

## Chapter One

March 25, 1982

Marilyn Bergquist finished stocking the morning's delivery of produce and returned to the front counter. Her store, The Eaden Mercantile, filled the needs of this town in many ways. In addition to selling groceries, she also rented VHS and Beta video tapes, housed the only liquor store in town, and offered photography and dry cleaning services.

Right after the grocery wholesaler's driver finished up his delivery to her store early that morning, Marilyn had made her weekly one-hundred-mile round-trip to Lewistown to make drop-offs and pick-ups at the dry cleaner and the camera store. As soon as she arrived back at Eaden, she began catching up on the stocking of her shelves, and she had been working on it for the last two hours.

She sat down behind the counter and yawned, happy to finally be off her feet. She pulled the box of photograph envelopes closer to her and began flipping through the stack. Most people in Eaden were terrible photographers, and their photos were so artistically lacking that she had no desire to see them. Others had a bad habit of taking shots of people in embarrassing or vulgar poses. She was repulsed by those crude photos. Marilyn had come to know whose photos were going to be enjoyable and whose weren't, and she wouldn't waste her time with the envelopes of the people who had disappointed her in the past.

She saw the envelope with Rita Andrews's name on it and her eyes lit up. She pulled the envelope and opened it. Rita had a great eye for photography, and Marilyn always looked forward to seeing what she had captured on film. Marilyn also had to admit that she had a soft spot in her heart for Rita's husband, Walter. He had graduated from Eaden High with her own boy, Tommy, over a decade ago.

The first photo in the batch showed Rita and Walter's young son, Marcus, dressed up in his Little League uniform and smiling for the camera. He was adorable with his curly brown hair pushing out from under the baseball hat that was a bit too large for his head. Marcus was a troublemaker, though, like all little boys. He and his partner in crime Jeff Williams were always running around and cooking up some scheme or another, and

that could only lead to trouble. But it was true that they always brought a smile to her face. *Maybe they're not such bad kids after all.*

This batch of Rita's photos met Marilyn's high expectations once again. Many were close-ups of wild flowers, perfectly lit and centered. Other photos in the batch featured the faces of newborn calves playing in the calving pasture and deer grazing in the Andrews' yard at dusk. Marilyn flipped each photo slowly, spending several seconds admiring each one with a satisfied smile. She then came to one that made her pause.

The front door opened and George O'Sullivan walked in. She instinctively hid her hands below the counter as she looked up at the old man and called out, "Hi, George!"

"Hi, Marilyn," he said back to her, smiling. "Did the fresh shipment come in this morning?"

"Yep, I just finished stocking it a few minutes ago. I boxed up your usual items, except the frozens, of course. Do you want anything else besides that today?"

"You're way too good to me, Marilyn. No, I think my usual shopping list should tide me over this week."

"Great," she said. She glanced back down at the photo in her hand. There was something about this picture that fascinated her. She knew that Rita would stop by sometime soon to pick up her pictures, and then Marilyn would never see this photo again. She felt the need to share it with at least one person before she lost it forever.

"George, come take a look at this." George walked to the counter and she handed him the photo. "Isn't it great? Don't you just love the forms and spacing she caught there? Even the lighting is perfect. Of course, those big smiles just tickle me. What do you think?"

George stared at the photo and opened his mouth to speak, but the phone started ringing.

"Hold that thought," Marilyn said as she moved to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello? Oh, hi, Sarah ... I'm not sure. Hold on and I'll run back and check." She put the receiver on the shelf below the phone and walked to the rear of the store.

Marilyn returned a few minutes later with a large box of groceries. She put them on the counter and returned to the phone. "Yeah, we have those, Sarah. Do you want me

to set aside a couple for you? Later this afternoon? Okay, I'll do that. Uh-huh. Good-bye."

Marilyn hung up the phone and turned to George. "There are your groceries—" She fell silent as she looked at George. He didn't even turn to look at her when she brought his groceries out, and he appeared to be fixated on the photo. She put the box on the counter and moved toward him. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

George turned to Marilyn with a look of surprise, and she saw that his hands were shaking and there were tears streaking down his cheeks. He took a deep breath, shook his head and appeared to try to smile, but the resulting expression on his face was anything but comforting to Marilyn,

"I'm okay. Just a little bit of hay fever." His voice sounded scratchy and uneven—very different from the almost poetic manner of speaking that Marilyn was accustomed to hearing from him. George fell silent as his eyes went back to the photo in his hand. He finally looked back to her and said, "I know this is really putting you in a bad spot, but this picture ... I'd really like to have a copy of it. Do you think there's a way?"

Marilyn didn't know what to say. It wasn't her photo to give, and they both knew that neither of them should have looked at it in the first place. She looked into George's eyes and saw a desperation that she had never before seen in him. Marilyn picked up the envelope and flipped through the photos with intense concentration, and then she looked up and smiled.

"This is your lucky day, George. It looks like there's an extra print of that one in this batch." Her eyes did a quick scan of the store to make sure they were still alone, and then she looked up at George. "If you put that photo in your pocket, nobody's gonna miss it."

"Thank you, Marilyn." He looked at the photo one more time and then slid it carefully into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. She wrote the amount of total charges on his tab card, and George signed his name and picked up the box of groceries. He nodded to Marilyn in the courteous way he always did, and they shared a soft smile. He turned and left the store.

