

IF YOU FOLLOW YOUR HEART

By Barbara Ellin Briggs

Book 1 in Meadow Lane

Chapter One

Charli belted out the words to “Hard Love,” pounding through her headset like brutal fists against her eardrums. Her voice rose raw and screamed into the afternoon sky. No one would hear her in the pasture while she emptied the manure spreader. She bellowed words about getting back up, wolves, and hanging on anthem style, forcing her voice hard enough to make the words feel true. No matter how loud the pounding, nor how raw the words, they did nothing to drive out the ache of burying her dad.

Screaming the last chorus, she tapped repeat and lurched. Her eyes flashed to the tractor gauges. She shifted her legs away from the heat of the engine. A second jolt had her peering over her shoulder at the locked wheels on the manure spreader. “No.” She groaned. “Not now.”

She jumped off the tractor, grabbed the manure fork hooked to the spreader’s side, and dug at the lumps jamming the paddle wheels. “I knew those guys left too much wet stuff in here.” And then they took off for two days. *Jerks.*

The rich, rotting odor wasn’t something she’d missed in Chicago. Nor was the mud and damp she’d learned to deal with in the early March Missouri thaw. A grunt pushed from her belly as she dug the pitchfork into the brown gunk. *Oof. I need a shovel.*

Once she got the paddle wheels rotating, she stowed the pitchfork, stuck one foot on the tractor step, and gritted her teeth. Matched pain rolled through her arms, tightening the knot under her shoulder blades. Exhaustion. Stress. One huge thrust lifted her onto the tractor seat.

She turned down the headset volume and swallowed hard. At least Green stalled when she’d jumped off, or right now she’d be chasing the tractor across the pasture.

Her fingers wrapped around the small key beneath the steering wheel and twisted. Nothing. She slid one earmuff off to hear better and tried the engine again. Not a click. “Perfect.” Headset pulled into place, her mind teetered on the sharp dividing line where sanity and hysteria played tug of war. She slapped the steering wheel. What had Dad said when she’d last driven Green? Sometimes the key stuck?

He’d know what to do, but it’d be a long time before he’d answer a question again, at least to her. Hot tears spilled from her eyes as she dug for a manual in the toolbox. Pliers. Might work for the sticking key. She fitted them around the dime-sized brass orb protruding from the ignition and twisted with all her might.

Snap.

The sound ricocheted through the pliers, sharp as her nerves. She sucked in, pliers clenched in her hand, staring at the rough brass edge as an explosion built in her chest.

Hysteria gave her one hard jerk. Screaming, she jumped up and hurled the pliers gripping the half key into the pasture. Her butt smacked into the tractor seat, and she buried her head in her hands. A week’s worth of agony burst from her eyes. *I couldn’t manage this with you here. What will I do now?*

And she’d ruined his tractor, too. Jerking sobs pulled at her chest.

Seconds later, a thud lurched her upright. “Ma’am?”

A man in black, blurred by her tears, stood to the side of the engine compartment, his knuckles knocking on the John Deere insignia. Charli slammed her hand into her chest with one deep breath. “Oh.” Where had he come from? Her gaze followed a straight line from him through the pasture to the gate. She pulled the headset to her neck and swiped her other arm across her face and sniffled.

“Sorry if I startled you. I spoke several times.”

Her nose dripped. She dug in the pocket of her hoodie and came up with a handful of hay. *Figures. I can’t even blow my nose.* In desperation, she rubbed her sleeve over her face again. Good thing the washer worked. Her hand tensed as she eyed the pitchfork, estimating the jump to grab the weapon if she needed.

“What do you want?”

“Um, appeared you were having trouble. I hiked out to see if I could help.” He used a soft, slow voice the way you’d soothe a nervous horse.

She sniffled and relaxed her fingers. “Do I know you?” A sane question. She’d been gone for ten years, and people change.

“Um, no. We’ve never met. June said you needed help.”

Well, that’s an understatement. “June? At Hoof & Woof Cafe?”

He nodded.

Black leather chaps, boots, and a matching jacket. He looked... dangerous. Except for his tousled blond hair curling over the tops of his ears—and those eyes. Blue, like the sky when the clouds slipped past. They tracked her every move. “She told you this is a horse farm, right?” Was her friend delusional? “Um, I don’t think...”

The guy stepped back and raised both hands chest high. “I tell you what. You call June. Meanwhile, I’ll fix your tractor. Once you have more information, we can talk things over.”

Friendliness wasn’t an endorsement. She’d met “friendly” guys in Chicago. If she let him fix Green, would he ruin the engine? She eyed him, weighing the pros and cons. She’d already killed the tractor. What more could the stranger damage?

“My cell’s in the barn.” She bit down and gave herself a mental kick. Smart move. Let him know you’re out here alone. No phone.

She jumped off the opposite side of the tractor and made a wide berth around him. Who wears black leather pants and a matching jacket to a horse farm, anyway? “Tools are in the toolkit there.” She motioned to the compartment next to the seat. “Might find one in the pasture.” With one finger, she pointed toward the area she’d let the pliers fly.

She spun on her dad’s wellies and marched toward the barn, boot tops slapping the backs of her knees. She’d pulled them on as a barrier between her and the manure. Not for hiking. And not to protect herself from strangers.

June knows I’m here alone. Why did she send a stranger to the farm? He was the image of a hero in a biker movie—with his blue eyes filled with compassion, blond hair swept to the side, and a soft, calming voice. *Not something I need to notice.*

A few minutes later, Charli limped into the barn office. Her dad’s enormous boots had rubbed a blister on her heel. With her other foot, she toed off the boot—left the sock inside—grabbed a bandage from her desk, slapped it on the offending blister, and retrieved her phone.

June had texted:

I’m sending help. Call me.

Her friend answered after three rings. “What do you mean you’re sending help? Who is this guy?”

“Isn’t Grey cute?” June’s voice twittered.

Charli sighed. It would be nice if her friend’s words reflected her serious situation. “Come on, June. I don’t need cute right now. Cute is distracting, and I’ve got piles of things to take care of so I can go back to Chicago.” She tapped the speaker icon. “And what do you mean cute? You’re married.”

“It’s a mistaken belief that married women become optically deficient.” June laughed, and then her voice turned business serious. “Grey asked if I knew anyone who needed help. You do. Michael grilled him. Besides, he knows Quaid.”

Quaid. The guy June raved about after he found her dog, Bailey.

“The good news is, he fixed my squirrely espresso machine. I’ve fought with this stupid thing for two years. I figured he can help you. Hear him out. If you don’t want his help, tell him to leave.”

The rumble of the tractor motor drifted through the barn. “He’s here. I’ll talk later.” Charli clicked off the phone, straightened her shirt, and pulled her ponytail tight. She hobbled into the barn aisle, one foot booted and the other bare. Grey backed the tractor and the empty manure spreader into the correct spot on the first try. It figured.

Charli let out a snort. *I bet he can back a horse trailer, too.* If she were planning to stick around, she’d brush up on her trailer skills.

He jumped off the tractor, holding his leather jacket over a shoulder with one hand. The other held the pliers she’d tossed in the pasture. Charli frowned. His white tee shirt hugged an impressive set of muscles.

She focused her gaze on his. “How’d you know where to park the tractor?”

“Wasn’t hard. I followed the tracks.” He motioned to the path left by the huge wheels. “You wanted the spreader emptied, right?”

Yes, but how’d he get rid of the muck?

“Do you have any grease remover?” He handed her the pliers and held out a forearm. The wing of a bird peeked out from beneath the short sleeve of the T. A grease smear extended to below his elbow. “I don’t want to mess up my jacket.”

The feathers on his muscular arm held her attention until he cleared his throat. *Geesh, Charli. Ignore the tattoo.* She pointed to the bathroom door in the barn aisle. “There’s a can under the sink.”

She limped to the office and settled behind the desk. The giant motorcycle parked outside the window looked like a dragon waiting for its master. He’d fixed June’s espresso machine and Green. He’d gotten rid of the muck she’d have shoveled until tomorrow. And he’d only needed grease remover.

She pressed her elbow into the desktop and rested her chin on her fist. *A smooth-talking biker with a tattoo and wearing leathers sounds like trouble. Let’s see if he can be helpful with more than a tractor.*

* * *

Grey’s eyes roamed around the tidy barn bathroom as he dried his arm with a paper towel, scrubbed his hands before sliding on his jacket. Shoveling manure required jeans and work gloves, not expensive leathers to prevent road rash. Pleased he’d kept his gear clear of the mess, he smiled. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to identify a ripe pile.

His requirement? An opportunity to help someone before moving on. Although an unhinged woman on a tractor should be a warning, something about her drooping brown ponytail, puffer jacket, and big green wellies made walking away tough.

The huge yellow headphones must’ve been set on powerful music with the way she screamed lyrics. She’d hurled the pliers with an impressive follow-through, too. He’d watched them land in a bare place. A trace of wildness, like a spooked horse, sparked in her eyes as she circled around him, the slap of green boots against her legs diminishing as she made her way to the barn.

There’d been nothing wrong with the old tractor. The safety had triggered when her weight left the seat and she hadn’t disengaged the spreader. He’d found enough tools in the tractor toolbox to unscrew the ignition unit and fish out the broken key. Easy. Didn’t take too many tricks to fire the engine.

June mentioned Charli had buried her father not long ago, and her mom was in a coma. Instinct told him the tractor hadn’t sparked her tears. His chest tightened. Being at odds with his old man didn’t mean he wanted to lose him. Worse for Charli with her father gone and her mother trapped in a coma. She had to be hurting.

He tossed the paper in the trash and strode down the barn aisle, contemplating the best approach with the emotional woman. Maybe stay quiet to reassure her he meant no harm. Let her know he could handle the basics around a horse barn.

A huge whiff of fresh shavings reminded him of home. Better than what he'd smelled earlier. "Grey McMillen." He held out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

She stood behind her desk and slipped a small, soft hand into his. "Hi, Grey. I called June. You check out. Have a seat."

He sank onto a worn leather sofa at the side of the room. "Your tractor is fine. Whenever you have a power-driven attachment on that model, you have to disengage or the tractor stalls and force is required to restart the engine. Nothing broken." An involuntary grin broke across his face. "Except the key."

Her chin lifted, and she glanced to the side. "Thank you for fixing Green." An attractive shade of pink flushed her cheeks. Her ramrod posture with her hands folded on the desk held a tinge of defiance, diminished by one bare foot peeking out from underneath.

"Green?"

"Well, yes. My dad bought Green during the summer I turned five. I named him. He taught me to drive on Green." Her blue eyes blinked. "Not when I was five—in fifth grade."

Not much different from his learning to drive a farm truck. Made him feel grown-up. "From my first look, Green has been well cared for and has many more years of life."

Her gaze dropped. *Way to go, Grey. Remind the woman of her loss.* He cleared the knot in his throat. "June told me about your dad. I'd like to extend my condolences. I can't imagine what you're going through."

Her shoulders and eyelids drooped in unison. "It's a horrible shock, and I'm up to my eyeballs in problems. There are more people with questions than I have answers for, and I have a million of my own. Questions, I mean."

The wounded expression in her eyes stirred a desire to help her. *I can take some of her load—for a while.*

She straightened. "What kind of work are you looking for?"

Fast subject change. Even though he admired her efforts to push through, the strongest walls could only hold back a certain amount of pressure. "I'm handy at fixing things, and I don't mind hard work."

“Are you comfortable with horses?”

“I can manage.”

“References?”

“Sure. If you think you need them. June’s husband grilled me and we both know a guy.”

Good thing she has friends who care.

“Quaid.”

“That’s him. Is he a friend?”

“No. I’ve never met him.” Charli wrote something on a notepad. “Did Michael mention he’s the Jackson County District Attorney? He’s adept at getting to the truth.”

Grey held his smile at her warning. “Yes. He gave me his card.”

Charli’s controlled posture relaxed with the indication he understood she wasn’t alone. “I haven’t had time to go over the books or the bank accounts yet to know what the farm can afford. To make matters worse, we’ve lost several boarders since the accident. Give me a few days to get things in order and I’ll know if, or what, Meadow Lane can pay you.”

Never his worry. Discussing pay made negotiations awkward. “I’m happy to work for a place to stay.”

Her brows knit as her head cocked to one side. “Just a place to stay? Part time?”

“Gets me started.” Her eyes narrowed as if she didn’t trust his answer. “I don’t have many needs, and I want to take a break from the road for a while. Maybe look around Kansas City. I’m a big Chiefs fan.”

Lips pursed, she drummed her fingers on the desktop. When the rhythm ceased, she looked him in the eye. “Let’s take a walk around some of the property. We may find what you need.”

She toed off her single wellie and pulled on a tennis shoe. A grimace and a gasp sounded as she stuffed a bandaged foot into the other.

He followed her uneven gait along the hall. “We’ve got the big barn with twenty stalls, the indoor arena, and the lower barn. Forty stalls altogether. And there are shelters in the pastures and pens.”

Grey’s gaze caught the huge barn beams. Someone who knew tools and wood had restored the old barn. The rest, built in this century, were typical metal.

“Come meet Bet. She’s a boarder.” A small, blonde-haired lady stood in front of a tack trunk rolling leg wraps. “Hey, Bet. This is Grey. He might work for the farm.”

Grey held out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Same here." She laughed and glanced at Charli. "Did you want him to meet me because I'm the odd woman out in this barn full of hunter-jumpers?"

"Very funny. I hoped to get your reaction." Charli motioned with her thumb toward him.

Bet grinned. "Nice. I approve."

Charli shot snake eyes at her friend, then turned toward him. "Bet's been helping me keep things together."

"Old friends?"

She shook her head. "We met at Dad's funeral." Her voice drifted off toward the end of her sentence.

Bet waved her hand at two horses. "My guys are three-day event horses. Mother and son, Dancer and Mouse. Well, their show names are Dancing Slippers and Hear Me Roar." She hesitated and frowned. "Like Mighty Mouse? The old cartoon?" She waited two breaths and shrugged. "Sheesh."

Grey chuckled and peered into the stall at a slender gray mare. "Thoroughbred?"

"Yes." A smile covered her face. "Mouse is her only foal. He's by a warmblood stallion from the college I attended."

The bay horse had more substance than the mare. "His breeding shows. Good-looking horses."

"Thanks. I love them both." She wiggled her fingers through the bars on the bay's stall. The horse nuzzled her fingertips. "Don't I, Mousie?"

Charli turned and rested a hand on Grey's arm. His forehead tightened at the sudden warmth. "Follow me. I want to show you something."

Hands crammed into her jeans pockets, they walked from the barn through an attached indoor arena. "Bet's great. She seems more like a horse lover than a blue-ribbon chaser."

"You don't like horse shows? I thought this is where you grew up."

Silence passed between them while they walked through the lower barn. Charli stopped in the doorway. The late-afternoon amber haze added a halo glow to strands of her hair lifted in the breeze. Grey blinked. Not the reason he'd come to this farm.

"I think there are more important things than winning ribbons." She nudged her chin toward a set of stairs. "Mom used this for barn help. Sometimes, barn workers leave in a hurry."

No promises what condition the place is in.” Climbing the first two steps, she skirted a broken board.

At the top, she rattled the doorknob and then rooted through her pocket. “I brought the key in case you checked out.” With a jiggle and a kick, Charli pushed open the door.

She’d done that before. “Hmm. Does this mean I passed?”

Humor underscored a sweet smile and raised eyebrow. “Maybe. You haven’t seen this yet.”

Stale air smacked Grey in the face as they pushed their way inside. “I don’t think anyone’s had a window open in a while.”

Charli shrugged. Floorboards creaked when she stepped to a sagging sofa. “I figured we’d find a mess. Looks like the last person was a slob.” She snatched up a Chronicle magazine and read the date. “These are old.” Hands on her hips, she gazed around the room before spinning toward him with a frown. “It’s not much. Running water, electric paid. Sometimes the internet works out here. If you want privacy and aren’t hung-up on fancy, this might do.”

A wave of protectiveness darted through his gut. *She’s too trusting.*

Grey flipped the water on in the kitchen. The sink window looked over an outdoor riding ring surrounded by a white-board fence. Beyond the arena lay acres of green pasture. It had been a while since he’d gazed over grazing horses. “You care if I paint, fix things up?”

“As long as you don’t destroy anything. Make yourself at home.”

“Then we’ve got a deal.” He held out his hand and smiled at the warmth of her grasp.

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