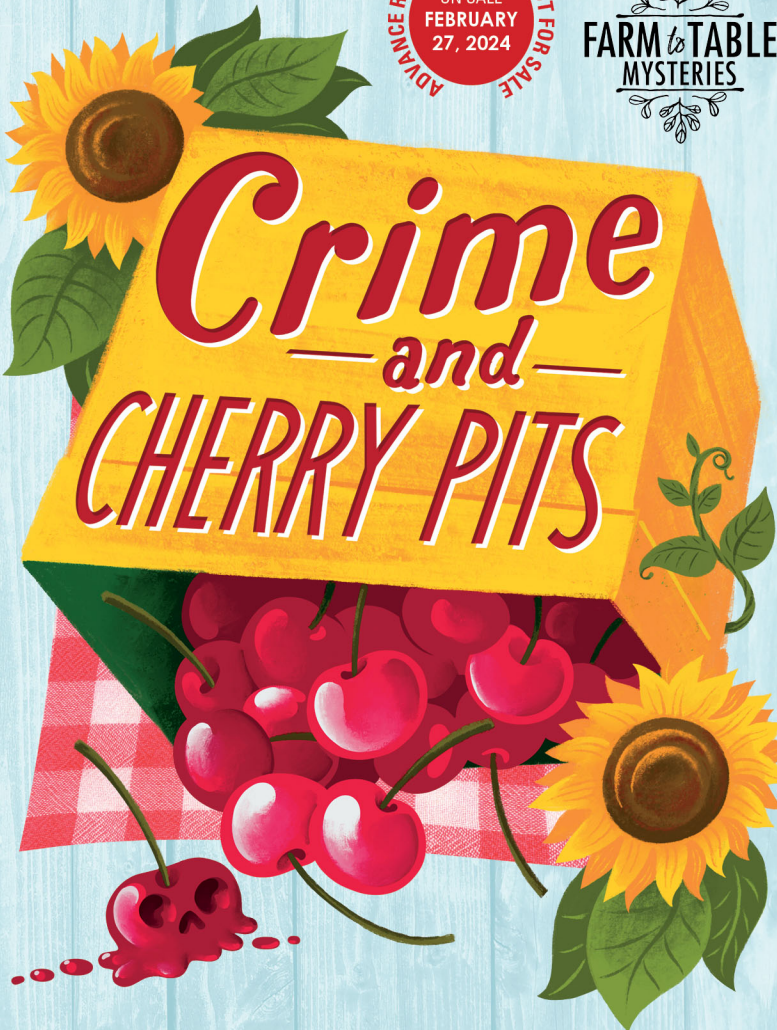


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FARM *to* TABLE
MYSTERIES



Crime
— and —
CHERRY PITS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AMANDA FLOWER

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FARM TO TABLE MYSTERIES

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In Farm's Way

Crime — and — *CHERRY PITS*


A FARM *to* TABLE MYSTERY


AMANDA FLOWER


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For my nephew Sergio Flecha Flower

*And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep...*

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Chapter One



If Penelope Lee Odders clicked her pen one more time, I might just jump in the Grand Traverse Bay. Penny Lee, as she preferred to be called, was a woman about sixty years old who fancied herself a hard-hitting reporter covering the annual Cherry Festival in Traverse City for a newsletter called the *Sweet Cherry News*.

“Now,” Penny Lee said as she looked down at her notes and her gray curls fell over her eyes. “What happened in Los Angeles that made you want to come back to Michigan in the first place? Man trouble? Lawsuit? Tell us all.” She brushed her hair aside.

I ground my teeth; Penny Lee had asked me the same question about my life in Hollywood a myriad of ways in the last hour. Maybe I was slow on the uptake, but it seemed to me that she was much more interested in my past than my present as owner and organic farmer at Bellamy Farm in Cherry Glen, a small town thirty minutes west of Traverse City.

Penny and I sat on folding chairs on a dock overlooking the gorgeous blue of the bay. Against the dock, the bay began

as sky blue and deepened into a vibrant navy blue as it emptied into the deep waters of Lake Michigan. The July morning sunlight, which beat down on our heads, reflected off on the water like crystals and shone on the countless sailboats that made their way out on the lake for the day. My little pug Huckleberry sat under my chair in the shade. Huckleberry had been born and raised in LA, and although we had lived in Michigan for just short of a year, he still looked continually confused about how he ended up in the middle of the north woods.

The edge of the dock would have been the perfect spot to sit and reflect on the fact that I had made the right decision to leave my job as a television producer to move back home to save the family farm, but glancing at the woman with frizzy gray hair and pointy nose across from me, I had a brief moment of doubt.

I stood up. “Penny Lee, I’m really grateful to you for this interview. The cherry festival is the biggest event in western Michigan, and I know that you must have so many people to talk to and so much to cover, so we should probably stop now as the festival opens”—I consulted my smartwatch—“oh, in ten minutes!” I squeaked. If I want to be at Bellamy Farm’s booth at opening time, I had to go now.

Penny Lee stood up and smoothed the wrinkles in her prairie skirt. “I suppose you’re right. I’m sorry we had to end before we were able to get to the meat of the matter.”

The meat of the matter? What on earth was she talking about? When I agreed to this interview it was to talk about my farm, our cherries, and the organic baked goods and

products that I sold. After many months, the farm was no longer just getting by but making a modest profit as a working farm.

“Thank you for your time,” I said. I couldn’t believe that I was thanking her, but good manners were so ingrained in me by my Grandma Bellamy it was impossible to not say thank you even in the most uncomfortable situations. Tugging lightly on Huckleberry’s leash, I stepped around her to walk up the dock.

“One last question,” she called to me.

I closed my eyes for a second, and against my better judgment, said, “Yes, what is it?”

“How long have you and your cousin Stacey Bellamy been fighting over your late grandmother’s money?”

“No comment.” I stomped away, and my little pug galloped after me to keep up.

I was fuming as I hurried through the festival to reach the Cherry Farm Market, where Bellamy Farm had a booth for the very first time in its over seventy-year history. As a Michigan cherry grower, to have a booth at the Cherry Farm Market at *the* cherry festival was a major feather in our cap. It was something that we could use to promote the farm on social media and in advertisements. To be at the market, your cherries have to meet the highest level of excellence, and my farm director, Chesney Stevens, and I worked tirelessly to bring the farm’s half-dead orchard back to life.

Even though we were accepted into the festival by the slimmest possible margin, I knew that each year the farm would improve dramatically and in a few years, I could see

Bellamy Farm being one of the most popular organic cherry booths at the Cherry Farm Market. Or at least that was the dream.

As Huckleberry and I walked through Open Space Park, where the majority of the festival was held on the edge of the Grand Traverse Bay, I glanced at the smaller of the two stages on the lookout for my cousin. She had been avoiding me in town, but I hoped that during the festival, we would have a chance to talk about what to do with our grandmother's stocks. I had to make Stacey understand that I didn't want to keep the money from her. However, for her to receive any money at all, she had to give her consent to the distribution of the inheritance as a legal heir. Just thinking about it gave me a headache. The argument had been going on for months.

There was no sign of Stacey on the stage as I walked by, but I saw Whit Stevens, Chesney's younger sister, next to a silver and red university trailer parked to the right of the stage. From what Whit had said, the trailer was used a green room of sorts when actors were between scenes.

Whit was dressed all in black and had a headset around her neck that was almost hidden by her streaked, bumblebee-bright yellow and black hair. Whit was a college student and worked as the stage manager at the Michigan Street Theater. It was no surprise to me that she had this job at such a young age. She was just as hardworking as her older sister.

Whit folded her arms across her chest as she spoke to a young man about her age. He had longish brown hair that he continually flipped out of his face with a flick of his head. Whatever he was saying to Whit, she didn't appear too happy

about it. My curiosity was piqued, but I knew it was none of my business, nor did I have the time to snoop.

A man bellowed at me, shaking me from my thoughts. “Out of the way!”

I glanced over my shoulder to see a short, plump man carrying a giant cherry-headed mannequin on his shoulder. The man’s face was as red as the cherry man he carried. I scooted to the side of the park trail, scooping up my ever-faithful pug Huckleberry in process.

The two of us stood there for a long moment watching the bobbing cherry head disappear in the sea of cherry red around us. The color literally was everywhere.

The festival was spread across the entire downtown area, with the carnival rides along East Grandview Parkway, the large music performances at the Bayside Music Stage, and the small acts, the Shakespeare performance, and Cherry Farm Market in Open Space Park.

There were so many things going on that I didn’t even notice twelve-year-old Hazel Killian running toward me until she called my name. Her long ponytail flew behind her head like a flag, and her knobby knees moved like pistons on a locomotive. “Shiloh! Shiloh!”

I waved at her.

She pulled up short when she reached Huckleberry and me. She bent over and gulped for air like she had just finished a marathon.

I rubbed her hand. “Hazel, what’s wrong? Are you sick? Are you breathing?”

She was still bent over and held one finger in the air in

the universal sign for hold on. I waited for her to collect herself.

She stood up straight. "Where have you been? Chesney is freaking out. The festival is about to open, but you're not at the booth."

I studied her face, looking for the truth in her statement. It wasn't that I thought she was lying, but she did have a tendency to exaggerate. I highly doubted that Chesney Stevens freaked out about anything. My young farm director was just about the coolest customer there was, and there wasn't anything at the booth that she needed me for. She could do everything I could and twice as well.

Not wanting to make a big issue out of it, especially after my less than pleasant conversation with Penny Lee, I said, "I'm heading that way now."

She tugged my arm. "You have to hurry."

I brushed my blond curls out of my face in time to see another man carrying a second mannequin with a giant cartoon cherry head on the top of it, coming straight for us.

I grabbed Hazel by the arm and pulled her out of the way. She cleared the cherry head just in time.

Hazel pulled herself out of my grasp. "You nearly took my arm off."

I shaded my eyes from the sun. "Sorry. That giant cherry looked dangerous. I don't want to have to tell your father that you got run over by a giant fiberglass cherry." I stepped back on the path but continued to carry Huckleberry rather than walk him on his leash. There just were too many obstacles between where we were and the booth.

“Dad would know it wasn’t your fault,” she said cheerfully as she walked beside me. “He’s always reminding me to watch where I’m going. He says I need to pay more attention and put my head on a swivel, whatever that means.”

“I don’t think your grandmother would feel the same way,” I said. “She’d definitely blame me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. She really doesn’t like you,” she said with a shrug.

That was an understatement. Hazel’s grandmother, Doreen Killian, had no love lost for me, and I didn’t see that changing any time soon.

Hazel looked around. “Besides, if someone was going to kick the bucket here, I think it would be a cherry-related death for sure. Look at this place. All you see are cherries!”

She was right; there were cherries everywhere. This was the first time I had been to the festival in sixteen years, and the very first time as a farmer representing my family farm. It was a major honor to be selected for the market. There was a strenuous application process and a hefty application fee to boot—a fee that was forfeit if you weren’t selected. Even though my family had been growing high-quality cherries on our farm for generations, my father never wanted to take the risk of the entry fee. He said it was like gambling and he wasn’t a gambler. He was a collector, a collector of obscure Michigan historical artifacts, and he had an entire room in his farmhouse to prove it.

Now that I was making decisions for the farm and my father had more or less retired, I was willing to take risks, so I applied this year.

I was so happy that I did, because Bellamy Farm was chosen to participate, and since Traverse City was a mere thirty minutes from my farm, I would be able to care for the farm and run the booth at the same time. Most of the cherry growers came from farther away and didn't have that good fortune.

The moment I saw the competition, I realized the little makeshift booth I always used at the much smaller Cherry Glen Farmers Market wasn't going to cut it here at the big show. No folding tables and beach umbrellas here, that's for sure.

I spent a considerable amount of money to have a custom booth made at breakneck speed by a local carpenter, and then Chesney did all the trim work and painting. I was happy with the result. The booth was shaped like a giant berry basket overflowing with cherries. A beach ball-size cherry hung from a limb made of green spray-painted PVC pipe. The carpenter made the basket, but Chesney came up with clever ways to make the paper-mache cherries as well as stems and leaves. There really was nothing she couldn't do.

The gamble on the booth put me that much deeper in debt; debt I would have no trouble paying off if my cousin Stacey would just listen to reason.

At the booth, Chesney set three jars of cherry jam into a paper sack and handed it to a customer. "Enjoy the festival! And remember to tell your friends to come to the Bellamy Farm cherry basket. It's the only place that you can buy organic cherry blossom honey, maple syrup, cherry preserves, and baked goods at the festival. It's a one stop shop that is not to be missed."

The woman smiled in return. "I will, and thank you for

selling these to me before you officially opened. There is so much to see, and I only have a couple of free hours to do it. Also, I have to say that your booth is just delightful. I came over to see what you had just to take a better look at it. It's my favorite booth at the market. You should be proud."

Chesney beamed. "We are more than proud, and thank you kindly!"

The woman left, and Chesney grinned at me from ear to ear. "Shi, did you hear that? The booth worked. I told you that it was an excellent idea. It's going to pay for itself!"

Hazel slid behind the booth. She and her father Quinn were two of my closest neighbors. They had a small, non-working farm about a half mile from me. Quinn was a single dad and a fireman and EMT for the town of Cherry Glenn and worked twenty-four-hour shifts. When he was working, Hazel either spent the time with her grandparents, Chief Randy and Doreen Killian, or me. Hazel loved her grandparents, but they were much stricter than I was, so she always preferred my place over their house in town.

That was fine with me because Hazel actually doing farm chores, which is how I spent the majority of my days. Having her along made the long days much more fun too.

"How did the interview go?" Chesney asked.

I made a face.

"Bad publicity is better than no publicity," she said in her cheerful way.

"I don't know about that." I sighed. "Penny Lee really just wants to know about my past in LA, not the farm."

She wrinkled her brow. "Why?"

“No idea,” I said. “And I don’t plan to find out because I am going to do my best to hide from her the rest of the festival.”

“Good luck with that. You kind of stand out in a cherry basket,” Chesney said.

I made another face.

Hazel was with Huckleberry in the grass under the booth. Huckleberry was in her lap while she read a book and had her earbuds in listening to music. I was glad the two were occupied so that I could talk to Chesney without Hazel overhearing me. “Hazel said that you needed me. She gave me the impression it was an emergency.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say it was an emergency. Stacey was here in full hair and makeup for the play.” She paused. “And boy was she steamed.”

That’s what I was afraid that she would say.

Chapter Two



I didn't like the sound of that at all. Stacey and I were currently at odds over my grandmother's stocks, which I had found hidden on the farm. My grandmother had hidden the stocks before her death more than fifteen years ago in the hopes I would find them, cash them in, and use them to save the farm. That was how I intended to use the money, but a disagreement between my father and Stacey, both of whom were valid heirs to my grandmother, had brought everything to a screeching halt. The stocks were valuable, and I didn't disagree with Stacey's claim that she was entitled to a portion of the money, if not half. My father, as my grandmother's last living child, disagreed.

I couldn't help but worry over why Stacey would be looking for me at the cherry festival. She had hardly spoken to me the last four months. She was on speaking terms with my father because he was an actor in the Shakespeare play she was directing at the festival, but things were tense between them as well. My father was the one digging his heels in that Stacey wasn't entitled

to any of my grandmother's stocks because she sold her half of the farm. As usual, I was getting the blame for the dispute.

Why was Stacey coming to my booth? How did she have time to pester me at the festival when she had so much to do for the play?

Before I could ask Chesney if Stacey had said what she wanted, a man in a long blue flowing robe and fake gray wig and beard appeared in front of the booth. Leather sandals protected his feet. I blinked to make sure what I was seeing. He looked like Moses come down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments—or at least the Charlton Heston version of Moses.

Hazel stood up and took a good look at him. “Why is he dressed like Gandalf?” Because she still had here ear buds in, she said it so loudly that everyone around our booth could hear her comment. Even the newcomer.

He chuckled good-naturedly. “I will take that as a compliment.” He held his arms out wide, blocking the path, and a disgruntled shopper asked him to move out of the way. It seemed a lot of tourists at the National Cherry Festival didn't like it when someone got in their way.

“You have quite a booth here,” the Moses doppelganger said. “It's difficult to make anything cherry-related stand-out at the Cherry Festival, and you have done it.” He fluffed his robe and beamed. “As a creative soul myself, I appreciate ingenuity of any kind.”

“You're in the play?” I guessed.

“Why yes,” he said and bowed his head slightly. “I'm

playing Prospero in *The Tempest*. The first performance begins in thirty minutes. I'm so thrilled to be part of it."

Hazel removed her headphones. "Why are you walking around dressed like that?"

He gave her what I was sure he thought was a charming smile. "A great actor commits to his character, and part of that that is dressing the part."

Hazel cocked her head. "Isn't talking to us breaking character?"

He let out a howl of laughter that caused several people walking by to turn their heads. If he wasn't already being stared at for his fake beard, the laugh did it.

"You must know my cousin Stacey. She's the director," I said.

"Stacey is your cousin?" He looked at our sign. "Bellamy Farm. You're one of *those* Bellamys?"

I wasn't sure how to take his question that I was one of "those Bellamys." I didn't know of any other Bellamys in Grand Traverse County.

"You must be Sullivan's daughter," he went on. "He told me you would be here selling cherries from your little farm. I should have put two and two together when I came to your booth."

Sullivan? No one called my dad Sullivan. He much preferred to go by Sully. I knew from this very comment that my dad must not like this Prospero actor.

"I can't believe Stacey is making you wear that awful wig," Hazel said. "It's really bad. What kind of costume budget do you have?"

“Hazel,” I whispered.

She shrugged. “I’m curious.”

The actor chuckled. “Curiosity will serve you well through your long life. Prospero is a man quite a few years older than I am. I have to look the part, as they say.”

“Stacey could have gotten you a better wig,” Hazel said.

He laughed even harder. “I think she gave me this wig as punishment. Maybe she thought I would leave the play if I had to wear it. However, the joke’s on her because I was born for this role. She can try, but she will never be rid of me.”

I wrinkled my brow. That sounded a little bit too dramatic. Yes, the National Cherry Festival was a big deal in Michigan, but this wasn’t exactly Broadway. He was in an outdoor production under a Ferris wheel.

This conversation was making me more uncomfortable by the second. “Can we interest you in a cherry scone or perhaps some cherry and white chocolate cookies? They are all organic. The cherries were grown on my farm, and I only use organic ingredients in my recipes.”

Before the man could answer, a shrill voice cried, “What are you doing with my cousin? Do you plan to cheat on me with her as well?”

Stacey stomped in our direction. Like the man standing in front of the booth, she was dressed in costume, as she would be playing the female lead in the play. Her outfit was a long gauzy lavender dress and she wore full stage makeup, which looked aggressive and too dark in the sunlight.

“I can’t have five minutes to myself?” the Moses look-alike asked.

“You’re supposed to be backstage with the rest of the cast. The fact I have to look for you this close to curtain time is unacceptable. This is my production and I won’t let you ruin it.”

“Oh,” he said. “Don’t worry. You’ve made that abundantly clear.” He waved at her outfit. “What about you? What are you doing right now? Are those your everyday clothes? I think not.”

“Looking for you! Whit told me that you left, and I knew I had to go find you to ensure that you made it back in time for curtain. I didn’t know you would be fraternizing with my cousin.” Her voice rose in volume as she spoke, and a small crowd was beginning to gather around my booth. They weren’t there for the scones.

Chesney stepped close to me and whispered, “Is this some kind of skit to build interest in the play?”

“I don’t think so,” I whispered back and then cleared my throat. “Please, can the two of you take this somewhere else?” I asked. “I’m trying to run a business here.”

“Running a business with our grandmother’s money.” Stacey pointed at the elaborate booth. “How did you pay for this anyway? Everyone knows that the farm isn’t even breaking even.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “And now you’ve tossed aside Quinn Killian for that sheriff, only to move on to Dane, a second-rate actor? Grandma Bellamy would be horrified.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Moses, I mean Dane, got the words out first. “Second-rate actor?” he shouted. “You said I was the perfect person to play Prospero!”

“That’s because we were together then, and it was before I knew you were married! Do you really think I would have given you the part if we weren’t in a relationship?”

An audible gasp rose from the crowd. There was a good chance the show that Stacey and Dane were putting on now would surpass their performance on the Cherry Blast Stage.

“As of right now you are finished,” Stacey spat. “Your understudy will take over for the rest of the festival. I expect you to return your costume immediately.” She shook her finger at him.

“You will kick me out of this play over my dead body,” he snapped.

She narrowed her eyes into tiny slits. “I can arrange that.”

While this argument was going on, Chesney and Hazel swung their head back and forth with each insult as if they were watching a tennis match. I, on the other hand, was horrified that this was happening right in front of my booth, a booth that Stacey was right about—I really didn’t have the money to pay for. So I needed to sell as many cherry-flavored pastries and concoctions as I could.

“You can’t replace me like that,” Dane said. “I’m not any actor; I’m the star. Everyone knows that Prospero is the mastermind behind the play. He’s the one who is pulling the strings. None of the other actors can do that. Your understudy is a joke. He can barely walk.”

I had a sick feeling in my stomach that I knew who the understudy was.

“We will just have to take that risk,” she snapped.

He pointed a finger at her. “I made it possible for you

to have a play at the Cherry Festival in the first place. You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my connections."

"Hand over that costume, or you will be sorry." With that, Stacey marched away.

Dane's face was bright red, and he ripped the long gray wig off his head and threw it after her before he strode off in the other direction.

"Wow!" Chesney said.

"Yeah," I murmured.

"What just happened?" Chesney rubbed the back of her neck.

"I don't think want to know."

"I knew that Stacey had a temper, but that was a real blow up."

"She was definitely giving off Lady Macbeth vibes," I said.

"Wrong play, but I do appreciate the Shakespeare cross reference," Chesney said with an approving smile.

Chapter Three



After Stacey and Dane left, it took us a few minutes to entice the crowd to buy scones, muffins, jams, and jellies. However, when they focused on what we had to sell and not the volatile argument between Dane and Stacey, business picked up.

In the end, their argument drew a crowd of shoppers to the booth, and we sold out of the scones and cookies before lunchtime. We were low on jam too. I sent Chesney back to the farm to grab more baked goods and jars of preserves. I would be up late baking that night. I was grateful for that, but my mind wandered back to the fight between Dane and Stacey. Could Stacey have had an affair with a married man? It certainly *sounded* like that was what happened. It also sounded like she didn't know about his spouse until very recently.

It shocked me that Stacey hadn't completely vetted Dane before getting involved with him. She was always so cautious when it came to relationships. She was drop-dead gorgeous with a perfect body, hair, and skin; she could have any man she wanted. However, she had always put her career before

everything else. What made her take the risk with Dane? And dating someone in one of her plays? That didn't sound like my cousin at all. She would want to avoid intermingling her personal and professional life.

I worried about it for the entire time Chesney was gone. When she returned, I pulled her to the side. "Can you hold down the booth for a little while? I want to see how Stacey is. That was quite a blow up."

"I was wondering if you were going to go try to find out what was going on with her."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

She cocked her head. "Shiloh, you're just about the nosiest person that I know."

"Should I take that as a compliment?" I knit my brows together.

"Sure." She laughed. "I can stay at the booth with Hazel. Tell Whit I said 'hi.'"

That reminded me that Stacey had said Whit had been the one who told her when Dane left the stage. If there was any drama going on with the cast, she would know about it.

"I want to go with Shi," Hazel said. "I've been stuck in this booth all day too. I'm so bored, and I haven't even seen any of the festival."

"Hazel, I need to talk to Stacey alone," I said. "This isn't a conversation to have in front of twelve-year-old."

"About her married boyfriend?"

I grimaced.

"I'm not a kid anymore. I know what is going on. I watch HBO. Kids grow up faster now than they did back in your

day.” She flicked her long ponytail over her shoulder as if to punctuate her point.

I raise my brow. “Back in my day?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re as old as my dad.”

Which in middle school speak meant I was prehistoric. I decided not to take offense. Instead, I sighed. “Fine, you can come with me, but when I speak to Stacey, can you step aside or something? Maybe go on one of the rides.”

“Or I’ll subtly eavesdrop like you do.”

I groaned. “I’ve created a monster.”

She grinned. “I learned from the best.”

“Ches, we’ll be back as quick as we can,” I told her.

Chesney waved at me. “Take your time. I got this.”

The Cherry Farm Market crowd did look a little thinner at the moment. Although there were still dozens of people milling about and shopping, but the lines weren’t nearly as long as they had been earlier in the afternoon. Even so, I knew people would be shopping for dessert after they went to one of the food vendors or one of the many restaurants on Front Street. I was grateful that Chesney had run back to the farm for the cookies. I knew we would need them. The market closed at 10:00 pm, and I would go straight home after to bake up a storm. I wasn’t looking forward to the long night ahead of me, but there was no doubt the festival had been a boon for my farm and helped get the word out about my fledgling organic baking business.

Huckleberry walked on his leash with his flat nose in the air, taking in all the smells. I wondered if it was confusing for the pug to smell the farm and the city at the same time.

Ahead of us was Grand Traverse Bay and the stage where Stacey's play was held. The stage stood empty. The performance ran from 3:00 to 5:00, and now it was close to 6:00. Even so, I assumed my cousin was still somewhere in the vicinity because she had to collect the costumes from the actors and set for the next day's performance. Stacey was a professional when it came to her productions and was as good as any seasoned producer that I had worked with in Hollywood.

"Oh! Can we go watch?" Hazel pulled my arm in the opposite direction.

I turned to see what she was so excited about, and then I saw the huge banner that said "Cherry Pit Spitting Contest."

I wrinkled my nose. To me the cherry pit spitting contest had an ick factor. I could be a bit of a germaphobe, which wasn't the most common farmer trait, but during my fifteen years in LA, I had been lathering on hand sanitizer every chance I got.

The cherry pit spitting contest was a tradition in northwest Michigan, and there were whole families that competed, generation after generation. I had never tried it, and I didn't plan to.

"Come on!" Hazel cried.

Normally, I would have just let Hazel go by herself. She was twelve, after all, but with such a large crowd, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find her afterward. I knew my nervousness of having a child around a lot of strangers came from my life in LA. Most of my work in TV production had been in true crime and that genre gave you a

complex about your personal safety and the safety of those you cared about.

I glanced back at the stage. There was no sign of Stacey. Maybe she had already left for the day. Her play was over and she had to be in a terrible mood after her very public argument with her ex-boyfriend or whoever Dane was to her.

“All right, but we can only stay a few minutes,” I relented.

She pumped her fist in the air. “Yes! I wanted to watch and learn the technique. I want to enter next year.”

I grimaced at this idea but didn’t share with her what I really thought about the cherry pit spitting competition.

An emcee stood on a platform with a wireless microphone in his hand. “Folks, that was a riveting matchup in the senior women’s competition! So many good spitters.”

I *knew* coming over here was a really bad idea.

“But we can only have one winner. Congratulations to Lucy Millhum!”

A redheaded woman that I guessed was about seventy went up to the emcee and accepted her small trophy.

“Congratulations, Lucy.” His voice took a dramatic turn. “Now, my friends, it is time for the main event! The men’s competition.”

Hazel folded her arms. “Why is the men’s competition considered the main event? That is so sexist.”

I patted her shoulder. “I have taught you well.”

She nodded.

The emcee announced the first competitor. He was a tall man in glasses. We watched as he placed a cherry in his mouth, chewed, and moved the pit to the tip of his tongue.

He rolled his tongue around it, then leaned back and catapulted the upper half of his body forward like he was a slingshot and the cherry pit was a pebble. The cherry pit flew through the air and landed yards away on the sandy course.

A judge went out to the spot and called out numbers to the emcee.

“Sixty-eight feet!” the emcee said. “That’s perfectly respectable, but I have a feeling that that distance won’t hold up.”

The next competitor went through the same motions of putting the cherry in his mouth and spitting out the pit. It was obvious that his cherry pit went much farther than the first contestant’s.

“Seventy-four feet!” the emcee crowed. “Now the competition is really heating up!”

I had to admit that the distance was impressive. I didn’t even know if I could throw a football that far.

“Amazing job, Ruddy! Our next competitor hails from our great city of Traverse City. He is a drama professor at the university, and you might have seen him this afternoon in *The Tempest*. Please welcome Dr. Dane Fullbright!”

“Hey, isn’t that the guy Stacey was yelling at?” Hazel said.

It was, in fact, the guy. I almost didn’t recognize him in his street clothes: skinny jeans and a gray T-shirt that was just tight enough to show off his body. His brown curly hair was perfectly styled and his trimmed beard looked like it had just gotten a fresh coat of beard oil. He waved at the crowd as if he was soaking it all in. It was clear to me that this was a man who loved an audience.

“Dane, do you have any inspiring words before you spit?” the emcee asked.

He smiled and showed off straight white teeth that looked even whiter next to his dark beard. “My students dared me to take part in this competition, and I am never one to back down from a dare. Because what are we if we do not push ourselves?” He paused. “‘And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, the cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve; and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.’”

“Well, okay,” the emcee said, looking slightly confused at Dane’s soliloquy. “Let’s see what you’ve got then.”

Dane bowed and walked to the starting line with a cherry in his hand.

“What was he talking about?” Hazel asked. “That made zero sense.”

“He was reciting a speech from *The Tempest*,” I said. “A speech he would have memorized in the role of Prospero.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What does it have to do with cherry pit spitting?”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

Like all the other contestants, Dane ate the cherry and balanced the cherry pit on his tongue and wrapped his tongue around it. He leaned back to spit it out, but instead of letting the pit fly, he grabbed his throat and doubled over.

“Whoa, is he acting out Shakespeare?” Hazel said. “Like a death scene?”

Everyone was completely still for a moment because maybe we were all wondering the same thing. Was the actor putting on an act?

But that wasn't possible. Not with the unpleasant shade of blue his face was changing to.

"No, he's choking," I cried.

No one moved so I rushed forward and grabbed Dane around the waist. I pressed his body against mine and tried my very best to administer the Heimlich maneuver, but he was twice my size and I barely had the strength to pump his body.

Finally, the crowd realized that this wasn't part of the performance, and I heard shouts for a medic.

I squeezed Dane against me a fourth time and saw the small cherry pit hit the sand just two feet in front of us. However, instead of taking in a deep breath, Dane seemed to have even more trouble breathing. He sunk to his knees, and since I was still holding him, I went to the ground with him. His lips were bright red and blistering. The rash spread to his cheeks and nose.

I slid away from him and helped him lay in the soft sand.

"Medic! Medic!" a sharp voice cried.

I felt myself being pushed to the side, and for the briefest of seconds my eyes locked with Quinn, Hazel's father, who was one of the volunteer EMTs at the festival. He and another EMT began CPR.

I struggled to my feet and felt myself being pulled away. All the while his last speech rang in my head. *We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.*