**Excerpt – DOG DAYS OF SUMMER by Teri Wilson**

**Chapter Four**

Percy’s landline rang in the dead of night, jolting Maple from a deep sleep.

At first, she thought she must be dreaming. It had been years since she’d even *heard* the shrill ring of a landline. She scarcely recognized the sound. Then, once she dragged her eyes open, she realized she was in a strange bed in a strange house with a strange dog sprawled next to her.

*Yep.* She plopped her head back down on her pillow and threw her arm over her face. *Definitely a dream.*

But then she caught a whiff of cinnamon on her forearm, and everything came flooding back to her at once. She was in Bluebonnet, Texas. Percy Walker, DVM, was her father, and Maple had found out the truth too late to do anything about it. No wonder she’d eaten an entire peach pie straight from the box for dinner while Lady Bird chowed down on a bowl of premium dog food.

That pie had also been *delicious*. Hands down, the best she’d ever tasted. Maybe Ford had been right about the virtues of homegrown produce. In any case, Maple had zero regrets about the pie.

She let her swollen eyes drift shut again. She’d wept throughout the entire peach-pie episode, and subsequently had the puffy face and blotchy skin to show for it. Lovely. Her mother would no doubt book Maple a facial the second she deplaned at JFK.

At least the landline had stopped ringing. A quick glance at her cell phone told her it was after two in the morning. If she fell back asleep in the next fifteen minutes, she could still get a good three hours of shut-eye before her hired car showed up to take her to the airport in Austin. As she’d suspected, Uber wasn’t a thing in Bluebonnet. It was going to cost her an arm and a leg to get to the airport on time because she’d had to book a service all the way from the city.

*Worth every freaking penny*, she told herself while Lady Bird snuffled and wheezed beside her. The dog snored louder than a freight train. Alas, not quite loud enough to drown out the landline as it began to ring again.

Maple sat up and tossed the covers aside. “Seriously?”

Who called a dead man’s house at this hour?

She stumbled toward the kitchen, where the phone—a vintage rotary classic with a cord approximately ten thousand feet long—hung just to the left of the refrigerator.

Maple plucked the handset from its hook. “Whoever this is, you’ve got the wrong number.”

“Oh.” The woman on the other end sounded startled. Again, *seriously?* Couldn’t people in Bluebonnet tell time? “I was looking for Lady Bird. Is she not there?”

Maple felt herself frown. “Lady Bird is a dog.”

“Of course, she is. Is she available?”

Maybe Maple really was dreaming. “You want to speak to Lady Bird on the phone?”

She glanced around, but for once, the golden wasn’t glued to her side. No doubt she was still splayed diagonally across the bed, belly-up.

“That’s cute, but no. This is Pam Hudson. You can call me Nurse Pam. Everyone does. I work at County General Hospital, and we were hoping Lady Bird could come in to visit with a patient.”

Maple blinked as something June said in passing earlier came back to her.

*That dog has a way with people who need a little TLC. She’s actually sort of famous for it around these parts.*

Lady Bird must be a therapy dog. Therapy dogs were specially trained to provide comfort, support, and affection to people in health-care settings. Why hadn’t anyone said anything?

Probably because it was none of Maple’s business, considering she already had one stylishly clad foot out the door and she hadn’t planned on taking the golden with her.

“I apologize for the late hour, but we have a little boy here who’s had quite a difficult night, and he’s been asking for Lady Bird for the past half hour. It would mean the world to him if she could come visit, even for a few minutes,” Nurse Pam said.

“Right now?” Maple asked in a panic.

No. Just…no.

Therapy dogs didn’t visit patients all on their own. They worked as a team in conjunction with their owners. And as of today, Lady Bird’s owner was Maple.

But Maple wasn’t cut out for that type of work, as evidenced by the epic disaster at the pet clinic. She was the absolute last person who should be visiting someone sick and vulnerable. Therapy dog handlers were compassionate. They were active listeners and knew how to engage with people experiencing all sorts of challenges or trauma. They were confident in social situations.

Maple was none of those things.

“I know it’s late. I’m so sorry for the interruption, but Oliver always lights up when Lady Bird is here. Percy was always so good about bringing the dog around whenever we called, no matter the hour. I know this is none of my business, but I heard you’re his daughter.” Pam’s voice cracked. “We’re really going to miss him around here.”

Maple’s throat clogged.

*Not again.* She was done with crying. She’d had her pie-fueled moment of weakness. There was no reason whatsoever to get emotional over a person she’d never met before.

“Do you think you’ll be able to bring Lady Bird by?”

The nurse was relentless. Fortunately, Maple had the perfect excuse. “I’m sorry, but even if I wanted to—” *which I don’t* “—I can’t. I don’t have any way to get there. I don’t have a car. In fact, I’m leaving early in the morning, and—”

“That’s an easy fix!” Pam gushed. “Don’t you worry. Someone will be by Percy’s house to pick you up shortly.”

Maple froze, a deer in headlights. This couldn’t be happening. “Wait, no. That’s really not—”

Pam interjected, cutting her off. “No need to thank me. We help one another out here. It’s the Bluebonnet way.”

Of course, it was. Maple couldn’t wait to get out of this place and back to New York, where she was hemmed in by people on every side and none of them knew her name or cared a whit about her.

She opened her mouth to protest again, but it was too late. There was a click on the other end of the line as Pam hung up the phone.

Maple gaped at the receiver. She tried pressing the silver hook where the handset usually rested, but no amount of jabbing at the ancient device would make Pam reappear.

“Nope,” Maple said aloud. “Nope, nope, nope.”

She wasn’t going to do it. Pam couldn’t make her. Maple would just call the hospital back and refuse.

But Maple had been half-asleep when she’d taken the call and couldn’t remember the name of the hospital the nurse had mentioned. Nor did she know what floor or department Pam had been calling from. All she remembered was that the patient was a little boy named Oliver and that Oliver was having a tough night.

*Join the club, Oliver.*

Maple dropped her forehead to the phone and concentrated on taking deep breaths. As out of it as she’d been a few minutes ago, she was wide-awake now. Any minute, a stranger intent on dragging her to the hospital was going to knock on the door and they were going to find Maple on the verge of a panic attack, dressed in her favorite cupcake-themed pajamas with pie crumbs in her hair.

This town was the *worst*. How did introverts survive here?

The dreaded knock at the door came in just under twenty minutes. Maple had barely had time to pull on her softest pair of jeans and a J.Crew T-shirt with sketches of dogs of various breeds drinking cocktails from martini glasses. Comfort clothes. Clothes that said she was staying in for the night, no matter what Nurse Pam had to say about it.

She swung Percy’s front door open, ready to dig in her heels.

“Look, I—” Maple’s tongue tripped over itself as she took in the sight of the man standing on her porch dressed in hospital scrubs. She swallowed hard. “It’s you.”

Ford Bishop.

Just how small was the population of this town? The man was everywhere—bringing his grandmother into the pet clinic, buying pies, delivering therapy dogs to the hospital in the dead of night. Maple apparently couldn’t swing a stick in Bluebonnet without it smacking into one of his nicely toned forearms.

Oh, no. She was staring at his forearms again, wasn’t she?

She blinked hard and refocused on his face…on those eyes of his that somehow made Maple want to close her eyes and fall backward onto a soft featherbed.

Something was very clearly wrong with her. She was suffering from some sort of pie-induced hysteria. Maybe even a full nervous breakdown.

Ford tilted his head, studied her for a beat and gave her a smile that almost seemed genuine.

“Hey there, Doc.”

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Ford squinted at Maple’s T-shirt.

Were those dogs? Drinking *martinis?* Interesting choice for a late-night visit to the children’s wing of a hospital, but Ford wasn’t judging. He was honestly shocked that Pam had managed to twist Maple’s arm into bringing Lady Bird to visit Oliver at all.

Shocked, but relieved—so relieved that he’d have happily chauffeured Maple to the hospital in her PJs, if necessary.

“What are you doing here?” Maple asked, blinking rapidly, and Ford’s relief took a serious hit.

“I’m giving you and Lady Bird a ride to County General,” Ford said. Why else would he be on her doorstep in the middle of the night, dressed in scrubs with his truck still running at the curb?

He wasn’t sure why she couldn’t drive herself. Percy’s truck was newer than his, and as far as Ford knew, it remained parked right in the garage, where he’d left it. But Ford was happy to give Maple and the dog a ride, if needed. He just wanted to get Lady Bird to the hospital by any means necessary.

“There’s been a misunderstanding.” Maple shook her head. “Lady Bird isn’t feeling up to it.”

At the mention of her name, Lady Bird made herself visible by nudging the front door open wider with her snout. The dog wiggled past Maple to offer Ford a proper golden-retriever greeting, complete with tail wags and copious amounts of drool.

Ford dropped to a knee to let Lady Bird plant her paws on his shoulders and lick the side of his face. The dog’s wagging tail crashed into Maple’s shins. When Ford looked up at her, a deep flush was making its way up her neck.

*Liar, liar, pants on fire,* he thought.

“I’m no vet, but it seems to me if this dog was feeling under the weather earlier, she’s suddenly made a miraculous recovery.” Ford stood, and Lady Bird added an exclamation point to his observation by continuing to prance around him like he was hiding bacon in the pockets of his scrubs.

For the record, he was not. The only thing in Ford’s pocket was his cell phone, which pinged at least once an hour with a text from Gram. The last missive had been a photo of Coco lying at the foot of her bed watching *Jeopardy* on the small television in Gram’s room at the senior center.

“Thank you for the pie. It was heavenly,” Maple said, and Ford was pretty sure he spotted a crumb from the crust of said pie in her hair, but he thought it best not to mention it. “But this day has been a real doozie. Pam kind of strong-armed me into the whole pet-visit thing, and I just…can’t.”

Ford crossed his arms. After this morning, he shouldn’t have been surprised. This was a kid they were talking about, though. Was she really saying no?

“Don’t look at me like that.” Maple scowled.

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like I’m evil incarnate.” She gave her chin a jaunty upward tilt. “I told you I wasn’t a people person.”

Ford narrowed his gaze at her. “Is that what I should say to the eight-year-old little kid who’s been puking all night after his most recent chemo treatment when he asks why he can’t see Lady Bird?”

She recoiled as if she’d been hit.

“Sorry. That was probably too harsh.” Ford held up his hands. He wasn’t in the business of guilting people into doing good deeds, all evidence to the contrary.

And he certainly didn’t think Maple was evil incarnate. Lost, maybe. Overwhelmed, certainly. Bluebonnet was a small town, and, of course, Ford had heard about Percy’s last will and testament. As hard as it was to believe, Maple was Percy Walker’s daughter.

The way she wrapped her arms around herself told Ford that no one found it more impossible to believe than she did.

Time to start over. “Look, Oliver is a sweet kid. His mom works nights. He’s tired, and he’s very sick, or else I wouldn’t be standing here on your porch at one in the morning asking for this small favor.”

It wasn’t small to the average person—especially a person who seemed to have at least a dash of social anxiety. Ford knew this. He just really, *really* wanted Oliver to get a few minutes with Lady Bird. Once the kid set eyes on that dog, he’d sleep like a baby for the rest of the night. Happened every time.

“Lady Bird will do all the work. Oliver will hardly even look at you, I promise. The dog is the star of the show. I’d take her there myself, but I can’t. I could get called away, and hospital rules say I can’t leave a patient alone with a therapy dog.” Ford shifted from one foot to the other. He needed to get back to work. “Please?”

“You can’t leave a patient alone with a therapy dog, but you *can* leave them with someone you don’t really know? Someone who isn’t even the therapy dog’s owner?” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Aren’t you, though?” Ford glanced down at Lady Bird, who’d planted herself directly between them with one big paw resting on Maple’s toe. Her impractical stilettos had been replaced with an oversize pair of house slippers. Brown corduroy and large enough to look like they’d come from the men’s department. Ford realized he hardly knew Maple, but the shoes definitely seemed out of character.

Then it hit him: the shoes belonged to Percy.

“I’m not staying,” Maple said with a shake of her head. She gestured to the house, the dog, and the town in general. “I’ll figure out what to do with all of this later, but I can’t stay here. I’m going back to New York in the morning.”

Ford bristled, even though he couldn’t help but think the slippers told a different story. Maple Walker Leighton was more curious about her birth father than she wanted to admit.

But that wasn’t any of Ford’s business. As for why the sight of her in those slippers filled his chest with warmth, he really couldn’t say.

“Please,” Ford said again and then reached to pluck the crumb from her hair. He just couldn’t help it. Maple’s lips parted ever so slightly at his closeness, but she didn’t move a muscle. He held up the crumb between his thumb and forefinger. “What if I promised you more pie?”

Her expression softened. Just a bit—just enough for the warmth in Ford’s chest to bloom and expand into something that felt far too much like longing.

*No,* he told himself*. Don’t even think about it.*

This was a business transaction, not a flirtation. He was offering pie in exchange for her dog-handling services. That was it. Come tomorrow, Ford would never set eyes on Maple again.

He swiveled his gaze toward Lady Bird. “Tell Maple there’s nothing to be afraid of. She might even have fun.”

“I’m not afraid,” she sputtered.

“I beg your pardon, I’m not talking to you. This is a conversation between me and the dog.” Ford flashed her a wink, and then fixed his gaze with Lady Bird’s again. “Go on, tell her.”

Lady Bird tossed back her head and let out a *woo-woo* noise somewhere between a howl and a whine.

Maple laughed, and the sound was as light and lovely as church bells. She should really let her guard down more often. “This is *craziness*. Have you two practiced this routine?”

No, but Lady Bird had a wide array of tricks in her repertoire. Percy had trained the dog well, and Ford had seen the golden in action enough times to have committed some of her commands to memory.

Ford didn’t tell Maple that, though. He just waggled his eyebrows and shot her one last questioning glance.

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it.” She thrust two fingers in the air. “Under two conditions.”

“Done.” Ford nodded, turned toward his truck and whistled at Lady Bird to follow.

“Wait!” Maple shuffled after them in her too-big slippers. “You don’t know what the conditions are.”

Ford swung open the passenger-side door of his truck and Lady Bird hopped inside. “I’m guessing the first one is pie.”

She crossed her arms, all business. “Accurate.”

Ford wondered what, if anything, could make this woman relax. Not that it mattered since she was so dead set on leaving, but it might have been fun to try and find out. “And the second?”

“You’ve got to promise to get me home in plenty of time to meet my car service for my ride to the airport in the morning.”

“No problem, Doc,” he said and gave her a curious look, which Maple either didn’t notice or chose to ignore.

“I’ll be right back. I need to put on some shoes and grab my purse,” she said.

“We’ll be waiting right here.” Ford banged his hand on the hood of his truck and felt his mouth hitch into a grin as she disappeared back into the house.

You’ve got to promise to get me home, she’d said. Not back here or back to Percy’s house.

Whether or not she’d realized it, Maple had just called this place home