

A Semi-Sweet Summer

CHAPTER ONE

Cassidy Cooper was elbow deep in a cardboard carton when the front door banged shut. Who would walk in without knocking? She grabbed the first thing she could get her hands on—a plastic colander. She could do better. She reached deeper into the packing box and pulled out a shiny, never-used skillet.

“Yoo-hoo,” called a shrill female voice.

Yoo-hoo? Who said yoo-hoo? Cassidy vaulted to her feet and hefted the weighty frying pan over her head.

A pixie-sized female peeked into the kitchen. “Hi. I’m Gabby. I heard from the movers you were driving in today, so I stopped in to introduce myself.”

This Gabby girl was quite pretty in a homespun sort of way. With long, black tresses whisked back from her face with a hair band, and faded jeans complete with huge holes in the knees, she looked harmless enough, but *yikes!* She’d walked right into Cassidy’s house without an invitation.

“Do you have a last name, Gabby?” Cassidy clanged the pan on the kitchen counter and stared down the intruder. She would wait politely for an apology, but she kept her hand around the handle on principle.

Gabby tilted her head and grinned. “Gabby Reyes. And you’re Cassie, right? Savannah said you were funny. You can let go of the skillet now.” Gabby stuck out her hand and stood...waiting.

Her stepsister had told this girl about her? She released her grip on the pan and offered a tentative hand in return. “I prefer Cassidy.” She disengaged and wiped damp palms on her khakis. “Thanks for stopping by, but I was in the middle of unpacking the car.”

Gabby pouted cupid-shaped lips. “But I’m here to help.”

The girl couldn’t take a hint. Cassidy needed to walk away, even if the box beside her still wasn’t unpacked. She left Gabby standing in the kitchen and trundled back to the car for another load. After getting up in the wee hours and driving six hundred miles, her weary legs were beginning to shake.

Gabby bounced along behind, trailing her like a golden retriever puppy. “Nice car. I love the reddish color. It matches your red highlights. They look great in your blonde hair.”

Gracious, she was chatty. Cassidy hadn’t exactly bought the car to harmonize with her hair, but she’d take the compliment. “So I’ve been told. I needed a car for small town life with no public

transportation. I always took the L in Chicago.” And she wished she were still there. Her stepsister’s death was so unexpected. And so totally gut wrenching.

Gabby reached for a load, extending eager hands. Cassidy relented, reverently handing her a couple of lamps. “Please be careful with those. They’re expensive.”

With arms piled high with beige silk throw pillows, Cassidy slammed the door of the coupe with a bump of her hip. Thankfully, the movers had arrived yesterday with her belongings, but even if they hadn’t, she’d stowed a few of her favorite things in her car to keep them safe. She climbed the three stairs to the covered porch and entered her new home, towing along with an invisible thread, a determined Gabby.

Her new home. Where fat groundhogs sunned by the roadside, fuzzy rabbits munched on clover-dotted lawns, and squirrels chattered from the shelter of trees swaying in a warm spring breeze. Yippee. She was back in the sticks of rural Maryland.

She tossed the pillows on her living room couch and then crossed her arms. Savannah’s belongings still furnished most of the place. How was she going to deal with that? Her head whirled as she stared at the hideous piece of furniture sitting catty-corner. Mismatched couches were unacceptable. The daily reminder of how their two lives had clashed would be intolerable. Savannah’s yellow and blue plaid would have to go.

Cassidy turned in a circle and absorbed the décor. Her stepsister had lived simply, so not too much to get rid of. She’d call those estate sale people first thing next week, and she’d function better once the place looked like hers, not Savannah’s. This bungalow might be small compared to the substantial farmhouses she’d passed on the way, but it had twice the square footage of the condo she’d left behind.

It just wasn’t located in Chicago. She sighed. She missed city life already. The anonymous lifestyle that came from living in a high-rise. The busyness that left her too tired to think.

People-pleasing Gabby tenderly placed the lamps on one of the four end tables and raised her eyes, hopeful. A hesitant smile graced her lips.

Cassidy planted her feet in the middle of the living room, hands at her waist. “Unfortunately, I don’t have anything to offer you at the moment.”

“Oh!” Gabby literally jumped for joy. “Hold a sec.”

The young woman bounded out of the room, leapt off the front porch, and scampered down the driveway. Through the dusty panes of the picture window, Cassidy had a great view of Gabby’s ample hips and tiny waist as she reached into the back seat of her car. Unlike Cassidy’s too-slender shape, Gabby’s figure was an hourglass, the kind of woman men noticed in a crowd.

Gabby sailed back up the stairs, and presented a loaf-sized package, still warm. “It’s lemon pudding pound cake. I made it myself. From scratch. It’s Savannah’s recipe.”

Her little sister's recipe? Cassidy didn't even know Savannah liked to bake. With a lump in her throat the size of the Rock of Gibraltar, Cassidy dared to reach over and pat Gabby's arm. Once. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

Cassidy deposited the package of buttery goodness on the coffee table and smiled—a bit stiff—but she tried for genuine.

Gabby stared pointedly at the cake swathed in plastic wrap, her head lifting with question marks in her eyes.

Oh. "I don't have any coffee made, but would you like a slice of cake?"

"Would I ever." Gabby slid her fingers up and down the silk pillows and amped up the bighearted grin to a generous wattage.

Cassidy shuffled to the kitchen and opened a box marked plates and cups. Now, where to find flatware? Despite explicit instructions, the moving men had stacked her possessions willy-nilly. She swiveled to find Gabby rooting through cardboard boxes of her stuff. She'd have to keep an eye on her surprise guest. Did Gabby think just because she'd been a friend of Savannah's, she was automatically Cassidy's friend as well?

Gabby flopped to the kitchen floor and crossed her legs under her. "Cassie, I mean, Cassidy? That'll be hard, by the way. Your sister called you Cassie."

"I haven't been Cassie since high school." Cassidy lifted the plates out of the box, stacked them on the counter, and opened a nearby cupboard at random. The shelves were already chock-full of kitchen paraphernalia. Of course. What had she been thinking?

A photo taped to the inside of the cabinet door caught her eye—Savannah in shorts and a yellow T-shirt when she was twelve or thirteen. And Cassidy stood next to her, her arm snaked around Savannah's waist. They were posing at the county fair, a Ferris wheel spinning behind them, the special smile of a carefree summer day plastered on their faces. That was the summer before the divorce between her mother and her stepfather—when the world still made sense.

Without warning, Cassidy's eyes misted. She tried to blink away the moisture but failed miserably. Leukemia might have whisked Savannah to heaven, but Cassidy was here to finish what her sister had started. If she hadn't returned, the guilt and shame of turning her back on her little sister would forever lay heavy on her heart.

In an instant, Gabby was off the floor pulling Cassidy into a hug, swiping tears out of her own eyes. "I know. I miss her, too." Gabby sniffled.

Cassidy drew in a sharp breath. Gabby patted her on the back and Cassidy loosened taut shoulders, accepting the comfort—for fifteen seconds. That was all she could handle. She wasn't ready for this, and she certainly wasn't ready to be in a strange woman's arms.

Gabby clamped down on her bottom lip and stepped back. “Uh, Savannah kept her plates in that cupboard to the left, and glasses are to the right.” She pointed. “Can I help you unpack after we have cake?”

At least Gabby had enough sense not to belabor the moment. Cassidy’s defenses softened. She was being too hard on the kid. Kid? Gabby was what, in her early twenties? A scant five or six years younger. Cassidy had never felt so old.

And way too young to lose a little sister.

She stowed her own plates back in the box. Maybe in the kitchen she could use a few of Savannah’s things. Now, what to do about Gabby? The girl might be harmless, but Cassidy still didn’t want the woman pawing through her personal items. “I really am thankful for the offer, but I’m good. It’s been a long drive, and I want to turn in early. All I have to do is find stuff for the night.”

Gabby grabbed a napkin from the tabletop and wiped her eyes, her brow creasing. “You didn’t pack a first-night box?”

“A what?”

“You know. A box with everything you need for the first twenty-four hours so you don’t have to scrounge around searching for essentials. Towels, shampoo, change of clothes, toothbrush...” She stopped talking and angled her head again as if she was doing her very best to figure Cassidy out. “Oh, well. I guess you didn’t, but we can do it together. Find your stuff, I mean.”

A first-night box. Huh. Maybe she’d remember to do a bit more planning before she moved again, but right now, it looked as if she’d be staying for a while. She’d quit her job, told her pushy boyfriend to take a hike, and listed her condominium. According to Savannah’s estate lawyer, this house was hers now.

So why was she turning away free help? Gabby might be a tad overzealous, but a little assistance would make life easier. Cassidy sniffed. And perhaps having her here in the house would keep her from thinking about Savannah. Cassidy wasn’t anywhere near ready to fall apart. But she was suddenly too limp even to consider unpacking.

“You know what, Gabby? Let’s go out for coffee, my treat, and then maybe we’ll have the energy to tackle this mess. Where’s the nearest Starbucks?”

Gabby’s dark eyes opened wide. “Nearest Starbucks? Why would you go there? There’s a great diner in town with the best coffee. And if we’re talking dinner, Katie’s Eats makes the most scrumptious fried chicken on the planet. And real mashed potatoes. And yummy gravy, and...”

Cassidy quit listening after the words fried chicken. When had she last allowed herself that sinful delicacy? She hadn’t been eating well for a couple of months. Or sleeping. Visions of Savannah

stealthily crept up on her. She needed to eat more food or she would have to buy new clothes. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Really? What fun. We can have cake when we get back.”

Cassidy pushed aside some boxes on the kitchen table until she spied her suede purse. As they exited the house, she double-checked the lock.

Gabby snickered. “You don’t have to do that here.”

Cassidy raised her eyebrows. Yeah, right. As if she would ever leave a house unlocked. After living in Chicago for most of her childhood, and then again from age sixteen, she suspected it was biologically impossible. She’d already planned to add extra locks to all the doors and windows. Bad things happened if one wasn’t prepared.

Gabby loped to her ancient car and jumped in. “I’ll drive,” she called out the window.

With weighted steps, Cassidy headed toward the car and crumpled into the passenger seat. “Where’d you get all that energy? Don’t country people meander?”

She vaguely remembered when her life felt more like a brisk walk than the frantic gallop of her life in the big city. Vaguely.

“Us country-people tend to stroll through life and enjoy the journey—unless there’s fried chicken involved. Then it’s every man, woman, or child for themselves. Ready?” Gabby shifted into gear and prepared for take-off.

Out of the corner of Cassidy’s eye, something huge and decidedly bovine moved over by her property line. “Hold up.”

Gabby pulled up short and Cassidy stiff-legged it out of the car. She strode across the lawn, her heels sinking into clover with every step. When she was ten feet away from a mangled fence, she spied a man headed in her direction, picking his way across the field next door. His periwinkle-blue cotton shirt stretched across broad, muscular shoulders, his thick, dark-brown hair was ruffled by the light breeze.

OK, he had nice, wide shoulders, but she had a damaged fence. She stepped closer. The oxford button-down fit him as if it was made for his fine physique. Her ex-boyfriend’s London tailor couldn’t have done any better.

Cassidy moved another step closer. The man’s chestnut-brown eyes, with a hint of copper, zeroed in on hers as he swiped an errant lock of hair off his forehead.

Hunter Gray?

The blast from her past nearly slapped her to the ground. In high school, she'd pined for this man from afar. In her adolescent journal, she'd waxed lyrical about his many fine attributes. She'd lain awake countless nights dreaming of the dimples in his face, his broad chest...and his lips.

And then, at the end of her sophomore year, he'd ruined it all. Her passion swung the other direction—hatred for his despicable self.

Hunter whistled through his teeth, a slow smile gracing his lips. "Well, hello, neighbor."

"Is that your animal on my lawn?" She knew a bovine when she saw one, and this one was impressive. Long, long legs, massive hooves, and...who knew cows could be so whopping enormous?

The cow turned dark, liquid eyes on Cassidy and she could swear the creature smirked. Wickedly. As if it were claiming the lawn as its own.

"Oh, you mean Marigold?"

He named his cows after flowers? "Yes. Why is Marigold on my lawn?"

"What can I say? She's the adventurous type." He pushed a hand through hair the color of brisk iced tea—that wavy, tousled hair. "Don't worry. I'll fix your fence."

She screwed up her face until she found the semblance of a smile. "Fine. And I'd appreciate it if you'd get your cow off my turf. Now."

Why wasn't she over this stomach-clenching angst? She'd forgiven him years ago, so why did the rusty barb of humiliation pin her like a bug to a board?

She smothered a sigh just as the recalcitrant cow lifted her tail and plopped a cow-pie on spring-green grass.