

CHAPTER ONE



“HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANYONE more forlorn in your life?” Clare Evans pushed her grocery cart through the produce section at Center Market, skirting around the sorry-looking bananas.

Marion Landry, her best friend in Moose Creek, Maine, squinted and adjusted the bifocals on her nose. “Who are you talking about?”

Clare spoke softly so as not to be overheard. She slanted her head toward the gentleman peering with suspicion at the apples piled high at the other end of the aisle. “Travis Gibbs. The man’s practically been a recluse for the last year, ever since he lost his wife.”

Frowning slightly, Travis hefted a huge Golden Delicious, seemed to weigh the fruit in his hand, and then with a quiet sigh, he let the reject fall back into the bin. He pawed through the Galas and finally came up with a worthy candidate. Then he dropped it into his half-sized cart—a tiny contrivance made for one.

Marion’s forehead creased, her eyes crinkling at the corners with sympathy. “I know. He’s been one droopy fellow. Kind of sad to see. He and Jillian were so close, you know.”

Clare tossed a head of romaine lettuce beside the red onions nestled at the bottom of her cart and pressed on. The front wheel of the wire-mesh contraption squeaked with an awful racket. *Click, clack, squeal. Click, clack, squeal.*

She paused, on the hunt for fresh veggies. Who knew that even in this little hamlet ten different varieties of mushrooms could be found? White, button, cremini...? Clare eyed the offerings and turned to Marion. “How well did you know Jillian? I only got a chance to meet her a time or two

before she died.”

Marion pressed lightly on a colorful eggplant sitting proudly next to the red radishes. “That’s right. You’d just moved here a few months before she passed. Cancer. The aggressive sort. She was a delightful person. Always doing so much for others. Always looking after Travis, keeping the home fires burning. She loved to knit, you know. Made hats for the homeless and the funniest Christmas sweaters you ever did see. But more than that, she loved the Lord in a modest sort of way—doing unto others and all that.”

“I wish I could have known her better. How long were she and Travis married?” Clare threw a package of portabella mushrooms into the cart. The meaty flavor would go well with the Italian dish she had in mind. She’d have to remember to buy balsamic vinegar for marinating—the perfect accompaniment to the pricey produce.

“Thirty-plus years, I imagine. She and Travis married when they were in their early twenties, but their son didn’t come along until Jillian was nigh on forty—a real surprise for both of them. She was thrilled to pieces. If I remember correctly, Travis just walked around in a daze for months after he heard the news.” Marion squeezed a few tomatoes. “Hey, the Italian plums are looking pretty decent today. Want some for the bruschetta?”

“Great idea. Since we’re short on time, let’s grab baguettes from the bakery department so we don’t have to make the bread. What else do we need?”

Clare watched as Travis took a few desultory steps, wheeled his cart between the citrus fruit displays, and rounded the corner out of sight. Even from a distance, she’d noticed there was precious little in his cart. Worse, though, had been his expression. Vague, as if he really didn’t have a handle on what he was doing there.

Her heartstrings tugged tight. Three decades with the same person. To have and to hold until death do us part... Having never been married, she knew all about stabs of loneliness, but suspected the ache was far worse after having a deep and abiding relationship snatched away in a

twinkling.

“Clare?”

“Sorry. What?” Clare cocked her head in her friend’s direction.

“I asked if you’ve decided on an entrée for the dinner dance yet.”

“Good question. Let’s see, you suggested the jazzy green salad and bruschetta. Great ideas, by the way. But since it’s Italian night this time, I’d like to do something besides the standard spaghetti. Any ideas?”

“Nothing wrong with the tried and true, but you’re right. Just because the dinner is for seniors doesn’t mean we don’t also enjoy the finer things in life. Since the vegetables appear to be fresh, how about some sort of ragout or a vegetable lasagna? Or do you think veggies might turn off the men?”

Clare shook her head and smiled. Men. Had anyone invited Travis? She mentally counted the months since the funeral she’d attended. Heck, the whole town had shown up, but it had been well over a year. Was it too soon to ask him? Or, come to think of it, perhaps it wasn’t nearly soon enough.

“Vegetable lasagna it is, and they’ll have to grin and bear it.” Clare tossed fresh carrots into the cart. Couldn’t have veggie lasagna without carrots. “But I also make a chicken cacciatore that will melt in your mouth, so we’ll do both. Do we have a final head count for tomorrow night?”

“Gloria said we have eighteen confirmed and two possibles. The Tremblays weren’t sure if they’d be back from vacation. Gerald does loves to fish. Although in talking with Celine, she’s had it up to here with camping out and frying fish.”

“Fishing, huh? That could get old pretty quick. I’ve always said, give me a good book and a chair down by the water. Who needs a fishing line to enjoy a lake?”

Marion nodded. “I’m right there with ya. I don’t know how the two manage to stay together with Gerald’s take-charge temperament, but it’s the second marriage for both of them. Funny, don’t you think? They met at church five years ago, the seniors group in fact, and anyone would think they’d been married for decades.”

Her mind whirling and only half paying attention, Clare contemplated what kind of a person Travis was. She hardly knew the man—they seemed to move in different circles and attended different churches. But the few times she’d spoken to him, she’d gotten the impression he was someone rather circumspect and serious. The active group of seniors from Moose Creek Free Methodist Church centered on fun and companionship—hardly a hip and happening dating scene—but apparently there had been one match made because of the group.

Still ... perhaps Travis wasn’t even ready for that. She’d heard he lived alone now that his son, Gabriel, was away at college. Loneliness. How long did it take to get over a beloved spouse? Or maybe “getting over” wasn’t the right phrase. Maybe learning to live with the grief was more accurate—learning to function on a daily basis, to be a part of society again.

Marion took off for the bakery, and Clare skirted around the corner and moved into the next aisle in search of more supplies. Travis stood in front of the copious shelves of cereal, his hands planted on his hips, a grimace on his face.

He threw up his hands and growled, “Oatmeal. All I want is good old-fashioned oatmeal. No apple cinnamon. No maple brown sugar, no peaches and cream. Where in blazes is the regular oatmeal?”

Clare smiled to herself. Should she offer to help? She should. She felt the Spirit nudge her to action. Travis appeared to need it.

She stepped closer and positioned herself next to him. “Look on the bottom shelf. That’s where they hide the healthy food. There and on the very top shelf. The kiddy cereal is at eye level to

facilitate maximum impulse buying. I think the reasoning is, if you want healthy, you'll make an effort to search for it."

Rocking back on his heels, Travis eyed her. His scowl softened, and his lips turned up at the edges until he achieved a sheepish smile. "Thanks."

He shambled a couple of steps to the left, stooped down, and seized a carton of slow-cook oatmeal. And some bran. Maybe that was more information than she cared to have, but she needed the stuff herself.

With an obvious effort, Travis cleared his throat and intensified the grin. "Clare, isn't it? Pastor Samantha's aunt?"

"Yes." Did the man just barely remember her? Well, he seemed like he was in a fog, and no wonder. She decided not to take offense and reached over and patted his arm. "You need anything else?"

"You wouldn't happen to know where to find hot chocolate, would you? The easy, powdery variety, not the make-from-scratch cocoa. I've got a hankering, but I can't seem to find it.

Wouldn't you imagine it would be near the tea and coffee?"

"One would think. But for whatever reason, I'm pretty sure you'll find it somewhere close to the marshmallows. That would be in the 'we don't know where else to put it' aisle."

Travis puffed out a hearty laugh. "Okay, so to ask yet another silly question, where would that be? Is there an aisle marked miscellaneous?"

"There should be. Or perhaps they'd be better off moving the marshmallows and the hot chocolate near the tea and coffee. Really shake things up."

“I wonder if we could find some oil for that squeaky cart of yours in the same mysterious aisle.”
His eyes twinkled.

Oh, my. He wasn't half-bad looking when he lit up like that. Poor man must need a laugh ... and a friend.

Before she could think it through, Clare plunged ahead and blurted out, “Hey, Travis. You busy tomorrow night? My church is having a senior dinner and dance—just fun stuff. No agenda other than that. Good food, good conversation, and a few turns around the dance floor.”

Travis cleared his throat. “Uh ... I don't know. Not much on dancing. Jillian was the dancer.” Clare gave him her most reassuring smile and kept her trap shut. Sometimes a moment of silence and a cheery stance encouraged people to talk. He appeared to be a person who needed to think things through before he committed.

Her strategy worked because after a pregnant pause, Travis continued. “But I do like to eat. What's on the menu?”

“Marion and I are working it up now. In the Italian realm, though.” Hmm. Was a slight nudge in order? “You in?”

“Do I have to wear a suit or something? I'm not much on dressing up these days.”

Clare couldn't help but notice the threadbare elbows on Travis's plaid shirt. Still, the casual bunch at the church went with a relaxed dress code. He would be welcomed no matter how he dressed. Especially by the women in the group. Fresh meat, with a side of slightly scraggly whiskers.

“No dressing up. Something akin to what you're wearing is fine.”

Travis's gaze traveled down his ensemble. He stuck his hand in the right pocket of his jeans and

pulled it inside out, a gaping hole apparent in the seam. “Well, I do think if I riffle through my closet, I can do a little better than this. What time should I meet you there?”

“Six to socialize. Dinner at six-thirty and dance at seven-thirty. Believe it or not, we’ve even rented a disco ball.”

Travis lifted a brow. “Disco dancing? Now that’s something you will definitely not see me attempting. I was barely passable at it the first time around.”

Travis reached down and snagged a package of instant blueberries and cream oatmeal. “Since this seems to be a branching out kind of day, might as well give this a try, see what all the fuss is about.”

“Fuss?”

“Instant oatmeal. Everybody’s talking about it.” This time, Travis gave her a full-on grin, with feeling. “Hey, Clare? Thanks for the invite. I can almost feel Jillian patting me on the back. She liked to go out, move, enjoy the world and God’s creation. Used to say life wasn’t meant to be lived on the sidelines.”

As a tiny tear appeared in his eye, Clare’s heart walloped. Oh, the dear man. She swallowed the pebble in her throat. “Glad you’ll be able to make it, Travis.”

A lock of silvery hair fell over his forehead as Travis graced her with a jovial nod and pushed his pint-sized cart down the aisle.

Eyes welling with tears, Clare’s compassionate soul thanked the Lord that she’d allowed herself to listen to His leading.

She turned around and sauntered down the aisle to hunt for Marion.



Travis was paying for his purchases when the grocery store loudspeaker crackled, followed by a squeal of feedback. There was a tapping sound as someone tested the mic on the speaker system, and then an official-sounding, low female voice echoed through the space.

“Attention, please. May I have everyone’s attention? There is a female moose loitering in the parking lot. The police have been called. Please do not leave the store until the moose has left the property. Repeat. Do not leave the store until you are alerted that it is safe to do so.”

After another high-pitched screech, the loudspeaker silenced.

Huh. As a forest ranger, Travis was trained as an emergency responder, and he certainly had handled more than his share of moose. The critters could be tricky to deal with, especially if they were scared or angry.

He threw some money on the counter and pushed his cart forward and out of the way. There was a muscle-bound young man he hadn’t seen before—couldn’t have been more than twenty—racing to guard the door. The kid screwed up his face, evidently trying on his best stern glare for the public, determined no one would pass on his watch.

Travis needed to get out that door if he was going to deal with the moose. With purpose, he started in that direction, slapping on his own grim face full of authority. One look at Travis and the guy looked considerably diminished, his breath puffing out of his mouth as it formed an “uh-oh.” Poor kid was visibly quaking in his shoes.

With a valiant gulp, the lad crossed his arms and choked out, “Didn’t you hear the woman? No gawkers allowed outside.”

With a sigh, Travis pulled his ever-present badge out of his pocket and flashed it. “Forest

ranger.”

“You’re not a police officer. I think you’re going to have to—”

Clare strode up beside Travis, her tongue clicking. “Horace, let him pass. The man’s a certified expert on moose.”

Still frowning, Horace reluctantly uncrossed his arms, uncertain. “Weeel…”

“Horace, I said, let him pass.” Clare’s voice had taken on a firmness that surprised Travis. Come to think of it, hadn’t she been a school secretary before she’d retired to move up north? She must be used to dealing with kids.

Travis narrowed his eyes and stared down the boy he couldn’t help but admire. Horace had moxie. Between the two of them, he and Clare must have made a formidable pair because Horace scuffed to the side, his gaze searching for possible interlopers.

Out of the store they went, Clare stopping under the awning at the front, a safe distance away from a female moose standing next to a white Subaru. The moose was on the small side with more than a few scars on her flanks. Her muzzle had a white sheen to it, and her eyes were a tad rheumy, a bit on the glassy-side. Yep, just as Travis suspected, it was old Matilda, the town moose, scrounging for food again wherever she could find it. A shrewd moose, she’d been known to break into a car, and even the odd church, to steal food on more than one occasion.

Travis shoved his hands in his pockets and tilted his head, assessing the situation. Although Matilda and Travis were on a first name basis, the aging Madame could sometimes be contrary. He knew enough to be careful.

He turned his head. “Clare? I think I saw some brooms or mops for sale inside the door. Would you be so kind as to get me one?”

“Sure.”

Clare was back in a dash, carrying a mop with soft red and white strings attached. Perfect. Just in case he had to prod the moose, he wouldn't hurt the aged beastie.

He thanked Clare and brandished the mop in the air, waving it gently like a flag stirring in the breeze. “Matilda? Git on home now. Scat.”

She eyed him with suspicion—all but raising a brow—but she took a step away from the car she'd been nudging with her long, powerful nose. The matriarch had been seen around town for years and was used to people. Not tame by a long shot, but not dangerous either. There was one man in town, Gerald Tremblay, who could even stroke her sometimes.

Well, Travis wasn't about to try any moose petting today. He wanted to move her along, urge her to high-tail it back to her own stomping ground—and Tremblay's farm on the outskirts of town. Slowly, mop in hand, Travis herded the animal off the premises one step at a time until, with an impatient snort, she shook her massive head. With a kick of her heels, and a grouchy air of disdain, the moose trotted off into the pine trees surrounding the shopping center.

Matilda's shy female offspring Molly peeped out from behind the trees and joined her as they ambled away. Travis could always tell which one of her kids was Molly. The dainty little moose—if any moose could be called dainty—was a light brown color with a swirl of fur on her chest in the shape of a heart.

Just in time because the WMOS television station van barreled into the parking lot, followed closely by a police car.

Local TV anchor, Dale Dupree jumped out of the van, microphone in hand, cameraman in tow. “Where's the moose, Travis?”

“Gone.”

Wallace Snitkey, Chief of Police, wheeled his car directly in front of the store at a rakish angle. He rolled down his window and shouted, “Where’s the moose, Travis?”

Travis shook his head. “Gone.”

“Okay, then.” Walter sped off, obviously having more important things to do, such as sampling the coffee flavor of the day at the Muddy Moose Café.

Dale was not so easily deterred. “Can I get an interview with you, then? What did it feel like to come face to face with the behemoth? Were you afraid the moose was going to attack? Is your life insurance paid up? I hear those creatures can be mean when provoked.”

Travis was not going to play this game—he had no need for fame, if you could call it that, in this sleepy little town—but he would oblige in his own special way. With a laconic smile, he faced the camera.

“Moose came. Moose went. All is well.” Noting the disappointed glower on Dale’s handsome Hollywood-worthy face, Travis tipped his cap.

Looking for fresh meat, Dale seemed to notice Clare for the first time and shoved the mic in her face. “And what about you, ma’am? Were you frightened to find a vicious moose within spitting distance?”

Clare eyed him up and down and replied, “Moose came. Moose went. All is well.”

Travis chuffed out a chuckle. Droll woman. He turned on his heel and walked back toward Center Market.

After bagging his food and saying his goodbyes to Clare, Travis pushed his cart to his truck and unloaded the grocery bags onto the passenger seat. He was about to close the door when

something hard hit him squarely on the rump. Swinging his head around, he surveyed the runaway shopping cart. Right behind it, an elderly woman charged toward him across the parking lot ... giggling.

Shucks. It was the widow Nanette Snodgrass. She smirked at him like she'd won the Maine state lottery, eyes wide and hopeful.

“Oh Travis, I am *so* sorry. The groceries have a mind of their own, huh? How are you doin’? You were so very brave to take charge of that tense moose situation. We’re all cheering for you.”

Gulping down a grumble, Travis merely nodded.

“Say, you must be so desolate, all alone in that big house of yours. Would you care for some company? I’d be happy to bring you over a home-cooked meal. What about tomorrow? I’ll drop by with a steaming pot of New England baked beans and brown bread, my specialty. Six o’clock good for you?” Nanette’s perpetual Cheshire cat grin glinted at him.

Dear Jesus, save me from chatty widows who don’t know when to keep their paws off.

His brain shifted into overdrive as he searched for an excuse, and then it came to him. He had plans tomorrow! Thank the good Lord and twice on Sunday.

“I appreciate the offer, Nanette, but I’m busy.” He had a date. Sort of, if you wanted to call it that. Nope, not a date—he wasn’t ready for that yet, but he was ready for a bit of fun. He swiveled Nanette’s cart around and gave it a delicate push in her direction.

“There you go. Be seein’ you.” With a slight nod, he climbed into his pickup and drove toward home.

Travis turned into his driveway and glanced at the living room window, but no furry black head peeped over the window sill. His chest constricted, the loss still fresh in his soul. Oh, how he

missed his beloved German Shepherd, Spruce. First Jillian last year, and then the added grief when Spruce had faded away, but it had been a kindness to finally put him down. Didn't ease Travis's pain any, though.

He wasn't up on theology, but if there were dogs in heaven, Spruce was surely there romping with Jillian.

Travis grabbed the groceries out of his truck and carted them inside. No wife, no dog, and his son Gabriel was at school. Travis looked forward to May when Gabe's semester at the University of Maine, Presque Isle, was over. He missed him like crazy but didn't want to be one of those hovering parents, who continually checked on his kid.

Thank God for dear friends who continued to check on him, despite his pulling away from the world. Eric, his good buddy, and Eric's new wife Samantha often dropped by to cheer him up. Stephanie, the pilot at the ranger station where he was the supervisor, provided daily jokes and made him smile. He was learning to cope without Jillian, albeit slowly, but that didn't mean he had to like it. Sometimes the loneliness nearly killed him, suffocating him at times.

Travis's cell phone rang as he stowed away the last can of soup, but he didn't recognize the number. Probably a telemarketer, but still, it was a person. How pathetic was it that he'd be willing to talk to a salesperson just to hear an affable voice? "Travis Gibbs."

"Hi, Travis. Clare here. I forgot to tell you there's a charge for the dinner to defray the cost of the food. Ten bucks."

"Very reasonable." Now there was a pleasant voice. The soft tones of Clare's down-east Maine accent washed over him in a mellifluous cascade. She'd probably gotten his number from Eric. Which meant she'd called Eric. Which meant word of his attendance at the dance would spread around the ranger station. He stared at the ceiling. At least Eric wouldn't rib him too hard, Clare being his wife's aunt and all. "I should have asked before, but can I do anything to help?"

“Got it covered.” There was a pause on the line. “Unless, that is, if you have any time before the dinner... You want to help set up? We’re a bit shorthanded in that department.”

“Sure. Can do. What time? Five o’clock? Five-fifteen?” Anything to get out of this dreary, silent house.

“That would be grand. Meet you in the kitchen at the Methodist church at five o’clock.” Since he’d only been in the church for Eric and Samantha’s wedding, he wasn’t one hundred percent sure where the kitchen was located, but he reckoned he could find it. Now, the kitchen at his Baptist church? He knew exactly where to find that.

Travis said his goodbyes and hung up the phone. He reclined in his leather lounge and switched on the news. The place didn’t seem quite so barren with Dale, the news anchor’s cultured tones drifting through the house.

A woman materialized on the screen with lovely light-brown hair, same as Clare’s. Clare Evans. Now there was a kind, gentle woman with a sensible head on her shoulders. He admired that. She was easy on the eyes too, even if she was probably a few years older than Travis. He chuckled, reflecting on a sermon he’d recently heard. Something about Abraham’s wife, Sarah, being called unusually beautiful. At the time Pharaoh added her to his harem, she was well into her sixties. She must have been an amazing woman. The minister went on to say Sarah died at age 127, so when the King found her attractive, she was only middle-aged.

Ha! Travis shook his head. Clare was a fine-looking woman no matter what age she claimed. And then his gaze cut to the mantle, a photo of Jillian in her prime staring back at him. A pang of guilt sliced through him. How could he possibly muse over the fine attributes of another woman when Jillian had only been gone little more than a year?

Still ... he was lonesome. Mighty lonesome.

He settled in for another long evening alone with the TV, but he did have plans for tomorrow

night. Out with real people, rather than a flickering image on a screen. He might even have a fine time. Never one to wallow or complain, fun-loving Jillian would unquestionably approve.