

Chapter One

Marcy Bellini looked around the bar and wished she were anywhere else but here. Right about now, her daughter would be winding down and getting ready for bed. Marcy's favorite part of the evening was when Claire crawled into her lap for a little mommy-and-me time. They'd watch Claire's favorite movie of the moment—inevitably a princess one—and snuggle until she was so sleepy, Marcy had to carry her to bed. If she concentrated, she could almost smell the faint lavender of her daughter's shampoo instead of the stale beer and conflicting colognes of the men around her.

She snatched her beer off the bar and smiled her thanks to Gena. The woman gave her a grin in return and waggled her eyebrows. Everyone seemed to be doing something like that—nudging each other or grinning at Marcy like they were in on a joke she didn't understand. It had started the moment she'd walked through the door of Chilly's, and as people drifted inside and out of the warm spring night, it was only getting more obvious.

Maybe they're just looking at Bri. It is her wedding party, after all.

While that might make sense, she couldn't shake the feeling they were all staring at *her*. Maybe it was just what people did at bars. It wasn't like she'd spent any time in them in the last four years. She'd hopscotched right over that wild stage most of the girls in her graduating class went through. There had been no one-night stands or drunken adventures or trips at the drop of a hat.

She had no regrets about that, though. Claire was the center of her universe and there was nothing as wonderful as relearning to see the world through her three-year-old's eyes. Everything was new and exciting, and she towed Marcy along on adventure after adventure.

What was drinking herself stupid and making bad decisions compared to that?

She dropped into the seat next to Bri, needing to get out of her head before she talked

herself right out the door. “This is...fun.”

Bri laughed. It was strange to reconcile this glowing woman with the shy librarian she’d met just two years ago, but falling for the younger Flannery brother had brought Bri right out of her shell. Marcy still remembered Ryan from high school, though, he’d been a few grades ahead of her. He’d blown town so fast after graduation, she’d been sure he’d never come back.

But she’d been wrong about a lot of things back then.

Bri nudged her. “I know this isn’t your thing, but you need this.”

“That’s up for debate.” She *didn’t* need this. She loved her life. It wasn’t traveling or any of the exciting plans she’d had before graduation, but it was comfortable and filled with the little delights she’d never known existed.

“When did you last have actual grown-up time?”

“I played bridge with Miss Nora and her ladies—and *you*—last week.”

Bri sighed. “Playing cards with a group of old ladies hardly counts—something Ryan never hesitates to point out to me. I mean something like this.” She motioned at the room around them.

“You’re one to talk. You hate the bar scene.”

“This isn’t a bar scene. This is a party for Ryan and me.” She glanced over the top of her black cats eyeglasses at the Flannery in question. He was leaning against the wall and watching his older brother take his turn at the pool table. There were other friends scattered around the room with the rest of the locals, but that didn’t lessen Marcy feeling like she had a spotlight pinned on her face.

After an hour, she could leave without being a terrible friend, couldn’t she? “It’s been fun, but it’s getting kind of late—”

“Don’t you dare.” Bri grabbed her hand like Marcy was going to bolt out of the door at any moment. Obviously her friend knew her too well, because she was in the process of inching out of her chair. “You have a sitter. A wonderful sitter who Claire loves. You’re going to take full advantage of it.”

“But—”

“No buts. You should do shots! Since I’m pregnant and stuck with ginger ale, I’ve got to live vicariously through *someone*.”

Marcy laughed and stopped trying to slide away. “Shots? Who are you and what have you done with that nice girl, Bri Nave?”

“You mean Bri Flannery, don’t you?”

They both looked up as Ryan took the seat across the table, closely followed by his brother Drew. Seeing them side-by-side was enough to make most females in town swoon. Both men were of the tall, dark, and handsome variety—the kind who made women sit up and take notice. But she’d seen enough over the years to see the *Look but don’t touch* neon sign flashing over Drew. He was Wellingford’s most eligible bachelor and Marcy would be old and gray before he settled down. Not to mention, tonight he looked as out of sorts as she felt, even if the lovebirds beside them didn’t seem to notice. Drew glanced at his watch. “Avery’s late.”

“We’ve gone over this.” Ryan rolled his eyes. “She’s waiting for a shipment. She’ll be here after it’s delivered. And, for the last time, no, she doesn’t need you over there and underfoot while she’s doing it.”

Before he could say anything else, Gena approached with a tray. She winked at Bri. “I heard someone say something about shots.” She set two milky-looking shots in front of Marcy.

“*Two?*”

Gena winked. “One for you and one for you to have for Bri.”

“Good lord, it’s a conspiracy.” She frowned at the people around the table. “You can’t all be working against me.”

Bri grinned. “I prefer to think that we’re working *for* you, despite you. You have a lot of living to pack into one night.”

“I think you’re under the mistaken impression that I need to get out more.” Getting out meant leaving Claire behind with a sitter. No matter how good a sitter she found, they weren’t a replacement for Marcy. And her daughter wasn’t a burden to be foisted off on someone else when having her around got inconvenient.

“Not more. I’d just like to see you actually having a good time when you *are* out.” Bri gave her a pointed look. “Which, coincidentally, is right now.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to protest that she *was* having a good time, but it wasn’t strictly the truth. She’d been dragging her heels since Bri showed up at her front door earlier. Every time she looked at her phone, she was half hoping that the sitter would call her home. Marcy sighed. “I’m being a stick in the mud, aren’t I?”

“That might be kind of a—”

“Yes, you are.” Drew motioned at her with his beer. “You need to live a little, Marcy.”

“I don’t know. I think you live enough for both of us.”

He laughed, looking completely unrepentant. And why would he? He had no idea how heavy even welcome responsibilities could get. But maybe he was right. Maybe she did need to let down her hair a little bit. And it wasn’t like doing it tonight meant she was jumping onto the slippery slope of neglecting Claire’s needs in favor of her own.

Marcy eyed the shots in front of her. They didn’t look particularly appetizing, but Gena

wouldn't steer her wrong. She braced herself and took one. It went down surprisingly easy, leaving a yummy watermelon taste behind. An answering warmth started in her stomach and she shot Drew a triumphant grin. "I can live a little."

"There you go."

Bri leaned forward and inhaled. "It doesn't make any sense. I don't even like shots, but that smells so delicious."

"You're pregnant. Nothing is supposed to make sense." Marcy laughed, some of her tension melting away. Both Bri and Drew were right—she needed this tonight. She just had to relax and enjoy it.

Gena reappeared. "Everyone's come out tonight, and they're all determined to run me ragged." She passed two more beers to the Flannery boys. "These are from Old Joe."

They raised their beers as one, and Marcy followed their gaze to find Old Joe sitting at the end of the bar. He raised his beer in response and grinned. Then his gaze landed on her, and his grin widened. *Oh no.* She knew that look. He was about to start meddling. He hopped off his bar stool, more spry than any man his age had right to be, and nudged the young guy next to him.

Crap. Marcy turned back to the table, already feeling a flush spreading up her neck. The second shot did nothing to bolster her courage, but it was too late to flee. Besides, she was supposed to be letting her hair down. That meant she couldn't hide in a corner to avoid Old Joe's matchmaking attempts. *Crap again.*

Zach Robinson nursed his beer in the corner and watched the rest of the room. Everyone was laughing or talking animatedly and the overall vibe was a good one. There'd be no big dramas tonight. When his gaze landed on Marceline Bellini for the seventh time in thirty seconds, he

gave it up for a lost cause and just looked.

It had been a while since he'd seen her in more than passing at the grocery store or walking down the street, though, even those encounters had become more and more infrequent. She'd become something like a princess in a tower, building up the wall between her and other people until it was damn near unassailable.

Though not *all* other people. She had friends—and he knew for a fact she never missed Miss Nora Lee's weekly bridge game—but she'd effectively closed the door on any man who got too close.

Including him.

Hell, who was he kidding? He shouldn't even be *looking* at her. She'd been best friends with his little sister since high school, and there was something just plain wrong about wanting her as much as he did.

Besides, he understood why she'd taken the stance she had on men. She had a kid—a frighteningly adorable little girl who looked just like her mama—and that responsibility was something Marceline took seriously. She'd move heaven and earth for her daughter, and that kind of dedication didn't leave much room for dating. A mixed blessing if there ever was one—he wouldn't have to watch her with someone else, but he had no chance with her, either.

Zach watched her take a shot and laugh at something one of the Flannerys said, and tried to convince himself that he had no business walking over there and striking up a conversation. He'd promised himself he'd stay away from Marceline. For a lot of reasons.

But then Old Joe popped up next to the table with his grandson in tow. Zach strained to pick out what they were talking about, but the dull roar of the crowd drowned out any possibility of eavesdropping. There was no mistaking the way Warren looked at Marceline—like he'd just

been offered a buffet of his favorite foods. It didn't matter that the kid was a good boy from all the stories the old man told—he was a goddamn Marine and those guys were all cut from the same cloth. Marceline, of all people, should know that. Her asshole of an ex had up and joined the Corps, leaving town—and his pregnant ex-girlfriend—without looking back. He'd had the pushy asshole aspect down to a science.

Just thinking about it had Zach clenching his hands and fighting against the urge to pound some sense into the idiot kid. Warren didn't know the history he was dealing with. He saw an exotically beautiful woman who seemed interested, so of course he was smiling. The little shit probably thought he could charm his way into her panties and then head back to whatever base he was stationed at without a second thought, leaving Marceline to once again pick up the pieces.

Over his goddamn dead body.

She took Warren's hand and stood, the way she filled out that dress nearly making Zach groan. These days, it seemed like every time he saw her, she only got more beautiful. She didn't dress for attention, but those sundresses she favored when the weather was warm did unforgivable things to his blood pressure.

And now the goddamn Marine was looking even happier as his gaze raked over her. God damn it. He wasn't a good enough man to sit here and let her jump into a mistake like Warren. She deserved better than that.

Or that was what he told himself as he finished his beer and stood, not bothering to slouch like he often did in a crowd. He wanted Warren to see him coming—and hell if the little shit didn't catch sight of him over Marceline's shoulder.

Fuck this.

Either she felt him at her back or she followed Warren's gaze, because she rotated on her

bar stool and took him in, an unreadable expression on her face. He hated that, hated how she seemed so damn effective at blocking him out, even if he'd been doing his damndest to stay away from her for the last ten years. The ever-present conflict inside him didn't do a thing to help him resist the need to throw her over his shoulder and take her away from this place. This man. "Marceline."

She grimaced. "Don't call me that."

It was the same conversation they'd been having for years, ever since he found out that his little sister's best friend's real name wasn't Marcy. Back then he'd enjoyed seeing how much he could rile her up. Now he just liked the feel of it on his tongue. "What are you doing here?"

She frowned harder, and he realized how harsh he'd sounded. He met Warren's eyes over her head and telegraphed, *Get lost, fucker*. The kid held his gaze longer than he would have expected, but he finally shrugged and stood. "I'll see you around, Marcy."

"What? Wait." But it was too late. Warren was gone, heading across the bar to where Old Joe had set up camp with his old poker buddies. Marceline turned back to him and frowned.

"You didn't have to run him off. He's a nice guy."

"He's a Marine. None of them are nice guys."

Her eyes flashed. "I think I'd know more about Marines than you would, Zach. Let me make my own mistakes."

Her own mistakes... It dawned on him that she'd actually been considering following through on something with Warren. What the fuck? Zach stepped forward, forcing her to part her knees. This was closer than he let himself be to her in years, but he couldn't back away. "You were playing with fire with that kid."

She met his gaze coolly before turning to take the shot in front of her. It smelled fruity,

but it had nothing on whatever perfume she wore. “Don’t be silly. We were just going to dance.”

“I saw the way he looked at you. Dancing wasn’t what was on his mind.”

“How would you know what was on his mind?”

Because he’d had the very same thoughts more times than he cared to count. All the ways he could seduce Marceline Bellini into giving him half a chance. “He’s a man and a Marine. He was going to try to take you to bed.”

Her chin went up, and he knew he was in trouble. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Well, now—”

Then she went on and ruined his night. “Besides, maybe I was thinking the same thing.”

She’d actually been thinking about letting that asshole have his way with her?

The roaring in his head competed with the red filtering over his vision. He counted to ten once, twice, and a third time. It didn’t do a damn thing to calm him down or give him the distance he desperately needed to deal with this without pissing her off.

That was the problem, though—he’d never had enough distance when it came to Marceline Bellini.

While he was trying to get control of himself, she was finishing the second shot next to her and stacking the glasses. “Obviously that ship has sailed, so...” She met his gaze and trailed off at whatever she saw on his face.

He could only imagine.

He’d come home on leave from the Army at twenty-two to discover that Erin’s awkwardly pretty best friend had morphed into a woman so beautiful, she made his chest ache. It was a blessing he’d had to leave again for another tour or God knew if he could have resisted her

back then. By the time he was back in town for good, she was dating that jackass, Jeff. It hadn't been easy to watch him treat her like shit and then up and leave her with a new baby on the way, but the single time he'd tried to offer to help, she'd shut him down so thoroughly, he'd backed off.

There had been so many times over the years when he'd thought about asking her out, but something had always kept him back. First it was that she had enough to deal with finishing up college with a brand new baby. Then, when the dust had settled, she barely gave him the time of day. She'd seemed determined to put herself as off the market as physically possible.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You decided to get back out there by going home with another goddamn Marine."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. "Sure, why not? He's a decent enough guy, and he's gorgeous."

It shouldn't surprise him she thought Warren was gorgeous. It seemed like every single woman in town did. But that didn't change the fact that hearing her admit it aloud made him want to kiss her until she forgot that fucker's name. "Not him, Marcelline."

"You can drop that protective older brother routine. I'm not seventeen anymore, and I'm more than capable of making my own decisions." When he just stared, still trying to get ahold of his temper, she threw up her hands. "Lord, Zach. According to you, no one is good enough for me."

Because it was the truth. He could still remember spending those two weeks he was home running off any boy that looked at her sideways.

Apparently he didn't respond fast enough, because she huffed out a breath. "If not Warren, then who?"

“*Me.*” The word fell between them as if it was a physical thing.

Her mouth dropped open. “What?”

It was too late to back out now, and hell if he wanted to. He’d been patient. He’d been more than willing to take the white knight route and let her live her life and take care of her daughter. It was the right thing to do. But he wasn’t saint enough to sit back and let her put herself out there with another man right in front of his face. “If anyone is going to take you off the shelf, it’s going to be *me*. No one else.”

Marceline licked her lips. “You.”

“Yeah, me.” He let himself look his fill, from her cowgirl boots to her fitted jacket to the flowery dress that hugged her breasts and fell to her knees. Up to her tousled dark hair, to those eyes that held a new awareness. Awareness it would take a better man than Zach to ignore.

He held out his hand. “Come on.”