment? Isn't Ryan concerned about the charge sticking?” Much to her frustration, Grace still worked the Life & Style desk at the *Tribune*, though her editor recently relented and let her shadow the court reporter one day a week.

The two disappeared into a rusty, white trailer, and Luke pulled us behind another one several yards away. “The assistant DA told Dillon exactly what he could and couldn't say. It'll stick.”

Ryan and his officers arrived with a jacked-up Gunner bouncing at their heels. The men huddled for a moment, and then Ryan pounded on the trailer's door. When it opened a few inches, he held up a piece of paper and motioned for the man to come outside. The carny must have refused because Ryan shoved his foot, and then his body, into the opening and pulled the man out by the scruff. A scared-looking Dillon followed.

Fisting his hands on his hips, the man glared at the three police officers. “I ain't done nothing wrong. I was just taking a break with my buddy here.”

Ryan smiled. “Good, then you won’t mind us executing our search warrant since you have nothing to hide.”

“Whatever. You ain’t gonna find nothing.”

Ryan shrugged. “I might not, but Gunner will.”

A low growl came from deep in the shepherd’s throat, and the alleged drug dealer took a large step back from the dog.

Ryan smoothed the fur between Gunner’s ears and chuckled. He had one hand on the trailer’s doorknob when Officer Lewis shouted, “He’s running!”

Ryan, Lewis, and Gunner gave chase, and with the potential for a front-page photo, I ran after them. The suspect zig-zagged between the trailers, but he was no match for the speed of Gunner’s four legs. The police dog lunged and latched onto the carny’s ankle. The man fell to the ground, screaming and thrashing at the dog. Defeated, he begged for Ryan to call the dog off. Ryan commanded Gunner to his side, and Lewis slapped cuffs on the man’s wrists and read him his rights.

As I took several pictures of the arrest, Ryan looked at me in disbelief. “What are you doing?”

I stopped long enough to reply, “My job. Just like you.”

Back at the trailer, Officer Conway led the German shepherd inside, and a few seconds later, we heard the dog’s loud, excited barks.

“Way to go, Gunner,” I said, knowing his barking signaled he had found drugs. Ryan and Conway shared the police dog, so I had spent some time with the beast. Though he acted

ferociously while on duty, he loved to cuddle and had no qualms with laying his eighty pounds of muscle and fur on my lap.

Conway and Gunner exited the trailer with two small boxes and a pistol. Conway handed the items to Ryan, who slipped the evidence into clear plastic bags. Then the uniformed officers led the alleged drug dealer and Dillon away.

“Wait, why are they arresting Dillon?” Grace asked.

“Don’t worry,” Luke said. “It’s just to protect him. Ryan didn’t want the carny knowing Dillon was working with the police.”

“Gunner found drugs?” I asked Ryan, who was writing in a small notebook. “Was it cocaine? Heroin? Weed? He can’t smell steroids, right? Did you know the carny was selling the other drugs? Is that why you brought Gunner with you? Was the gun registered? Does the guy already have a police record?”

“Slow down, Emma, please,” Ryan said with an indulgent sigh. “Yes, his name is Steve Packard, and he does have a sealed juvenile record. He was arrested in Florida last year, but the charges were dropped. We figured he would be selling more than steroids. It’s probably cocaine, but it has to be tested by the lab. I won’t know about the gun until I get back to the office and run it through the database.”

When I started to ask another round of questions, he stopped me with a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll email you a copy of the police report as soon as I can.” He turned to Luke. “Thanks for your help on this. I’ll let you know if I need anything else from you.”

“Well, that was exciting,” Grace said, a bit breathless after Ryan left.

“That’s why this job is better than the Sports desk of the *Tribune*.” I redid my ponytail while prioritizing my to-do list in my mind. “OK, I need to finish up with that cow and then get started on this drug bust.”

“Grace, would you like to walk around while Emma works?” Luke’s face turned red the second the words left his mouth.

I don’t know which of the three of us was startled more, but I wanted to high-five Luke for finally taking a chance, though some women might not consider it a proper date and more of a “we might as well as long as we’re here” situation. At this point, I was willing to bend any rules to get these two together.

Recovered from her shock, Grace carefully composed her face. “I’d love to.” Her left eyebrow twitched subtly. “Only if you don’t need my help, Emma.”

It was an innocent enough offer unless you were a best friend who saw right through it. My girlfriend was scared, which gave me hope because no man or social situation had ever frightened Grace Warner.

“No, I’m good.” I checked my watch. “Maybe we could all meet for dinner after I write these stories? I should be back at my apartment by five o’clock. I’ll see if Ryan can go to dinner too. At the very least, I owe him a moderately priced meal for giving me this story.”

We said our goodbyes, and they went in search of the best cream puff the fair had to offer while I continued toward the Dairy Barn. On the way, I apologized to my stomach and nose, knowing they would rather be eating sweets than smelling farm animals.