



## *Sugar Creek* Preview

Rachel Farris came speeding down the dusky two-lane highway toward Destiny just as fast as she'd left town almost fifteen years ago. Flooring it on a straight stretch, she turned up the radio, trying to let the Rolling Stones drown out her thoughts. But Mick's gravelly voice, reminding her that you can't always get what you want, had just the opposite effect.

One day life was great, near perfect, and you thought you had it all figured out – and then the next: *massive implosion!*

Well, okay, it hadn't imploded just yet, but signs of imminent collapse were everywhere lately.

It was bad enough she was headed back to her hometown of Destiny, Ohio, a place she'd never planned to return. But the timing couldn't have been worse.

Her grandma, Edna, was lonely again, thus claiming she needed help with the fall apple harvest – and Rachel's number had come up. Fair enough. Family came first. Yet life would have been easier if this hadn't happened right when Conrad/Phelps, the small but prestigious Chicago ad

firm where Rachel had worked since college, was about to downsize. And right after her boss had warned her they'd soon be eliminating one of only two account director positions, putting her career in serious jeopardy.

Given that Pamela Tremaine, the other director, had been with the company less than three years, Rachel should have felt totally confident she'd be the one to stay – if her team hadn't just lost the firm's largest account. And it didn't help that Pamela was ridiculously young, and ridiculously pleasant, and beloved by everyone who came into contact with her. So Edna's call had left Rachel feeling duty-bound to take a leave of absence at a time when she could least afford it.

Yep, the potential for implosion was getting serious – a thought which made her press her Manolo Blahnik clad foot a little deeper onto the gas pedal as she took a slight curve, her BMW hugging the road. The sooner she got to Destiny, after all, the sooner she could leave. That was how Rachel operated – quickly and with purpose; get in, get out. If she applied the same work ethic with Edna as she did on the job, she'd be back in the windy city trying to salvage her career in no time. And after nearly seven hours behind the wheel, she was more than ready to reach the Farris Family Apple Orchard.

It was just as the Destiny city limits sign went flying past in a blur that a blast of evening sun cut between the rolling hills up ahead, blinding her. Yikes – suddenly she couldn't see a thing, so she reached for the glove box in search of sunglasses, and the car swerved a little.

That's when the swirl of blue lights reflected in her rearview mirror and the *whir, whir, whir* of a siren split through the air.

Oh, damn. Just what she needed. *Not.*

As she pulled to the side of the road – which, in Destiny, was just a narrow shoulder of gravel that crunched beneath her tires – she took a deep, calming breath and prepared to face some paunchy, over-eager Deputy Dawg type who was all excited to catch a speeder. This was probably the highlight of his day. But that didn't mean she couldn't talk her way out of it. Being convincing and persuasive was what she did for a living, after all.

She dug for her license and registration – without coming across her sunglasses, darn it – then turned down the radio and lowered the window, only to have a thick wave of hot August air burst in to override the effects of her A/C. Blegh.

When she looked up, the sinking sun still glared directly in her face, forcing her to lower her eyes. She saw dots and felt disoriented as the cop approached.

“What’s the hurry?” he snapped in a deep, rather *mean* voice.

*Sheesh – can we tone it down a little, Barney Fife?* She squinted, attempting to see him alongside the painfully bright beams of sunlight, and when that failed, she settled for trying to read his badge. “I’m sorry – I didn’t realize I was speeding,” she fibbed in her best polite-yet-confident tone. “But I’m afraid my frail, ailing grandmother is expecting me and I don’t want her to worry. I’d call to let her know I’m on my way, but I can’t get a signal here ...” She narrowed her eyes on the badge further, still trying to make it out. “... Officer Romeo.”

“That’s *Romo*,” he corrected her stiffly.

And Rachel’s jaw dropped. Oh no. He was a Romo? A freaking *Romo*? The Farris and Romo families were long-time enemies, and even if most of the Farris had left Destiny, she knew the bad blood remained.

And then, as if to add insult to injury, he said, “License and registration, ma’am” – and she instantly wanted to slug him. Since when had she become a ma’am? She was only thirty-two, for heaven’s sake! *I bet Pamela doesn’t get called ma’am.* As her chest tightened, she handed the paperwork over and waited for a reaction.

“Figures,” he muttered under his breath. Ah, there it was.

“What’s that?” she asked anyway, playing dumb.

“You’re a Farris,” he informed her like she might not know. Then he shifted his weight to one side until his broad shoulders blocked out the sun – finally allowing her to see him.

The first thing she noticed was the way he scowled at her from behind typical mirrored cop sunglasses.

And the second was ... oh dear. Oh *my*. Her throat went dry.

He was no Deputy Dawg – and a far cry from Barney Fife. In fact, he was ... a cop *god*. With thick, dark hair and olive skin, a day’s growth of stubble covering his strong jaw, and shoulders that filled out his beige uniform quite nicely, he was ... shockingly hot. Even behind mirrored sunglasses. And in Destiny, of all places! How was that possible?

But then she recalled her friend Amy – who still lived here – mentioning some sexy-as-sin Romo being a town policeman. Her heart beat faster than before and she suddenly had to work to control her breathing.

Even while he snarled at her.

*But wait – stop. Get hold of yourself.*

*Sure, he's hot – but he's a Romo. And a mean, growly one at that.*

He proved her point by glancing back down to grouse, “Out of state license.”

“That would be because I live out of state,” she heard herself reply dryly. She didn't normally talk back to cops, but apparently she just couldn't take this attitude from a Romo lying down.

Not that she would *mind* lying down with him. If he were a little nicer. And not a Romo, of course. But he *was* – and her unwitting attraction to him was making her all the more irate.

Her remark earned another handsome scowl, to which he added, “Edna's not frail or ailing, by the way. So your excuse doesn't fly.”

Oops. Clearly, he knew the town well enough to know Edna was the only Farris left who might have a granddaughter coming to see her. “Well, that's not how *she* tells it,” she argued. “All I know is that she summoned me to help with the apple harvest, so that's what I'm doing – if you'll kindly let me go on my way.”

To her surprise, he lowered his chin, appearing suspicious. “You don't look like much of an orchard worker.”

*Who asked you?* She bit her tongue for once, though, and tried to regain her composure. In fact, it suddenly hit her that all her powers of persuasion had pretty much gone out the window somewhere along the way. So she gave her head a confident tilt, and in her smoothest voice replied, “My skill set might surprise you.” And ... hmm, was that being confident – or flirting?

“And no way I'm letting you off that easy,” he added.

Okay, didn't matter whether it was confidence or flirtation since, either way, it hadn't worked. So now *she* scowled at *him*. “Come on, Romo, cut me a break.”

When his dark eyebrows rose behind those sunglasses, she realized what she'd just said – but again, she couldn't let him ... *win*. Since, that quickly, that's what it felt like with this guy – a matter of winning or losing. Farris vs. Romo. She couldn't let him get the best of her without at least fighting back.

"I've got news for you, *Farris*," he practically growled. "Maybe you can argue your way out of tickets up in Chicago, but not in Destiny. You were going twenty over the limit."

Whoops. Twenty? Really? Still ... "Can I be honest with you?" It was time for a new tactic.

"All right," he said dryly, sounding doubtful already.

But that didn't stop her from gazing up into that sexy cop-god face and saying, with true sincerity, "When such a low speed limit is posted on such a wide open stretch of highway, I don't actually know how a person can be expected to *go* so slow. I'm sure you know what I mean – it's nearly impossible."

And when he peered down on her, his expression softening a bit, she suspected he was beginning to understand her point – and she found herself wishing she could see his eyes. Were they as gorgeous as the rest of him? What color were they? Brown, maybe? That's when he said to her in a completely patronizing tone, "Let me explain it to you, *Farris*. You *ease*. *Off*. *The gas*."

Okay, he was hot as hell – but still a jerk. So she forgot all about his eyes and said, "Romos always *were* smart asses."

"*Farrises*," he announced, "*set the bar* for being smart asses. Not to mention the fact that they have a long history of not abiding by the law."

All right, that might be true, but she still rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner and tried to look deeply insulted. "Can you just give me my ticket now so I can get to Edna's before she has a heart attack or something?"

Mike Romo seldom stood around arguing with traffic offenders, but something about this woman had gotten under his skin, quick. Maybe the fact that she was a city girl to the bone, made obvious not only by her arrogant attitude, but by the stylish haircut that didn't quite reach her shoulders, the trendy dark jeans she wore, and the sleek-looking scarf hanging loose around her neck. Or maybe it was because she was extremely attractive – blonde, slender, the works – and had probably thought that would get her off the hook. Or ... maybe it was just because most people didn't have the nerve to backtalk him when openly breaking the law.

"I *could* arrest you, you know," he informed her – mainly because her lack of regard for authority pissed him off. Yet as he heard his own words, something low in his gut warmed and he realized he could think of a plenty of things to do to her that would be a lot more pleasant than arrest.

Hell. Where had *that* come from? She was a speeder, not some babe in a bar, and he *never* had those kinds of thoughts when on the job. So when she blinked her shock – saying, “*Seriously? You could?*” – he got back to business.

“*Twenty over*, Farris. Plus swerving. Together, they border on reckless driving.”

She gasped at the accusation. “I was in complete control of the car at all times!”

He simply gave his head an *are-you-kidding-me?* tilt. “That would be great if the law stated you could drive like a maniac as long as you control the vehicle, but the law doesn’t state that. And besides, you were fishtailing all over the road.” Narrowing his brow further, he leaned closer to her window – and that’s when a soft, feminine scent of some sort struck him. Which he felt in his groin, damn it. But he was still pissed and needed to make sure she knew it. “Frankly, I don’t get the idea you’re taking this infraction very seriously.”

“*Infraction?*” she repeated like he was crazy. “Look, what’s the big deal here? It’s not like I murdered anybody. I’m from Chicago. We drive fast. We’d get run over otherwise.”

Was she serious? “Well, you’re not in Chicago anymore, Farris, so get used to it.”

As Mike scribbled out key information on the little clipboard he held, he tried to wrap his brain around this. Around her. Or maybe around the way his body was reacting to her. His head – it was in the right place, damn irritated by her attitude. But his body ... shit, his body was tightening in all the wrong areas at the moment. He couldn’t make sense of it, and he didn’t like it.

When he shoved the ticket at her along with her license and registration, she took a look and let out yet another gasp. “This is for a hundred and fifty dollars!”

“Uh, *yeah*.”

Then her voice dropped and she suddenly sounded a little meeker. “Well, the last time I was pulled over in Destiny, it was more like ... thirty.”

Thirty? His eyebrows shot back up, in disbelief this time. “When was *that*?”

She appeared to be thinking back, the little spot between her brows scrunching. “When I was seventeen.”

Figured. He just shook his head. And wondered, as a lifelong Destiny resident, how he’d not known this girl when she was seventeen. She seemed ... memorable. “Well, I see you still haven’t learned. But times change, and we don’t tolerate speeding here anymore. You speed, you pay.”

She simply looked disgusted, and maybe a little beaten – although it was hard to feel very sorry for her when she rolled her eyes at him again. “Whatever you say, Officer Romeo.”

The words made his jaw tighten. “It’s not too late for me to haul you to jail, you know.”

And he’d been sure that would change her tune – so he couldn’t have been more shocked when she simply stared up at him in blatant, blue-eyed defiance, as if just daring him to do it.

When he leaned back toward her window, he wasn’t sure if it was because he wanted to take one last stab at intimidating her – or because he was following some animal urge to get closer to her. “Let me give you a little advice, Farris,” he said gruffly. “Learn some respect for the law. And *slow down*.”

Then he turned to go back to his car – but stopped to glower back down at her one last time, adding wryly, “Welcome to Destiny.”

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