

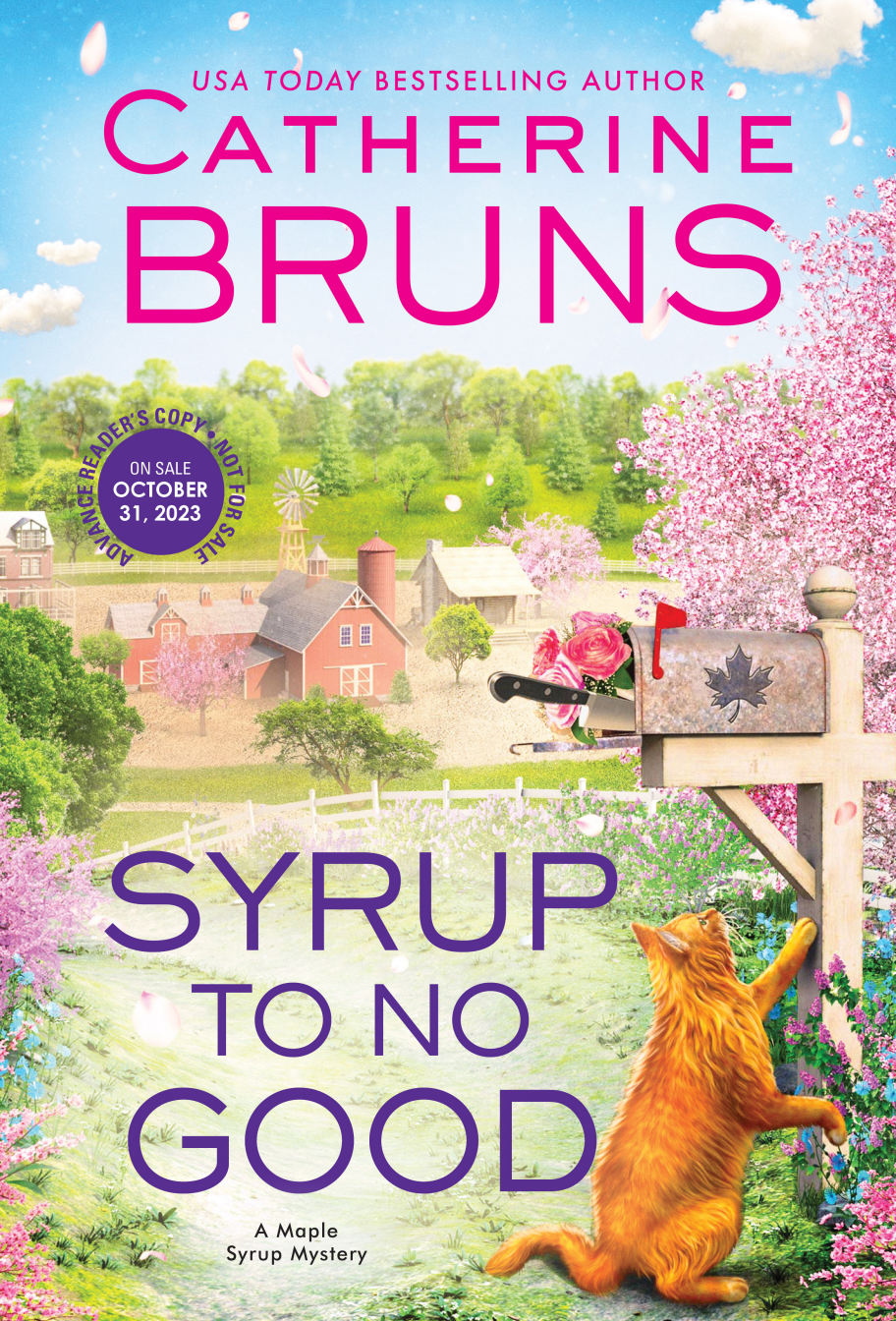
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SYRUP TO NO GOOD

A Maple
Syrup Mystery





CHAPTER ONE

THE SOUND OF EXCITED LAUGHTER was all around as I went back and forth between tables in the café, offering up extra syrup for pancakes. The syrup was a beautiful sight to behold as it slowly dripped down the crispy edges of the cakes and onto the plate below, causing my mouth to water.

My father, who had been one of the best maple syrup makers in the entire state of Vermont, always said that you could tell good syrup by its density. “The thicker, the better, *habibi*,” he’d told me. *Habibi* meant “my love” in Arabic.

“Okay, everyone!” I called. “Let’s get this show on the road. Who’s ready to eat some delicious pancakes?”

A chorus of cheers went up from the tables.

“Ready!” I called. “On your mark, get set, go!”

The kids and adults all picked up their forks in unison and began digging into the fluffy cakes that my mother had prepared for our annual pancake eating contest. I set the

jug of syrup down in the center of the table with a satisfied thud as a memory of my father crossed my mind. Dad had always looked forward to hosting the pancake contests at his farm. The maple syrup farm had thrived under his ownership and hopefully would for me too. I smiled to myself. If he were here, Dad would have inserted himself onto the wooden bench between the kids and told them silly jokes until everyone's sides ached with laughter.

A sharp pain pierced my heart. It had been six months since my father's murder and not a day went by that I didn't think of him. Victor Khoury had purchased Sappy Endings twenty-five years ago. He'd had big dreams for the 300-acre farm that contained approximately 5,000 maple trees and lived to see many of them become a reality. A wonderful businessman, husband, father, and friend, Dad's life had been taken in his office one evening last fall. Although his killer was in jail and justice had been served, the result was anything but sweet. Sadly, it would never bring him back and I missed him with every fiber of my being.

My best friend, Heather Turcot, was making her way around the tables, giving words of encouragement to both the kids and adults alike as she refilled glasses of milk. Her blue eyes were shining with delight as she laughed at something one of the contestants said. It was good to see her looking happy for a change. Heather's life had been a rollercoaster of unending stress lately. Her wedding to fiancé Tyler Murray was only two weeks away, and what she'd originally thought would be an enjoyable event to plan had been nothing short of a throbbing migraine instead.

My gaze shifted to the other tables in the Sappy Hour Café. Employee Noah Rivers was studying his wristwatch intently. “One minute left, or the first person to clean their plate wins!” he called out.

He happened to look up at that moment and our gazes met. A pleasant chill worked its way up my spine as I stared into ice blue eyes that always managed to take my breath away. His perfect chiseled features looked as if they’d been carved out of stone, and his lashes were so thick and long that any woman would have gladly killed for them.

It seemed silly to call Noah an employee, but it was a bit awkward to refer to him as my boyfriend in our work environment. We’d started off on the wrong foot when I came home to take over the farm last November. Our romance was progressing slowly, but as the old saying went, good things came to those who waited. Noah and I weren’t rushing things, especially since we both bore scars from previous relationships. After five years, there were still times that I smarted over my broken engagement. As for Noah, his suffering was much more pronounced and painful than mine. His wife Ashley had died at the hands of a drunk driver a little over a year ago. He and his six-year-old daughter Emma were still adjusting to life without her.

Noah startled me out of my thoughts by letting out a loud whoop. He raised the right arm of a teenaged boy and gestured with the other hand to his plate. The only thing left on it was a small puddle of our amber maple syrup. “We have a winner!” he yelled.

Applause broke out in the cafe as I presented the young

man with his prizes. In addition to a gold medal strung on a red ribbon, I'd gifted him two large pieces of maple candy and a gift certificate for the café.

"Come on, everyone," Noah called. "It's time to head over to the sugar shack for a maple syrup boiling demonstration!"

The crowd moved out of the café, talking gaily among themselves. Instead of following, Noah strode over in my direction and rewarded me with a smile. His dark, silky hair was slightly tousled, and the urge to run my fingers through it was tempting. Noah was more than just a handsome face though. One of the things that I liked about him—and there were many—was how unaware he was of his good looks. He was an excellent worker, and I honestly didn't know what the farm would do without him. Noah knew everything about collecting sap and the boiling process, plus he made candles for the farm that turned a nice profit, especially around the holidays. He was originally from the South and had served with the Marines after graduating from high school. When he returned from duty, Noah had gone to work on a maple farm in Upstate New York. After the tragedy with his wife, he'd wanted a new start and eventually found his way to Sugar Ridge, Vermont. It was impossible not to admire his determination and strength.

Noah nodded to Heather, who pretended to be occupied with cleaning the tables, then addressed me. "Any chance you're free to go to the movies with Emma and me tonight?"

“I’d love to,” I said honestly, “but with Heather’s shower tomorrow, there’s a lot of last-minute things to take care of. Could I have a rain check?”

“Of course.” He smiled, but I caught a flash of disappointment in his eyes. There was nothing I would have liked more than to be with him and his daughter tonight. In the past few months, I’d come to love Emma as my own child.

“Why don’t you come by tomorrow night after the shower, and I’ll make you dinner,” he offered. “Em can help.”

My cheeks warmed as I stared at his fine chiseled features. “Sure. That sounds like fun.”

Noah’s gaze shifted to my lips, and he started to lean in closer. At the last second, he glanced around the room, then took a step back when he noticed Heather staring. He winked at me, and took off for the sugar shack where his adoring public waited.

It was the second and last day of our Open House Weekend. Over seven hundred people had passed through our front door since Friday morning. We’d had a full slate of activities planned for yesterday and today. The boiling demonstration that Noah was conducting would be followed by a maple candy making demonstration, which was something I had recently learned to do myself. After that, people would be free to browse our gift shop and the sugar bush outside until closing time.

Selma Khoury, my mother, was behind the counter of the café where she’d been baking all day. At the moment, she

was busy whisking another tray of muffins into the oven. As a courtesy, we'd offered free coffee and maple muffins to the public and had gone through a huge quantity of them. The café smelled divine, with a hint of pancakes still lingering in the air, accompanied by the warm, intoxicating buttery-maple scent of the muffins, which could drive anyone to distraction. She was too preoccupied to pay any attention to what we were doing, and that was fine with me.

When my father first started the farm, adding the café was a no-brainer. People loved maple lattes, warm or iced, at any time of the year. Dad's will had surprised everyone when he stated in it that his wish was for me to take over the farm. I never thought I would be able to succeed. After a while I'd finally realized that this was where I belonged, and my confidence continued to grow every day.

Heather helped me gather up paper plates from the table. "That was fun! Leila, I can't believe it's the first time I've ever been to a Sappy Endings' Open House weekend."

I tossed the paper plates into a nearby trash can. "I'm so glad you could come. It's a good thing we had to reschedule it, right?" Open House Weekend was a tradition in Vermont during the spring at maple syrup farms, but a late season snowstorm had forced us to cancel our event two weekends earlier and reschedule. On the original day, Heather, who worked as a hairdresser, had been out of town styling hairdos for an entire bridal party. I was grateful for her assistance today.

She glanced at me worriedly. "I feel so guilty about this, Leila."

“Guilty about what?” I joked. “Helping me pass out pancakes?”

Heather smiled. “No. But I’m ruining your social life. You should be snuggling up with Noah tonight instead of doing last-minute things for my shower. Plus tapping season is finally over and I know you’re exhausted.”

I waved a hand dismissively in the air. “Oh please. It’s not a big deal. This is part of my duty as maid of honor. You’d do the same for me. Besides, I want to make sure your shower goes perfectly tomorrow.”

“And that’s another thing for me to feel guilty about,” Heather continued. “You only get Sundays off and I’m monopolizing this one.”

“Would you stop? After today, we’re going to start closing at two o’clock on Saturdays for the summer. It will almost feel like another day off. As for your shower, I’ve had fun arranging it.”

Heather shot me a dubious look. “Come on, Lei. I know you hate that sort of thing.”

My friend wasn’t totally wrong. Heather and I were opposites when it came to looks and hobbies. She was blond and blue eyed while I was dark haired with an olive skin tone. People had often wondered how we ever became friends in the first place. For more than twenty years though, we’d stuck together like maple syrup and pancakes.

Heather was a girly girl who loved clothes shopping, experimenting with different hair styles, and browsing for antiques. I hated all of those things and would rather spend my days burying my nose in a good book or working on

the farm. Fortunately, planning Heather's shower hadn't been nearly as time consuming as the wedding was for her. I'd decided to hold it at Sugar Ridge's local country club. Close to sixty women had responded to say that they would attend. More than two hundred people were expected for the wedding, but several relatives across the country were only flying in for the big day.

My biggest problem was that I still hadn't bought Heather a present. I always waited until the last minute to take care of those important details. Fortunately, there was a china and silver store in the center of town that had the place setting she'd registered for, and they were open until seven o'clock tonight. Thankfully they offered gift wrapping as I was terrible at anything creative.

I slung an arm around Heather's shoulders. "Okay, maybe it's not my kind of thing, but you're my best friend and that's all that matters. Just think! Two weeks from today you will be Mrs. Tyler Murray. With an MD on the end," I added. Heather was proud of the fact that her fiancé was a pediatrician.

To my surprise and horror, she burst into tears.

"What's wrong?" The strain showed on her face and for a moment, I wondered if Heather might be having second thoughts about her marriage. No, that was impossible. She'd been madly in love with Tyler since high school. Heather also loved the idea of being a doctor's wife, even though she occasionally grumbled about the long hours he worked.

Heather sat down on one of the wooden benches and

stared up at me with a forlorn expression. “Oh, Lei. I’m so scared about tomorrow.”

“What’s there to be scared about?” I asked in confusion. “We’re going to have lunch, cake, and you’ll open presents. Lots and lots of presents to help furnish your new home.”

Heather blew her nose into a tissue. “But I’m meeting some of Tyler’s relatives for the first time, and I’m worried what they’ll think.”

“Oh please,” I scoffed. “They’re all going to love you.” How could they not? Heather was one of those people with a sunny disposition who was an absolute joy to be around. Her natural beauty radiated from the inside.

She wrung her hands together. “Okay, maybe I’m worrying for nothing. Tyler says they’re all nice. I mean, they can’t be as bad as my Uncle Grant’s new wife.” She winced. “Jeez, I don’t know why I call her new. They’ve been married for five years, but I’ve only met her once.”

“Grant is your dad’s brother, right? I don’t remember ever meeting him.”

Heather nodded. “He’s not really interested in family events. Grant is ten years older than Dad, and they’ve never been close. I feel terrible for saying this, but I don’t like him very much. And ever since he married Monica, Dad says he’s become even more distant.” She leaned in closer, as if afraid someone would overhear. “It absolutely kills my father that he took her name.”

My mouth fell open. “Are you kidding me? He’s Grant Butterfield instead of Turcot?”

“Monica insisted upon it.” Heather rolled her eyes.

“And she holds the purse strings, so if Uncle Grant wants anything, he has to tip his hat and ask nicely.”

I realized that some men did take their wife’s name in this day and age, but I didn’t know any personally, and this surprised me. “He lives in New York, right?”

“Yes, he’s only an hour away but is always too busy to come for a visit. Mom and Dad didn’t want to invite them to the wedding, but we had no choice.” Her face turned the color of a ripe tomato. “Dad says they’re always up to no good.”

“Gee, I can’t wait to meet them,” I said sarcastically.

Heather puckered her lips as if she’d eaten a lemon. “My uncle has always acted like he was more important than everyone else, and what’s even worse is that Dad lets him get away with it. He’s a regular doormat around him.” She sighed. “And Uncle Grant thinks he’s better than Dad because he married a rich woman. You know how hard my parents work. They’ve been saving for my wedding for a long time.”

I did know. Heather’s father, Garrett, had worked for General Electric for over thirty years and mostly on his feet. Her mother, Olivia, had been a receptionist at the local elementary school for almost as long. She’d started there while Heather and I were in school and liked the fact that she could be home for Heather after school and during summer vacations.

“I’m worried about spending any amount of time with Monica,” Heather confessed. “Dad said she thinks Vermont is a backward state. She’s from Long Island, so she thinks

living in a rural area automatically makes us a bunch of hicks.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve run into her kind before,” I said. “We can handle her.”

Heather continued. “I’ve never met her son, but he’s also coming to the wedding. Dad’s not a fan of him either.”

“Whoa. Hold on a second,” I said. “When did she and Grant have a baby?”

Heather laughed. “Devon is from Monica’s previous marriage. He’s around our age. Monica’s first husband died when Devon was only five.”

“How sad.” I thought of Emma, who had lost her mother at the same age.

“It is sad,” Heather agreed, “but Monica spoiled him so much that Uncle Grant told Dad it’s pathetic. Devon’s never even held a full-time job.”

My mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding. How does he live?”

Heather cocked an eyebrow. “How do you think? Monica gives him an allowance. And I’m not talking about the five bucks a week that you and I got when we were kids.”

“Actually, I got ten,” I teased.

“Show off.” Her mouth quivered into a smile. “At least you helped out at the farm and everything. Devon gets a hundred times that amount for doing nothing.”

I let out a low whistle. “Wow. Must be nice.”

She sighed. “I’m already bracing myself for the country girl jokes.”

“Don’t let it bother you. You’ll see Monica tomorrow and at the wedding, then maybe only once a year after that for either a wedding or funeral.”

“I’m worried that she’ll be looking down her nose at me the entire time,” Heather confided.

“Don’t waste your time worrying about her.”

Heather swallowed nervously. “I wish I didn’t have to worry about what she thinks, but Dad borrowed money from them for the wedding. It’s just a short-term loan, but I feel awkward about the whole thing. And I don’t like the thought of my father groveling at their feet with them thinking they’re better than him.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there.” My mother had taken it upon herself to arrange a marriage for me several years ago. She and my father had both been born in Lebanon, where the tradition was still popular. They’d been good friends with the Salems, who had followed them to America about five years later. Mark was a year older than me, and while loathing the idea of a ready-made husband, I’d managed fallen in love with him anyway. We had dated for over three years, and then Mark had backed out of our wedding a month before the big day.

“Lei, there’s something that I should tell you.” Heather glanced over at my mother, who was chatting with a customer at the café counter while pouring more muffin batter into pans. “Maybe we should go into your office.”

I didn’t like the sound of this. “Okay.” I picked up my coffee and followed her out of the café. A walkway area separated the Sappy Hour Café from the gift shop. A few

people were mulling around in there, picking up bottles of syrup and maple candles, but they could take those purchases to my mother to be rung up.

The walkway area led to a long corridor. At the very end, situated near the back door, was my office, marked with a sign that simply read, PRIVATE. As this had been my father's office for many years, I'd hesitated about making changes. Perhaps the time had come to add to the current furniture, which consisted only of a wooden desk, chair, and file cabinet.

Heather opened the door and was greeted with a plaintive "meow." She laughed out loud at the sight of Toast, my orange cat, lying on top of the desk. Toast had been a stray who adopted me during my first week of work at the farm. He was an indoor cat, but once in a while I brought him along to work with me. He seemed to enjoy the change of scenery.

Heather pulled a chair closer to the desk and nuzzled Toast's face with her own. He immediately began to purr like a V-8 engine. "How's my favorite kitty today?" she cooed.

"Toast is fine," I said. "He was neutered the other day, and I suspect he's not happy with me. Other than that, he's fine. So, what's going on? Is there something else about your aunt and uncle that you haven't told me?"

Heather paused with her hand buried in Toast's thick fur. "No. It's about Mark."

My body froze. "What about him?"

"Have you...talked to him lately?" Heather asked casually.

Something in her tone suggested that she was fishing for information. “Heather, you’re my best friend. If I had talked to him, you’d be the first to know. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

She bit into her lower lip. “He’s in town. I wasn’t sure if he’d come to see you.”

“He’s here? In Sugar Ridge?” My stomach twisted like a giant pretzel. “Why would he come to see me after all this time? We haven’t spoken in almost five years.”

She shrugged. “Hey, you never know. I figured he knew you were back home, so maybe he stopped by for a visit. Your mother must know he’s here. She’s friends with his parents, right? They were close before the marriage talk ever began.”

“Mom’s still friends with Maya, but since she’s been running the café, she hasn’t really seen much of anyone.” My mother’s maple flavored baklava and other treats were the talk of the town. When she took over the position last December, it was supposed to have been short-term. I suspected that working at the café helped her deal with the loss of my father. Mom was tough, but even she had her limits. She was up at dawn, worked all day, then came home to take care of the house before falling into bed at nine o’clock. She never complained though.

“How long is Mark here for? Have you seen him?” I wanted to bite my tongue off as soon as said the words. The fact remained that while I’d once loved Mark, he hadn’t loved me back enough to marry me. It was a deep wound that I thought had healed after all of these years, but now I was starting to wonder.

Heather's face grew stern. "Tyler saw him at On Tap last night. He told Mark that you'd been back since your father's death, and he seemed surprised. I mean, wouldn't his parents have told him that you were back in Sugar Ridge for good?"

"Not necessarily," I admitted. "His parents always thought he could do better than me."

She tossed her head. "Well, they were never very smart."

"I'm sure his being back in town has nothing to do with me," I said. "He's only home to see his mom and dad."

"Are you going to tell Noah that your ex is in town?" Heather asked.

I shrugged. "What's the point? It's not like I'm expecting Mark to stop by and chew the fat."

Heather scratched Toast's behind the ears. "I'm glad that I told you in case he happens to catch you buying Oreos at the Jolly Green Grocer."

I laughed out loud. Next to my mother's baking, Oreos were my go-to dessert. I watched as Toast lapped up the attention from Heather. He lifted his chin, closed his eyes, and deep purrs filled the room. "He's got you wrapped around his paw," I teased.

Heather looked up at me wistfully. "I think I'd rather hang out with Toast this weekend."

"You're worrying over nothing," I said. "Tomorrow is a day to celebrate you. And remember all the fabulous gifts you're going to get. I want you to have a good time and not think about Monica, okay? Let me handle her."

Heather sighed and hugged Toast against her. "Some days I think it would have been easier if we'd eloped."

“But you’ve always wanted a big wedding,” I protested. “Eloping isn’t your style.” It was more my speed. Heather and I both knew this, but she was too polite to say so. “You’re going to marry the man you love. All the hard work is done, and it’s time to start enjoying yourself.”