



Forever

by

Morning

BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TARYN QUINN

FOREVER BY MORNING

BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD

BOOK FOUR

TARYN QUINN



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FOREVER BY MORNING

She was the storm I never saw coming...

Rescuing a runaway guest from my cousin's wedding reception on my horse was never in my plans.

Nor was falling for her from the first glance.

It was just supposed to be one night between strangers.

She's a rich socialite from Manhattan who stopped believing in forever.

I'm the head of my family orchard in a rural small town who carefully plans and plants and is all about growing roots.

On paper, we don't make sense.

But in real life, she's my everything. And I'm hers.

The time has come for her to fight for her forever...and us.

***Author's note:** Beckett Manning has never met a challenge he can't face. Helena Danbury has never met a man who put her first. Welcome to the fourth book in our Brothers Three Orchard series,*

which is set near Crescent Cove. This book has a happily-ever-after and no cliffhanger.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

1. [Helena](#)
2. [Beckett](#)
3. [Helena](#)
4. [Beckett](#)
5. [Helena](#)
6. [Beckett](#)
7. [Helena](#)
8. [Beckett](#)
9. [Helena](#)
10. [Beckett](#)
11. [Helena](#)
12. [Beckett](#)
13. [Helena](#)
14. [Helena](#)
15. [Beckett](#)
16. [Helena](#)
17. [Beckett](#)
18. [Helena](#)
19. [Beckett](#)
20. [Beckett](#)
21. [Helena](#)
22. [Helena](#)
23. [Helena](#)
24. [Beckett](#)
25. [Helena](#)
26. [Beckett](#)
27. [Helena](#)
28. [Beckett](#)
29. [Helena](#)

Epilogue

[Have My Baby](#)

[Taryn Quinn](#)

[Quinn and Elliott](#)

[About Taryn Quinn](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While we try to do as much research as possible in using words and phrases from other languages please know we never mean to offend if we get things wrong.

Also, the orchard details and functions have been slightly fictionalized for romance purposes. LOL!

Sometimes we make up fictional places that end up having the same names as actual places. These are our fictional interpretations only. Please grant us leeway if our creative vision isn't true to reality.

For every woman who has forgotten their worth. We see you fighting your way back inch by inch and we're so very proud of you.

CHAPTER 1

HELENA

A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW

Watching the man you thought you were going to marry dip his bride in an epic swoon-worthy kiss had to be one of the worst case scenarios in the history of my life.

The fact that I was standing up for the woman as an emergency bridesmaid wasn't something I saw coming either. And yet, here I was.

I tucked my small bouquet of tulips and daisies into the crook of my arm and clapped with the rest of the guests as the officiant smiled hugely and lifted his voice over the cheering crowd. "May I introduce, Mr. and Mrs. Clay Winslow!"

A tiny ball of pain tightened in my chest at the announcement.

Had I really believed that would be my future one day? Or had it been a handy shield so I didn't have to deal with my less than certain idea of forever?

The chapel emptied out before I could examine that one way trip to the therapist's couch thought. Again, I was left alone at the proverbial altar. The sun blasted through the stained glass leaving a trail of trampled apple blossoms in squares of purple, yellow, and blue on the snowy white runner.

I should have followed the wedding party into the Gala room for the reception. Instead, I found myself sitting in the front pew, staring up at the simple altar. I'd never been an overly religious sort, but the quiet and the stained glass gave me a much needed moment of solace.

If it had been my wedding day, I'm sure it would have been in one of the large churches in Manhattan. The Clay Winslow and Helena Danbury wedding of my mother's dreams would have been three hundred people minimum. It would have made the headlines of every newspaper and

wedding journal my mother could have procured.

And it would have been all wrong.

The tear that dropped onto the pink tulip surprised me.

I knew it wasn't for Clay.

Not really.

It wasn't even for the idea of us. That had died a fiery death just before Christmas. In all honesty, it had died long before then. I'd just held onto the safety of him and our fake relationship because it had been easier than facing the reality of how hollow and static my life had become.

Clay had just realized it before me.

Because he met his person.

Rachel Doyle had shaken him up and the way he looked at her made me realize just how unfathomable we actually were as a couple. I was a placeholder in his old life. A bookmark in a forgotten novel that had been left on a table in a pretty sitting room that was only used a few times a year.

That was the chalky pill I couldn't swallow.

I'd allowed myself to become that woman.

I reached down to pick up one of the fragile apple blossoms and slipped it in my pocket. I'd tuck this one into my journal to remind me of a fresh start. That the blossoms belonged to someone else, and I needed to remember it was never meant for me.

Part of that fresh start meant facing the wedding reception.

As well as finding my "date". There was a strong emphasis on those quotes.

I was pretty sure Reid Pierce was going in my mistake column as well. He'd been exciting and mysterious at first. No one really knew what was going on behind those glacial gray eyes. Surely, I would be the exception.

And here I was alone again.

The exception, evidently, was wanting me. I wasn't sure Reid even stayed for the entire ceremony. He certainly didn't wait around to keep me company or lead me into the Gala room as a gentleman would. Then again a fog had settled around me during the vows.

My world had been conditioned for marriage.

Helena Danbury was good marriage stock. As if I was a side character in *Bridgerton* or something. Never the main character, that was for sure.

Did I even want that anymore? Maybe that was the bigger question.

After one last look at the altar, I firmly put it behind me and hurried down

the aisle to the open doors. I followed the music across the walkway past the gardens just starting to bloom. The sweet scent of apple blossoms overpowered the more subtle tulips, roses, and daisies that filled the urns that guided me between The Lodge and chapel.

Topiaries stood guard at the doors to the Gala reception room.

I expected they would still be in the informal reception phase, but I should have known better. Traditions had flown out the window when it came to this wedding as soon as we'd gotten to the rehearsal dinner.

Not many weddings started with a near kidnapping of the maid of honor.

I rubbed my arms at the memory of the chaos of the night before. That Willow, the bride's sister, had been sitting right beside me and been drugged. How could I have missed it?

My gaze had tracked the reception to find Reid and I'd realized that was exactly how I missed it. I'd been distracted because I'd been out of sorts with how easily Reid had dismissed me once we'd been around our friends.

He'd withdrawn and kept disappearing all night, leaving me alone. The rapt attention he'd paid me during the winter to win me over had melted away like snow in the spring. Or maybe it had slipped away once he figured out how easy I was to win over.

But then Willow had gone out of her way to make me feel welcome. She hadn't made it awkward that her future brother-in-law's ex was at the wedding. She was warm and funny and insanely talented, just like Rachel.

Then she'd almost been snatched away from her family right under their noses.

I'd been too distracted with my own sadness to pick up that the waiter had been anything other than a waiter. I was so used to waitstaff that they blended into the background for me. What did that say about me?

Worse, what did it say that I was making it about me right now?

I shut my eyes against the beautiful setting and the happiness practically sparkling around the room. All the things I'd envisioned my wedding would be didn't match this quiet perfection.

Mine would've been more of a bride and groom in a snow globe. Sparkly, pretty, and under glass and water.

Contained and pretty on a shelf.

Just like me.

A shriek of laughter startled me into opening my eyes. Rachel was swept up into Clay's arms, her veil fluttering behind her as his long-legged gait

marched her out of the reception area and toward the atrium.

The music seemed to follow them as if the DJ had been in on the plan.

Willow was dragging Ransom behind her with a laugh, proving that last night's drama was firmly behind her to enjoy her sister's happiness. I was still surprised Ransom Douglas had fallen so hard for her.

I'd never been close to Ransom even though he'd grown up with my older brother. I'd been just young enough to be excluded from their circles. As usual, just a little bit on the outside.

Even dating his best friend for years, we'd never become anything more than social acquaintances. Not for my lack of trying, but Ransom had kept himself apart from everyone ever since the night three friendships had been destroyed.

Clay never wanted to discuss that night either.

Secrets were a stock in trade in Manhattan and I was smart enough not to dig too deeply to uncover them. I didn't like to make waves.

At least that had been part of the five-year plan my mother had laid out for me.

Don't ruffle feathers, Helena. Be indispensable, Helena. Be the perfect hostess, Helena.

Be invisible.

Secure the ring.

Secure the name.

Clay had been slipping away for years. I'd just been too complacent to face it.

I scanned the room for my "date" and found him on the fringes of the room. He was scrolling his phone with one hand while the other dipped in the pocket of his Brioni suit. Reid was often set apart from people. I never really knew what was going on with him, but this wedding was opening my eyes in ways I never dreamed.

Now I was beginning to wonder if his interest had stemmed from the challenge of getting me away from Clay. Their rivalry was legendary in our social circles. At least it had been until Clay had lost interest in the technology world they both belonged to and focused more on Rachel.

Reid's interest in me was cooling every day. Sometimes it seemed to be by the hour.

I started to cross the room to meet up with him when I caught him staring at another woman. My stomach plummeted and my chest tightened—again.

Following his gaze, my eyes stung. Of course it was Maple Douglas. Not many people knew her full name or that she was Ransom's youngest sister. She'd distanced herself from the name and had become her own brand. Maple was plastered on magazines and billboards and walking runways in Paris and Milan.

I was pretty sure half the men and eighty percent of the women in the room were staring at her.

However, this felt different. Not just the admiration of a stunning woman.

Then his gaze swung to me as if he felt mine on him. His smile was charming and somehow cool at the same time. As if a mask clicked into place for my benefit. He quickly walked to me, extending one hand to me.

"Helena, where have you been?"

I gave him a stiff smile and let him clasp my hand in his to tuck into the crook of his arm. "Just needed a moment alone."

"Whatever for?"

The calculation in his gaze made me swallow back the acidic retort that bubbled up. Did he really not know or was he being deliberately obtuse? I never knew with him.

Thankfully, the mass exodus into the gardens provided a distraction. Reid craned his neck to see what was going on. My fingers flexed into a fist at my side as I noticed he was looking at Maple again.

What the hell was going on there?

Beyond the fact that she was far too young for Reid, she was Ransom's sister. Not to mention that he used to be engaged to Marigold, Ransom's other sister.

The engagement that had demolished their friendships.

Was he insane?

I nearly stumbled as he dragged me forward to follow the rest of guests as they emptied into the May sunshine. It was a warm day, but the apple blossom scented breeze was a relief. It cleared my head and pushed aside the hateful thoughts brewing.

My heels sunk into the soft grass as he tried to circumvent the bottlenecked crowd. "Reid, slow down."

My shoulder slammed into a man. He turned and frowned down at me, and I suddenly recognized him from the rehearsal party the night before. "Are you all right, Miss Danbury?"

"Yes, thanks. I'm so sorry, Mr. Manning."

“Beckett,” he corrected me.

Reid swore under his breath and craned his neck to look over the sea of guests. I released his arm and sighed when he left me in the dust.

“What’s going on?” It was very annoying to be so short.

Beckett frowned after Reid then gazed back down at me. “Let’s get you out of the line of fire.” He settled his hand along my lower back.

When his calloused fingers met my skin, I barely managed to stifle the quick gasp.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

He didn’t move away. My breath hitched at the firm way he held me against him. Almost protective.

We were jostled by another couple, and he grasped my hip to move me closer. The scent of leather and citrus rolled through me. It wasn’t unpleasant—more earthy than I was used to. Not the moneyed blends of cologne I generally associated with the men around me.

While most men were wearing suits, Beckett wore dark jeans, a pearl gray dress shirt rolled up at the forearms, and a deep navy vest. I found my hand on his middle as he urged me along the edges of the crush of people.

As if I was weightless, he lifted me up and out of the way as a dog raced through and clipped me at the ankle.

“Dammit, Casey,” he muttered. “Sorry about that. My dumb dog gets excited when there’s too many people.”

“It’s okay. What’s going on?”

He glanced down at me, his summer blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “Romance, ma’am. Clay likes his grand gestures.”

My heart stalled. That should have been my first clue that Clay had never been for me.

His brow wrinkled as if he just realized who he was talking to. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

I curled my fingers into his vest instinctively before I immediately smoothed it. “It’s all right.”

His nostrils flared and the friendliness slipped out of his eyes. “No, it’s not. It was thoughtless. I just can’t keep all the people straight. You’d think I would be better at it with how many people are in my damn family.”

We were squashed together near one of the doors of the atrium as all one hundred plus of the guests flowed out to the front of The Lodge.

His hand slid along my waist to pull me out of the crush. I glanced up at

him and my breath stalled at the way he looked down at me.

Was that...*something* in his gaze?

No, that was silly. It was just my wounded ego talking.

Finally, there was a dent in the crowd, and I moved back. “Thanks for the assist.”

He dropped his hand from my hip. “I’m part of the surprise, so I need to get out there.”

“Oh, of course. Sorry to keep you.”

“Pleasure was all mine, ma’am.” Then he disappeared down a side path.

I brushed my hair over my shoulder and squared my shoulders as I followed the stragglers out to the front of the building. People were congregating on the lawn between The Lodge and a small copse of trees.

There was a gorgeous arbor set up with more of Rachel’s theme of simple tulips and daisies. These were a mix of bridal white and the more springtime colorful splash of deep purples and pinks. A swath of white and pink ribbons were tied to the top and floated in the light breeze.

People were gathered around the arbor as Clay had finally put Rachel down and they both stood under it with matching smiles. Even from where I was, I could see the way she turned her face up to him, her expression one of pure joy.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat.

Had I ever looked up at someone like that? I didn’t think so. Not even a quarter of that pure, honest love had ever been in my heart let alone shining off my face.

A sharp whistle had me swiveling my head toward the field. A gorgeous gray gelding stood in the field with Beckett in the saddle. For the second time today, my breath stalled out.

“Stand back, people!” His voice lifted above the laughter and the conversation as he made way for the tractor slowly pulling a bus hitched to it.

It was hot pink with a white racing stripe that ended in a flourishing script touting: The Boozie Bus.

Rachel shrieked and threw herself into Clay’s arms. He swung her around with a laugh.

As the bus came to a stop, I noticed that there had been many modifications done on the vehicle. The windows raised slowly in one complete piece and an awning slid out to create shade. When it finally opened, Laverne, Rachel and Willow’s aunt, popped up wearing a matching

pink apron over her wedding finery. “Anyone ready for a drink?”

In the midst of the crowd of people who were delighting in the outdoor drinks, I noticed Reid was speaking with Maple again.

Intensely.

I slipped around the groups of people who were enjoying the drinks from the bus and from the waitstaff who were making the rounds now that the reception had changed venues. Clay and Rachel had disappeared into the bus to check out what had to be her wedding present.

The fact that Clay had given her a hot chocolate version for their engagement left me angry and sad at the same time. Not even for the grand gesture, but that it was simply perfect for her.

Not a diamond.

Not a statement necklace with a dollar figure attached like our usual circles gossiped about to prove their station.

A bus—because it was exactly what she wanted for her business. That he knew it was what would make her happy. From the sound of her laughter and the echo of delight in the people clamoring for a drink, I’d say it was a success.

I gave my hostess smile to someone I recognized from Clay’s company, but my focus was on Reid and Maple. Their voices became more distinct the closer I got.

“I can’t believe you’d show your face here.” Maple’s voice rose. “After you left me without a word in Paris.”

Dear God, he didn’t. Tears pricked at my eyes.

They stood nearly chest to chest. Reid’s eyes were hot in a way I’d never seen before. He always seemed to exist behind a veil of indifference. Sometimes it bordered on malice before the mask slipped back into place. Right now, there was no mask, proving I didn’t know a thing about him.

Just like the rest of the people in the circles we ran in, I was in the dark as to who Reid Pierce was. But *Maple* knew.

From the way her breasts pressed into him, there was little doubt about the intimacy between them.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew Reid’s reputation, but to have it so in my face like this drove my anger past the hurt.

“Reid.” My voice was sharp and a little shaky. Goddamn tears always came with the anger, no matter how much I tried to control it.

He didn’t even look at me. His eyes were locked with Maple’s. “Didn’t

give you the chance to leave me first that time, did I?”

Not the first time? What was going on?

I backed up a step and bumped into someone. They glanced from me to Reid and Maple and the pity nearly took me out at the knees.

“No. It wasn’t a game.” Maple’s voice was acid.

“It’s always been a game. It’s all you know. I was tired of being one of many.”

Maple’s eyes widened.

Reid slipped his hand into his pocket, his face back to the emotionless mask. “I see you aren’t denying it.”

“That’s what you think?”

“What I know. This time, the digital proof wasn’t part of our games.”

I looked around and there were more people watching. Embarrassment overrode the hurt. I just needed to get away from them. I didn’t want to know what kind of games they’d been playing. It didn’t even matter when it was. Before me, after me, during—I didn’t know.

It wasn’t like I had a hold on him.

As usual, I’d never been held close. Just taken off the shelf to be played with.

From my periphery, I noticed the crowd of people starting to part. Distantly, I heard Willow’s voice and then Ransom’s wide shoulders plowed through the gawkers.

“Maple?” Ransom’s voice lifted.

“Ransom. This isn’t about you.” Maple stabbed her finger into Reid’s chest. “You’re a fucking rude bastard.”

“You enjoyed my rudeness for that long weekend, didn’t you?”

I pushed through the crowd intent on one thing—freedom.

I broke out of the crush of people. The raised voices were red with anger, vibrating with rage and past hurts flowing over new ones. It was as if one big wave of emotion surrounded me. All I could do was run from it.

I’d come with Reid. It wasn’t like Manhattan where I could just call a car service and go back home.

Go home to what?

Another embarrassment?

Another failure?

I didn’t even realize the tears were flowing until I dashed them away to see clearly. The first thing that came into focus was Beckett and his stunning

horse. The black cowboy hat shielded his face from the sun, but right then it just didn't matter to me.

I didn't see another way to get away from everyone. My heels sunk into the grass and I stumbled. I flicked them off and ran toward him.

He frowned at me, then back at the crowd. I didn't even look back. I didn't want to see what was going on. Relief poured through me as he reached his hand out for me.

His rough hand circled my forearm, and surprise shot across his face when I gripped his arm tight.

"Hang on," he said gruffly. He lifted me yet again as if I weighed nothing.

I quickly threw my leg over the back of the horse and wrapped my arms around his middle.

"Miss Dan—"

"Just go. Please. Anywhere." His leather and citrus scent filled my head as I buried my face into his back.

He inched forward on the saddle. "Can you ride?"

"Yes." The skirt of my dress ripped as I tucked myself tight against his back. His horse was large and muscular and it had been a damn long time since I'd had anything between my thighs, let alone a horse. "I won't fall."

"I won't let you fall." He dropped his arm down to pet the horse's neck. "Easy, boy."

"I'm sorry," I whispered against the rough cotton of his vest.

"Storm can handle a little thing like you, don't worry."

I felt the flex of his thighs as he steered the horse to turn around and head into the trees.

I didn't care where we were going.

For the first time in my life, my impulse had been to run. And it felt damn good.

CHAPTER 2

BECKETT

WHERE ARE YOUR SHOES?

Rescuing the proverbial damsel in distress was not how I thought my afternoon would go.

Using Storm as a showpiece for Clay's over the top wedding present was supposed to kill two birds. I figured I'd quietly slip away for a few hours and chill the fuck out before returning to help break things down from the wedding festivities.

The last few days had been a lot.

Between my cousin's near kidnapping, the increased security measures attached to the orchard, and the wedding itself, I was maxed out.

Then a pair of doe eyes had completely derailed my plans. The fact that said doe eyes were attached to the first woman to stir me up in fourteen months was also inconvenient. And now she was on the back of my horse like we were in some romantic comedy like the ones my little sister, Zoe, watched constantly lately.

Storm sidestepped a little as we slowed down to a trot in the heart of the orchard. He wasn't used to two riders, nor the way we were both seated in the saddle. I couldn't blame him. Having Helena Danbury hugging me from chest to thigh was making me a little out of sorts too.

I patted his neck. "It's okay, boy."

"I'm sorry to be an inconvenience. You can just drop me..." She trailed off. "I don't know where."

"It's a nice day for a ride, but I'm not sure you're wearing the right gear, Miss Danbury."

"Helena, please. I believe we are well past formalities."

"All right." Hell if I knew where this should go from here. "I don't mind

letting you hang with me for the afternoon if you like.” I hadn’t meant to make that offer, but the way she relaxed behind me told me it was the right call.

“I don’t want to put you out.” She lightly tapped her forehead against my back. “I don’t have my purse. I don’t even know where it is. Maybe in the dressing room?”

“Do you need it for something?”

“Well, no.” She huffed out a breath and dropped her hands away from their tight grip on my middle. “I don’t even have shoes on. I’m pretty sure my dress is ripped up to my hip.”

“Can’t say that bothers me.” Her quick, delighted laugh made me glance over my shoulder at her. “Just sayin’.”

She pressed her lips together and the blush to her cheeks stirred up that inconvenient reaction in me again. She was staggeringly beautiful. Maybe even more so with her once perfect hair all windblown and the sparkly pin in her hair sliding down near her ear. The tendrils around her face looked soft enough to touch. The real kicker was her eyes. Smudged and still a little red rimmed from tears, they seemed even bigger up close.

Fragile in ways that made me want...too much. Which wasn’t like me. The women who usually got me revved were adrenaline junkies who thought long term relationships meant a weekend of sweaty sex then never texting me again. It worked for me since that was all I had the bandwidth for.

The fact that I wanted to drop my hand to her smooth thigh for a stroke to settle her just like I did with Storm was the most alarming part. Instead, I focused on her dress and got my brain back in gear. She was right, it was not made for the saddle. But she was tiny like my little sister.

“Hang on. I have an idea.”

Her arms came back up to link around the front of my belly. I flexed because I was an asshole and prideful enough to want to show off the muscles my job gave me. Not that they would probably impress a woman like her. She was from Manhattan with all the soft suits and rich types. Or, hell, maybe they were gym rat types.

I had a feeling Clay Winslow was a rarity in the city set. Years ago, when the orchard had been in a bind, I’d followed my instincts and sold off some of our land. It could have gone very wrong, but as it turned out he didn’t mind getting his hands dirty on the tree farm. After meeting Rachel, he’d tucked his Armani suits in the back of his closet more often than not these days.

If it was Armani. I didn't know an Italian suit from one off the rack at Macy's. Was Macy's even still a thing? I just remember my mom dragging us into the department store for a suit for graduation.

I was pretty sure that was the last time I'd worn one.

I pushed those thoughts away. Just because I was attracted to Helena didn't mean a damn thing. I'd been attracted to plenty of women over the years without acting on it. I'd let her hide out from her drama for a few hours then deposit her back at The Lodge, simple as that.

I nudged Storm from a trot into a longer stride toward the back of the property. He knew the orchard as well as I did so I didn't have to worry about his footing on the roots of the trees. We kept them trimmed back as much as we could, but we were in the older section of Happy Acres and the path was a little more gnarly. The Jonagold trees afforded us a little shade since these older girls were well over fifteen feet tall at this point.

Thankfully, Helena was a natural rider from what I could tell. Her hips moved with mine which tripped me up some. Made me think of other reasons and ways we could move together which annoyed me enough to nudge Storm into a hard gallop.

He didn't mind. Storm was built to run and was always happiest when I let him have his lead.

We cleared the Jonagolds, then the Red Delicious, and finally got to the back of the orchard which was unplanted. A delighted laugh from behind me told me she needed the ride as badly as I did. The trail leading to my parents' house required a little more finesse and I slowed us back to a trot.

"Where are we going?" Her hold on me eased and her hands slid down to grip my vest.

"We're going to hit an incline. Just so you know."

"Oh, okay." She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands now that we were moving slower.

"I don't mind you hanging onto me. Unless you're uncomfortable, of course." Then she shouldn't have given me those big doe eyes and asked me to get her away from the wedding if she was.

"No. I just..." She sighed. "You must think I'm an idiot."

"Of all the things rattling around in my brain, that isn't one of them. Now, hang on." My voice was more gruff than I intended.

Her arms slid back around me, this time with a lighter touch. The fact that I wouldn't mind her going for a harder grip was mildly troubling. Especially

if I was going to keep her with me for the next few hours.

She cleared her throat. "I appreciate you taking the time to get me away from the wedding. I truly don't want to put you out."

"Enough about the inconvenience. It was a bad scene." She stiffened behind me and I redirected to a safer topic. "First order of business is getting you some clothes. You seem to be about my sister's size. I figured we could raid some of her old clothes at my folks' house."

"That would be wonderful. The undergarments to this dress are killing me."

I tried not to focus on the fact that her breasts had been pressing into my back this whole ride, nor the fact that I wasn't mad about it.

"We can go back to The Lodge if you want your own—"

"No. I don't want to face anyone just yet." Her voice and body language instantly filled with anxiety.

I covered her hand on my vest. "It's all right. All my family should be at the wedding. We can hide out there for a while, but my mother isn't very social. I'm sure she'll be making noise to go home soon."

"Is there another option?"

I glanced over my shoulder. My house was out of the way, but still very much a part of the orchard. I didn't know if it would freak her out to go to a stranger's house. Not that this whole situation wasn't weird anyway. "Depends on you, Helena."

Her big hazel eyes met mine. "In for a penny at this point. I'm up for anything."

My eyebrow arched. "That's a loaded statement." When she lifted her chin and held my gaze, I grinned. "A lesser man would take advantage."

"Are you a lesser man, Beckett?"

I swallowed hard. I liked the way she said my name, and the hint of bravery glinting in her eyes. "You're safe with me. As safe as you want to be."

Her breath hitched and I wondered if I went too far.

"I'm really tired of being safe," she whispered.

My hand fisted the horn of my saddle in front of me. "Another loaded statement. Two for two, girl. You surprise me."

"I generally don't inspire that...sort of thing in men."

I laughed as I twisted to face forward once more. "That just means you've been with the wrong kind of man."

“We can agree there.”

I didn't know all the nitty gritty details about her relationship with Clay. I knew they were old friends and often used one another as a plus one to avoid the ever present marriage topic. I guess it didn't much matter if you were rich or regular people, families were always pushing for wedding bells.

However, the Reid guy—I didn't like him or the way he treated her when I'd run into them at the reception.

We were quiet during the climb to where my parents lived. My aunt Laverne and my mother had built houses with their families on opposite ends of the orchard after my grandfather died. It was a way to give the families space and share their inheritance at the same time.

I didn't need to lead Storm. He knew every curve and rock that led to the old homestead. We were often over there checking up on my mom and dad. My mother had taken to retirement far better than my father had. She tended to her greenhouse full of orchids with more love and attention than she'd ever paid to the farm. Not that she'd own up to that—ever.

I spotted a new vintage Ford truck next to the detached garage. This one was definitely worse for wear. On first glance, I was pretty sure that back panel was completely rusted through. I supposed that would be my dad's next project. At least it kept him out of trouble.

Storm wanted to head around to the back of the house where he generally conned my mother out of carrots. I patted his neck. “Not this time, pal.”

It was a little awkward to get out of the saddle, but I managed to slide to the ground without kicking Helena off the back of the horse. I dropped his reins on a patch of grass under the massive oak tree. Storm gave an annoyed snort before ignoring me to graze.

“Okay, your turn.” I reached up for her. I tried not to notice the length of creamy thigh on display. She was perched just behind the seat of my saddle and Storm was not a thoroughbred kind of horse.

Damn, she was spread wide.

And I would not think about that.

She tried to tug at the ragged skirt of her dress, but there was no saving modesty at this point. I plucked her off the back of Storm who just went on with his grazing. Nothing bothered my damn horse.

I was bothered enough for both of us.

She squeaked and grabbed onto my shoulders. I set her on the gravel driveway, her floral scent curling around me with how close we were. She

tried to tug her dress down, then just ended up huffing out an annoyed breath and pinching the side closed.

“C’mon, we’ll find you something to wear.” I frowned down at her feet. “Where are your shoes?”

“Four inch heels aren’t exactly good for running.”

I set my hat on the horn of the saddle, then I picked her back up, tucking her surprisingly firm ass on my forearm.

She looped her arm around my shoulder and her already wrecked hair tumbled against my neck. “Just put me on the grass. I can walk.”

“My dad is always trying to fix something—emphasis on the try, but don’t tell him that—so who knows what’s lurking in the grass. Glass, screws, nails, rusty shards of metal.” I shuffled her closer to my chest. “Don’t worry, I pick up hay bales heavier than you.”

“Thanks, I think.” She pushed at her hair with her other hand, but she relaxed against me.

Damn, she smelled good.

I climbed the steps to the wraparound porch and set her down. The strap of her dress slipped low on her shoulder, showing off a bit of that supposedly uncomfortable undergarment.

She tried to grab both that and the tattered rip at her hip. “I feel like Cinderella after the pumpkin disappeared.”

I grinned at her. “So, I should go back and look for your shoes?”

She wiggled her toes. Under the dust and grime were bright purple polished toenails. The color surprised me. I figured she’d be some barely there pink. “No way am I letting you near my feet with the way they look right now.”

“If you ask nicely, I’ll let you use my mom’s spa shower.” I opened the door.

“Don’t even joke about that. I’m a mess.” She shoved at her hair and the clip thing finally gave up and clattered to the floor. A fat curl fell forward and just hung there suspended in front of her eyes. Whatever hairspray or shellac they used must have been industrial grade.

“A beautiful mess.”

She blinked up at me. “Hardly.”

“Go on, get inside.” I urged her forward. “You know you’re beautiful.”

“There’s no way to respond to that and not sound impolite. I’ll just beg for the shower and clothes.”

“Wouldn’t want to be impolite.”

She squinted her eyes at me and tried for stern and ended up looking more like a spitting kitten instead.

Her attention drifted to the living room. Over the years we’d renovated and made additions to the ranch style house a few times, but once me and my brothers had moved out my mother preferred to put any extra money and time into her orchids and my dad into the gardens and his trucks.

It probably seemed faded and ancient to Helena. It annoyed me that I felt any shame in the worn rug and sideboard that was loaded with mail, keys, and a basket of tools.

“Your parents have a lovely home.”

I frowned down at her. “You don’t have to say that.”

She looked around and I tried to see things from her point of view. The white sheer curtains on the front windows that fluttered in the light breeze since all the windows were open to get the cross breeze between the front and back windows in the kitchen. Oversized couches in a patchwork of different colors thanks to cushion covers and handmade afghans filled every spare corner of the room while a trio of leather recliners sat square in front of the wide screen television over the fireplace.

Me and my brothers congregated here for sports and family dinner most Sundays. It was usually a race to see who could get their butts into the other two recliners. The center one was for Dad. Even if he wasn’t in the house, we knew not to sit there.

“It looks like you can actually curl up and take a nap on any of those couches.”

“Isn’t that what a couch is for?”

“Not in my parents’ house.” Derision tinged her voice.

“You still live with them?”

“I have my own wing.”

“Wing?”

She tipped her face up to meet my gaze. “That sounds terribly pretentious, doesn’t it? I can go days without speaking to them. I just never thought about leaving.”

She looked back at the living room that had barely changed from my childhood almost wistfully which made no sense to me. I’d moved out before I turned nineteen. Not that I hadn’t crashed out on the couch more than a few times over the years, but I’d needed my own space after fighting over

bathrooms with two brothers and a little sister.

“Well, I can show you one grand part of my old house.”

“It’s all grand.”

“Laying it on pretty thick. It’s just an old ranch.”

She reached out to touch the lace doily under one of the lamps, before curling her fingers back into her palm as if it was too precious to touch. I was pretty sure one of my aunts had actually made it with an absurdly small needle-like hook.

An old memory of Laverne sitting on the porch with thread on her lap as she and my mom drank lemonade in the summer filtered through my brain.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, after I moved out, my mom convinced my dad to knock down the wall between my old room and the bathroom.” I walked down the hallway toward the back of the house and took a left. “Just down here.”

The earthy scent of plants and the sweet blooms of orchids filled the hallway.

I looked over my shoulder to see if she was still following me, but she was waylaid by the photo wall. “Helena?”

“What? Oh, sorry.” She hurried down the hallway then backed up. “Wait. Is that you?”

“Probably a few of them are me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Never mind.”

I laughed and went to where she was standing. “Which one?”

She pointed to a grainy photo of me at six with my Taylor guitar. The guitar was nearly as big as I was. “Yeah, that’s me. Still have the guitar.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “It was my cousin’s guitar. He thought it would make him look cool, but he didn’t want to actually learn how to play it. Just liked to hold it to get chicks.”

She pushed the drooping strap of her dress back in place. “Did you want to do the same?”

“Damn straight.” I waggled my eyebrows. “I actually learned how to play it though. Works even better.” I laughed. “C’mon. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She tipped the bottom of one of the frames to straighten it then hurried after me.

I tried not to be charmed by the fact that she was enjoying a childhood photo of me, but she sure was making it tough.

“Which room is your sister’s?”

“The orchid room.”

Helena smiled. “Is that what she calls it? Why? Is it purple?”

I grinned. “No. My ma was so pissed that Zoe moved to California to paint that she converted her bedroom into a greenhouse off the back of the house.”

“Oh.” She blinked and her mouth opened then closed. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Neither did Zoe.” I laughed. “But there’s a box of her clothes in Hayes’ old room. He was the last one to leave the roost. It’s the only room that hasn’t been converted. Now it’s mostly Elvis’s room.”

Confusion knitted her brows. “Elvis? Do your parents love the deceased singer?”

I tipped my head back and laughed.

She stopped in the middle of the hall. “What’s so funny? Lots of people have shrines to him. I’ve seen things on television.”

“You’re fucking adorable.”

She crossed her arms and that damn strap fell down again. My laughter faded as I walked back down to meet her. My boots sounded damn loud in the narrow space.

“I’m not making fun of you.”

She set her jaw and stared up at me with an arched brow.

I couldn’t resist rubbing her arms. “Okay, only a little. Elvis is my nephew. Zoe is engaged to a rockstar. Maybe you’ve heard of him? Ian Kagan.” At her blank look, I snorted. “All good. Rockstars are kind of like roaches around this orchard. My cousin Lila married one too. We’ve mostly gotten used to Nick. Laverne seems to like him for some reason. Good thing since he’s her son-in-law.”

“Oh. I vaguely know Ian’s name.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m more of a Taylor Swift girl.”

I lowered my voice. “I don’t think my brother-in-law can hear you. I think you’re good.”

She wrinkled her nose at me. “I like country too, actually.”

“Oh, do you?”

“I feel like you’re making fun of me again.”

“Maybe. One of Ian’s best friends is Flynn Sheppard. He comes here to play a few shows every year at our concert stage. Usually sticks around to

jam with us for a few days. Nice guy. Drinks us out of moonshine and whiskey every damn time.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“I know. We live a weird life. It’s quiet and boring most of the time then bam—crawling with rockstars during random holidays. We have become a pretty cool venue for the summer though.”

I was damn proud of what we’d built over the last decade. Especially since we’d almost lost it all a few times. But every time, I managed to pull us back from the brink with the help of my brothers. And now we were actually expanding.

Keeping that going was my only focus. It had to be.

I let my hands drop from her arms. “Let’s find you some clothes and a towel, huh?”

CHAPTER 3

HELENA

THINK ABOUT IT

I was just getting used to Beckett's teasing and his face went all solemn and serious. Oh, he tried to play it off with a smile, but the mood had definitely shifted. I just wasn't sure why.

I followed him into a bedroom. It wasn't quite a nursery, but it wasn't a guest room either. It had a bunk bed sort of set up, but the lower bunk was a full-sized bed. The top bunk crossed over the bed horizontally and was littered with stuffed animals, dinosaurs, and cars. A child's drawings were taped up on the wall beside the top bed.

A comfy chair was tucked into the corner with another one of those fluffy afghans thrown over the back as if someone had just tossed it there after reading one of the books stacked on the table. It was a mix of children's books and a few romance novels I recognized from my own digital library.

But the thing that set the room apart from a simple guest room was the mural above the chair. The corner had been painted like a tree with endless branches crawling out along two walls and inching over the ceiling. Some of the branches looked like octopus tentacles, some like a tree, and others like seaweed. It was whimsical and the hallmark of an artist I knew very well.

"Oh, my God. Your sister is Z. Manning?"

I had one of her paintings in my living room, for God's sake. I'd been lucky to catch one of her gallery showings during a trip to California for one of the charities I worked on.

"Yeah, Zoe." Beckett was digging into closet. He straightened with a pair of jeans and a few shirts in his hand. "Think one of these will work?"

"Anything is fine."

"Most of Zoe's stuff is stained with paint, unfortunately." He held out the

jeans. “Might be a little big on you, but better than that dress.”

“A burlap bag is better than this dress.”

“I probably have one of those in my ma’s orchid room.”

I couldn’t tell if he was teasing or not. I was learning Beckett had a dry sense of humor sometimes. I took the jeans and nearly sighed at the soft, worn material. Like my favorite pair at home. The ones I only wore when I knew my mother wasn’t around. I peeked at the size and internally winced. I appreciated that he thought my butt wouldn’t fit in them, but they might actually be a little tight.

Better than flashing my very pale backside as I had for the last hour.

“I have this old baseball shirt or this one.” He held up a faded One Direction shirt with a smirk.

“As much as I appreciate Harry Styles with long hair, I’ll go with the longer sleeves.”

“Don’t know Ian, but you know Harry Styles? He’ll be crushed.”

“Guess I’ll have to check him out on my Spotify.”

Beckett shook his head. “Today is getting stranger and stranger.”

“You’re telling me.” I glanced over my shoulder at the mural one more time, astounded that a famous artist just doodled on the walls of this room.

The octopus tentacle was so familiar to me since it matched the painting I had. My mother hated it, but she loved that it was worth a cool three million when I’d gotten it appraised. Zoe’s work was gaining value every year. I’d have to have to get it re-appraised in a few years for insurance.

When I’d seen it in the gallery, it had grabbed me by the neck, much like the octopus had done with the woman in the painting. It was wrapped around a female form, dragging her to the bottom of the ocean. It was a massive piece, as most of Zoe’s pieces were, and full of so many different levels of darkness. A single shaft of light from the surface highlighted the struggle between woman and beast.

It had elicited a visceral response in me. Enough that I’d redone my sitting room to match it.

“Helena?”

“Coming.” I slipped out the door and quickly down the hall to where Beckett stood.

He was holding a towel and washcloth. “Not exactly The Lodge or hotel grade but should do the job.”

“Thanks.”

“You can use whatever you find in the shower. My mother has quite the selection in there.”

“I’ll just be glad to get the dirt off. And this dress.”

His blue eyes dipped to where I was holding the dress closed at my hip before tripping back up to meet my gaze. The coolness from a few minutes ago was gone again, leaving a raw awareness between us. “I’ll just go try and find you some shoes.” He pressed his lips together as if holding himself back from saying something.

“What?”

“I’m sorry I can’t do more. I really can bring you back to The Lodge.”

I placed my hand over his on the towels. “If you’re still okay with me spending the rest of the day with you, I’d like that.” And maybe more. The way he looked at me made my blood thicken in a way it never had with any other man.

Would it hurt to do something rash for once in my life?

Even if it didn’t end up being anything more than another ride on Storm, I wanted to do something crazy and out of my comfort zone.

I went up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “You’re a nice man, Beckett.”

His hand slid along my hip to where my dress gaped open. His thumb swiped over my skin as he crowded me into the doorjamb, the stack of towels the only buffer between our bodies. “I’m really not.”

My breath stalled in my chest as my nipples instantly hardened.

His thumb slipped a little farther into the rip of my dress to where my hip dipped toward my inner thigh. Everything inside of me clenched tight in the most deliciously foreign way. I stared at his mouth and licked my lips.

“I can be a nice man if that’s what you want. If that’s what you need today.”

I shook my head. “I’m really tired of men treating me—”

“Oh, I’ll treat you right, but it won’t be with soft hands, Helena.”

My eyes shot to his. “I was going to say treating me like glass. Like a pretty thing for a shelf, not to be touched.”

His jaw tightened and a muscle jumped along his temple. He drew his thumb out of the rip in my dress and my heart sank. He probably didn’t want to be bothered by a pent-up penthouse princess. Instead, he dragged the back of his knuckles up along my side to the curve of my breast, then coasted up to my neck and finally cupped my face.

He leaned down until our lips were so close, I could taste the mint on his breath. But rather than kissing me, he tipped my chin up to brush his bearded chin along my neck. I shuddered as he moved to my ear. "Say the word and not an inch of you will go untouched tonight."

My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath. Could I even handle a man like Beckett?

God, I wanted to.

He curled his fingers around my neck gently. "Take your shower and think about it."

Then he dropped his hand and stepped back. His summer blue eyes were nearly midnight thanks to how dilated his pupils were.

For me?

"Regardless of your answer, you'll be safe with me, Helena."

I nodded.

"I'm just going to check in with Laverne to make sure people know you're okay."

As if anyone cared. Reid was probably halfway back to the city by now. Rachel and Clay were supposed to leave for Greece later that night.

"Thanks," I said softly and closed the door.

I pressed my forehead to the back of the door and willed back the quick rush of tears. From turned on to tears in the space of a few heartbeats. That had to be a new record for me.

I set the towels on the sink and got a look at myself in the mirror and nearly lost it then and there.

My eyes were smudged with mascara and my neck was pink from dust sticking to my skin from the ride on Storm. My lipstick stain was the only makeup that had survived the harried horse ride and made my lips look swollen and bruised against my pale skin.

I turned on the taps and was grateful to find a packet of makeup remover wipes on the side of the sink. I plucked out three and scrubbed at my face and lips until I was splotchy. At least the worst of it was gone, leaving my pale eyelashes and light pink lips instead of the remnants of the wedding look.

I felt a little guilty for using his mother's brush, but I ran it under hot water before I ruthlessly dragged it through my hair to release the hair spray and product. The rest I'd have to shampoo out.

I turned away from the mirror and stripped out of the dress, leaving it on the floor along with the shaper I'd been wearing under it. The thought of

wearing any of that under the borrowed jeans was abhorrent. Luckily I wasn't wearing hose due to the near summer temperatures today.

I found a roll of can liners under the sink, ripping off a bag then stuffed the entire ruined outfit into it and tied it viciously. Annoyed at the tears dripping down my nose, I stood naked and beyond angry at how everything had turned out.

I wasn't sure how Beckett could be turned on by how I looked. Was it just because he felt sorry for me?

I turned the water on full hot and stepped into the multiple sprayers with a groan. The water felt divine regardless of my precarious emotional state. I let it beat on me from the front and the sides for a few minutes then saw a button to turn on the rain hood and almost wept at the gentle flood of water.

I grabbed the nearest bottle of shampoo and poured it into my hands. The warm scent of honey and lavender filled the steamy shower. I lathered it into my hair twice to get out all of the sticky hairspray and gel then found the matching conditioner.

His mother had a series of floral body washes in fancy little bottles. I chose the lavender one and quickly finished up my shower. With a wistful sigh, I turned off the taps and got out.

I felt a million times better. Water was definitely a bit of mystical wonder in this world. Everything looked a little better after a shower.

I hit my hair with the hairdryer I'd seen under the sink when looking for the bag for my destroyed dress. My hair was too thick to dry completely, but at least it wasn't dripping. I quickly put it in a simple braid to keep it from tangling.

I cleaned up after myself and pulled on the baseball shirt. The three-quarter sleeves were a faded raspberry color that might have been red at one time. I winced a little at how thin the cotton was. Sometimes I could get away with a tank or bralette if I was wearing layers, but there was no denying my lack of bra under this shirt.

I wiggled into the jeans, thankful that the hundreds of washings had left them soft and slightly stretched out. They were still a little tight through the seat, but thankfully fit everywhere else. The bottoms of the jeans were frayed around my ankles and a stress hole at the seam of my hip showed my lack of underwear.

There was no hiding it if you really wanted to take a hard look at me.

Maybe I could borrow a hoodie from the box of clothes from Zoe.

My braid was already starting to unravel. My hair was thick, but fine as cornsilk. Looked like I'd be looking for a hair tie too. I'd never been this unprepared in my life. The least I could have done was grab my purse before making a getaway, for God's sake.

I opened the door and peeked out. Beckett was pacing at the end of the hall. He looked like he was on the phone, even if I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Did I dare dig into the box without his permission?

"Dammit," I muttered to myself. I'd already been inexcusably rude to borrow what I was wearing and now I wanted to ask for more.

He spotted me in the hall and motioned for me to come back out to where he was.

"I know, Laverne. She's fine. I promise. She's just a little..." His voice trailed off as he looked at me.

I looked down. The jeans weren't too bad on me, were they? I met his gaze and then crossed my arms at where his gaze had dipped to. Yeah, I'd been right on the shirt.

"Do you have a sweatshirt or something?" I whispered.

He gritted his teeth again and turned away from me. He lifted his hand to the top of the doorjamb to the sliding door to the backyard.

I was embarrassed until I noticed the grip he had on the top of the door.

Was that for me?

I peered down at my breasts. Did it show that much? Of course now I was thinking about it and my nipples were like freaking headlights. Great.

"Look, Aunt Laverne, I gotta go. Yes, I'll take care of her. No, she doesn't want to come back right now. She just needs to get away for a few hours." He tipped his head back, one hand to his ear with his phone and the other white-knuckled from his tight hold. "Right. You got it. I'll call you later." He stuffed his phone into his back pocket then turned around.

I crossed my arms, but I didn't think it helped.

"Pretty sure the One D boys would be better for my mental health and the current zipper indent in my..." He cleared his throat. "Jesus, Helena. I didn't realize you were hiding all that under that dress."

I looked down at myself. "Pretty sure my slightly better than a B-cup breasts aren't that impressive."

"Girl, any breast under that shirt would be enough to make most men sit up and take notice. Enough that I'm a little pissed my little sister owns it, but

damn, do I enjoy it on you. FYI, you have a perfect pair of breasts.”

I tried to hunch my shoulders forward to make them less noticeable and he stepped forward. “Hell no, don’t hide them. If I’m going to die, I want a good view.”

My face flamed. “Beckett.”

He grinned. “Or did you decide you wanted polite and nice Beckett instead? If so, I’ll find you a parka so I can make it happen.”

A giggle bubbled up and out of me, dispelling a bit of my embarrassment.

“Is that a no?” He drew my hand up toward his mouth and turned my wrist up at the last second. He dragged his teeth lightly across the fragile skin then flashed his tongue over it as a chaser.

“No.”

“Louder.” His voice had gone husky in a way that made my nipples tingle.

I lifted my eyes to meet his. “I want this, Beckett.”

CHAPTER 4

BECKETT

SAVE A HORSE RIDE A...

Humbled didn't even begin to cover it.

The tail of her braid curled around her neck and the damp ends made a small wet spot just above her nipple. The shirt was practically threadbare and very fucking distracting. But damn, the curves on her knocked me out. She seemed so tiny and slight when she'd stood up on that altar for my cousin.

Ethereal in a way that made me feel rough as sandpaper. Hell, I shouldn't even be touching her. We couldn't be more opposite. And I had to hold myself in check. The crazy need for her felt bigger than it should be. A better man would listen to the instincts that pushed at me too much for the amount of time we'd known one another.

I wanted her in ways that didn't match her sweet softness. Ways that would probably send her running for the hills. But the spark in her eyes matched mine.

Even though there was no gentlemanly side of me to be found.

I stepped back before I did something stupid, like toss her over my shoulder and haul her out of my ma's house without another word.

She instantly brought her arms back up to cross over her chest.

I wouldn't be having any of that. I grabbed the boots I'd found at the back of Zoe's closet then crowded back into her until she dropped her arms. I slid my knee between her thighs and tipped her chin up. "Quit hiding."

My voice was more growl than enticement and I couldn't seem to temper that.

Ah, there was the spark. Her eyes flared with annoyance. "I don't hide."

"You sure as hell do. And you deserve to be front and center."

She swallowed thickly, but she kept her gaze locked with mine before

throwing her shoulders back which definitely didn't help my current situation. "I do."

"Damn straight." I slid my other hand along her hip and around to cup her ass. I lifted her onto her toes and groaned when she rolled her hips to meet the front of my jeans with her belly. "Feel that?"

She dragged in a sharp breath, then she nodded.

"I'm not some dumb kid, or a clueless asshole like your date. I know what I want. It's you."

The fact that it rolled off my tongue so easily had me wishing I didn't say it, but it was too late. I did want her. Even if it was just for one day, or maybe one night if I was lucky.

"Why?"

"Beyond the beautiful part, you're smart and interesting. And chemistry doesn't necessarily make sense. It can be as easy as your scent." I lowered my face to her neck, brushing my nose behind her ear. "The sound of your voice. The way your breath hitches when I get close to you." Not in fear. I didn't want her fear, but I wanted her to feel wanted. To let go for me.

I tightened my grip on her ass to drag her even closer.

Her hand slipped between us and her fingers dug into the muscles of my belly. "You're so hard."

"Move lower and you'll find I'm even harder."

She licked her lips and did just that. I groaned as she tripped the tip of her finger down over the bulge behind my zipper. "Just chemistry?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Her golden lashes swept down as she tested my length through denim. I resisted the urge to push myself into her hand more fully. Letting her get to know me at her own pace was the smarter course of action. "I don't know. I've never slept with a stranger."

"You think we'll be sleeping?"

Her lips twitched as she peered up at me. "I sure hope not."

"Never had one wild night, Helena?"

She shook her head.

"Not even when you were young?"

"I tried in college, but I kept ending up with guys who liked what my name could do for them more than getting me off."

What the hell was wrong with the men she hung out with? "Goddamn shame."

“Tell me about it.”

“Want me to be your wild, Helena?” I held my breath. It felt a little bigger between us than the question and I needed to shut that down for both of our sakes. “Today. Tonight. Maybe in the morning?”

“More than anything.”

I held up the boots. “Then let’s get outta here. I sure hope they fit.”

She swayed a little, then she backed up and took the boots, peering in to see the size. “Think we’ll be good.”

“Perfect. While you get those on, I’ll raid my ma’s fridge for some food.” I moved away from her to get my head clear. “Anything you hate or are allergic to?”

“Hummus.”

I laughed. “I’m not much for the mushy dips either.”

I gave myself a few extra minutes with the cold fridge door open to hopefully convince my cock to calm the hell down. I found some fresh strawberries and cheese in the crisper. My mother wasn’t exactly the most creative when it came to cooking, so there wasn’t much else to steal. I made a mental note to buy another bottle of wine or steal one from the taproom as I snagged the lone bottle of riesling at the back of the fridge. I grabbed a few carrots for Storm as well.

After shoving yogurt out of the way, I found a lone package of hot dogs in the deli drawer and snagged the package of rolls on top of the fridge along with two plastic cups. Guess that would have to do. If things went well, I’d bring her back to my house after I took her to the spring at the back of the orchard.

It was a nice day for it and there was a fire pit set up there. Me and my brothers escaped there plenty of times on hot days. People would be distracted with the reception and from what Aunt Laverne said, the party was going to go well into the night.

That shithead Reid Pierce had been kicked out of the reception. I was mildly impressed he’d even asked about where Helena had gone to. He damn well didn’t make too much of a fuss when all was said and done. If he’d really cared about her, Pierce wouldn’t have quit until he found her.

What she saw in that robot, I had no clue. Twice in the space that I’d seen them together, he’d bailed on her.

She deserved to be shown something different. And I would be the one to do that.

For one day.

I tucked the food into a soft-sided cooler I could strap to the front of my saddle.

I wished for my own more comfortable clothes, but what I had on would do for a day at the lake. I stripped off the vest and hung it on the back of the chair in the kitchen.

Catching her giving me the once-over made me smile. She tried to hide it, but her eyes grew heavy, and she nibbled her lower lip as she tightened the laces of Zoe's ancient Timberlands. I was glad she'd scrubbed the makeup off. I'd prefer to taste her than whatever lip dye had stained her lips red.

The soft pink suited her more.

I bet it would match so many other places on her and I was eager to find out.

"Ready?"

She stood. "Yes."

I handed her the cooler so I could dig in the closet for a blanket. I found a heavy quilt that would give us some space to spread out.

If I was lucky, I'd be spreading her out wide with the sun coming down. I spotted a bottle of sunscreen on the top shelf and stuffed that in my back pocket.

She was as pale as milk. I didn't need her burning out in the late afternoon sun. I tightly rolled the quilt to strap to Storm's saddle. Back outside, the sun was still blaring overhead and the sky was a limitless blue.

I smelled rain. Being a farmer all my life, I knew a clear day meant jack shit when Mother Nature decided to take a turn. There would be a hard rain on the overnight.

One that the trees desperately needed.

I preferred to use the aqueducts later in the season. The spring storms did a better job than any man made system ever would.

"Want to try the front of the saddle this time? If you don't mind being that close to me."

Just the idea of her moving to sit against my front would be torture, but it would be the best kind.

"If you're all right with it, I am."

"Storm will appreciate it as well." I dug out a carrot and handed one to her. She gave me a huge smile. While she made nice with my horse, I strapped the blanket into the buckles at the back of my saddle. I normally had

my saddle bags on for my various tools and walkies, but I hadn't needed that for the wedding.

She crooned softly to Storm as he chomped his way through his favorite treat.

I came up behind her and patted his neck. "Is he behaving?"

"He's so beautiful. I haven't been around horses in probably ten years."

"I wondered why you rode so well."

She glanced up at me. "I did a few years at a horse farm during the summers in boarding school. It was better than being stuck in the city during the summer."

Storm nuzzled her side, looking for more food.

"You can have another one when we get to the springs, you greedy bastard."

Storm chuffed and Helena laughed.

"Ready?"

She nodded. I set my hat back on my head, then went to lift her onto the horse but she put her foot in the stirrups and threw a leg over. She was a tiny bit of a thing, but there were muscles in those thighs.

"All right then." I laughed and motioned her to move forward. She shifted up and I got on, settling her against me.

Oh, yeah, this wasn't going to be an easy ride.

She wiggled against me and suddenly stopped as she got a fair idea of what she'd be working with later. My cock was tight to the cleft of her ass and I was pretty sure she knew what she was doing.

She lined us up and I bit back a groan. Not that innocent.

I lifted the reins, then looped an arm around her middle to give her some support. My hand slid down to cup between her thighs. "You tease me, I'll tease you."

"Promise?"

I lowered my head to nip her ear. "I'll have you squirming the whole ride, girl." I stroked my fingers over the seam of her jeans between her legs and she hissed out a breath.

"How long's the ride?"

Oh, yeah. She was going to kill me.

"Long enough." I squeezed my knees against Storm's sides and he instantly moved backwards then back down the path.

She was stiff for the first few minutes of the ride, but eventually she

leaned back against my chest. The angle had the fullest part of her breast brushing across my forearm with each rocking motion of the easy walk.

She was restless as if her body knew what it needed, but she wouldn't quite allow herself to totally relax. I flicked open the button of her jeans.

She sucked in a breath.

"Okay?" I asked against her ear. I nipped the shell of her ear down to the lobe. "You're so wound up."

"You make me...wound up."

I grinned against her skin. "You're restless because you're nervous?"

"You're so big. I'm not used to it."

My laugh was a rumble.

"I mean, body-wise, but...well, that too."

"You're not that innocent. Not the way you snuggled up that perky little ass against my dick." She tried to move forward and I eased her back. "No. It's okay to want to be touched. To ask me to touch you."

Her nipples tightened under the cotton, and I shifted my arm to brush her through the material. The little moan urged me to slip into her jeans.

I hissed as I realized the only barrier between my hand and her pussy was thin denim. "No wonder you're shifting against me. That seam is doing a number on you, isn't it?"

She didn't answer, but her head rolled to the side as my middle fingers coasted down between her legs. She was slick and warm with a narrow strip of downy soft hair.

I lowered my mouth to where her neck met her shoulder and sipped from her as I found her clit and lightly circled it. "Is that what you need?"

Her hips lifted against my touch.

"Until I can get my mouth on you, this will have to do."

Her strangled moan ended in a whimper as I took control of the easy strokes then went for what she needed. I followed the way her hips lifted, the way she arched her back.

I glanced up to make sure we weren't going to walk off the path. Storm liked to wander when I wasn't paying attention, but we had a few minutes as we crossed the wide open back fields.

The sun spilled over us, and her golden hair shone over her shoulder. I gave the reins some slack then looped them over my hand so I could cup her breast. The leather scraped over the tip of her nipple, and she shuddered.

Back and forth, I dragged the leather over her T-shirt for friction while

my other hand worked at her pussy. She shuddered in my arms, the soft pants turning to groans and finally a keening cry.

I sucked along her neck, and bit down on her ear just as she was going over and she arched in the saddle. Her ass dug against my aching cock as she jerked against my hand.

Under a bright late spring day, she fell apart for me. And it was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen.

I pushed my own violent needs aside to tend to her.

Soon enough I'd lose myself in her.

Soon enough there would be time for me.

But she needed this and I was more than willing to give it to her.

My name became a litany and a prayer as she came down from the high of her first orgasm.

And it damn well wouldn't be the last.

Not today.

CHAPTER 5

HELENA

ARE YOU GONNA KISS ME OR NOT?

I slumped back against Beckett, my breath trapped in my chest right beside my raging heart.

Dear God.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd come so fast. Even by myself it took ages for me to relax enough to finish. Honestly, it wasn't really worth it for me to take care of business that often. I usually ended up feeling empty and hollow.

That was not empty.

I dragged the late spring air into my lungs, relaxing as the black dots in my periphery faded. I still felt so full and realized he definitely was still inside me.

His voice was a rumble at my ear. "Goddamn, you are beautiful." He pulsed his fingers inside of me again and I jerked, my body ultra sensitive. "Can't say I've ever done that on my horse."

"Can't say I've ever had someone do that to me on a horse either," I said shakily.

He drew his fingers slowly from my body and trailed them up my belly and under my borrowed shirt to cup my breast. "I'm going to lick all of this salty perfection off you as soon as we get off Storm."

"I already got off."

His quick laugh, rumbled through me and activated a giggle. It felt like it had been days since I'd laughed, and Beckett had pulled half a dozen out of me in the space of a few hours.

"That you did." He tugged at my nipple then slid his hand back down to my middle and left it there, holding me lightly. "Now, I have to pay attention

or Storm will dump our ass in the woods.”

I straightened, finally noticing the heavier foliage that had encroached. The dappled sun left a creative design on the underused path thanks to the heavy tree cover. We weren't in the actual orchard anymore. These trees were a mix of pine and larger, burlier types I couldn't name.

I shivered as the shade and light breeze crashed into my already chaotic system.

He brushed his bearded chin against my temple and settled me against his chest. “We'll be back in the sunshine in just a minute.”

“I'm okay.”

His thumb glided against my midriff in a gentle back and forth motion that eased me as much as it stirred me up. I wasn't used to being touched so much. Both Clay and Reid had been relatively hands off with me. Which should have been my first clue that we weren't exactly meant to be.

Reid had been a little more intense during the chase, but then his attention had cooled to arctic levels.

Both of them had been so very opposite of this earthy, overwhelming man.

Then again, I'd seen Clay with Rachel and there had been no cool and reserved between them. Evidently, it had just been with me.

“Hey. What's going on in that thinky brain of yours?”

“Nothing.” I forced my muscles to relax one by one as I'd learned over the years to avoid a tension headache, or worse—migraine.

“Are you rethinking this afternoon?”

“No.” I twisted enough to look at him. “Not in the least.”

“Good. Then relax and enjoy the ride.”

I faced front and let myself drift with the easy pace of the horse, the way our hips moved together, and the delicious warmth that lingered inside of me. Of course I would get twisted up after my first orgasm in months. Could I ever just relax and enjoy a moment in my life?

Determined to do just that, I focused on my present moment, not anything in the future or even what would happen next. I pushed aside the wedding and the complicated relationships that had made up my last few years. The air held the heavy sweetness of wild berries and the buzz of bees doing their jobs. I often ran in and around Central Park in the city, but it had nothing on the freshness of the air here.

Moss, ivy, and baby trees encroached on the large, sturdy trees. Leaves

crunched under Storm's hooves as we maneuvered along the path until it suddenly cleared. A rock formation came into view and the scent of water overpowered the hint of decay in the shadows.

The closer we got to the rocks, I could hear rushing water as well, but I only caught glimpses of rocks and water from where we were. "Where are you taking me?"

"An old natural spring. We sneak away to swim here during the hot summer days."

I looked up at him. "Skinny dipping with the girls?"

He grinned. "More so when I was young and dumb. I don't get much time to enjoy the springs these days. Too much to do with the orchard and the add ons we've been doing."

"Rachel told me about the taproom and the concerts."

He hummed out an affirmative. "I'm also working on a few other things this summer before we get ready for harvest. Diversifying the orchard keeps us growing."

"Must be hard to compete. There's a lot of orchards out this way."

"There sure are. We had to work our asses off to stand out. I don't want to put all my apples into one bushel basket so to speak. So, we have the taproom and the concerts that have done well for us. We're looking into some additional spirits this winter or next—the timelines are fuzzy there. My brother Hayes has an affinity for moonshine and it's not the easiest to produce."

I didn't know anything about it, other than the fact that it was high octane alcohol. "That sounds dangerous."

"You'd be correct. We've made our version of Fireball a few years ago and it was a moderate success. However, the hard cider brewing has been steadily growing ever since we brought on Ronan Parrish last year. We just got a distribution deal to start selling to grocery stores in the tri-state region."

I could hear the pride in his voice. I was mildly jealous that there was such passion in what he did. Foundations and charities consumed my time when I wasn't planning or attending events. They were important, of course, but they'd been more of a legacy obligation than a vocation for me.

Every Danbury and Eldridge had been on the board for the Children's Hospital. I loved that I helped kids, but nothing had ever driven me to dig in for a career. My parents were more worried about who I'd marry than me getting any satisfaction from a job.

For years, I'd fallen in line.

It was easier than swimming against the undertow of my mother's machinations. Find a husband, secure a suitably impressive name, keep my societal contacts and acquire more.

It was exhausting, cold, and uninspiring.

I wanted to believe in something like Beckett did. Even like Rachel did. She'd gone from being miserable handling billionaire entertainment event contracts to starting her own smaller business with hot chocolate, for goodness sakes. And from what I could tell, she'd never been happier.

I had no clue what inspired me.

Beckett's hand firmed at my midriff as he dragged me tighter against his chest. "Path is going to get a little rough."

I grabbed onto the horn of the saddle as Storm picked his way around the rocks and boulders then the path widened, and I finally got a good look at the springs.

"Wow."

"It's pretty spectacular isn't it?"

To say the least. I was expecting a tiny place to take a dip, but in actuality it was bigger than most pools I'd seen over the years. The rocks made a natural basin and the waterfall was soothing more than a rush of dangerous water. "I didn't realize something like this was hiding out here."

"We like to keep our secrets. I'm hoping it will be an attraction for our rentals we're working on."

"No doubts there, it's beautiful."

"Rachel helps out with our marketing. She and Willow are going to spiff up our website with photos after Rachel and Clay get back from their honeymoon." Beckett groaned. "I'm sorry, I keep mentioning that shit. I'm a thoughtless jackass."

I covered his hand. "It's fine. I'm truly happy for them or I wouldn't have filled in for Rachel's friend."

"It's still shitty." He led Storm over to a shady spot, then shifted to swing his leg over and drop down to the ground. He reached up for me and I let him curl his arms around me to lower me slowly to the ground, our bodies brushing from chest to thigh.

He grinned down at me as he reached around me to unbuckle the blanket from the back of the saddle.

"Will Storm be okay over here?"

“I’m going to bring him over to drink then let him chill out in the shade for awhile. His favorite grass is over there.”

I had a feeling that was by design, more than happenstance. I had a feeling Beckett was a thoughtful sort, not that he wanted people to know that. “Okay. Can I set up the blanket somewhere?” I craned my neck.

“There’s a grassy area just over there.” He pointed and then unfastened the cooler to loop it over his shoulder.

“I can carry it.”

“I got it.” He dropped Storm’s reins then urged me forward, tucking the blanket under his other arm.

We climbed over a few smaller boulders and the grassy spot made my chest tighten. It was lovely and lushly green with new spring grass. A few wild daisies and Black-Eyed Susans sprouted around the rocks with happy white and gold petals. A massive oak gave just enough shade that we wouldn’t burn to a crisp.

He handed me the cooler then snapped out the blanket. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched him go, enjoying the wide lines of his shoulders and his narrow waist. When he disappeared from view, I kicked off my borrowed boots. No need to track dirt into where our food would be.

I started unloading the food. I found berries and cheese and grinned at the hot dogs at the bottom of the bag.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a hot dog.

I looked around and saw the small covered grill at the edge of the grassy area. It was set on a flat stone with a lockbox hidden under some nearby stones. I wondered if the Manning boys had been Boy Scouts in another life, or it was just part of rural living to think ahead.

By the time Beckett returned, I’d arranged the fruit and cheese. A bottle of sweating wine at the bottom of the cooler bag along with the familiar Red Solo cups of my youth made me laugh. It didn’t matter where, when, or what friend group you had, a red cup was universal.

“Sorry it’s not very fancy.” Beckett had left his cowboy hat with Storm. His dark blond hair was a mess of curls that made me itch to see if they were as soft as they looked. He wore aviator sunglasses against the glaring sun, and I wished for my purse for the first time all day.

He stretched out on the blanket in front of me, then pulled out a white plastic pair of sunglasses from his vest pocket.

“Where did you find these?”

He set the ridiculous cat-eyed sunglasses on my nose with a lopsided grin. “My sister leaves them everywhere. Must be twenty pairs between Ma’s house and mine.”

It could have been a lie. They could have been from an old girlfriend, but I was pretty sure he was telling the truth. Beckett didn’t seem to need to sugar-coat anything.

I pushed them up my nose more firmly, just happy to have something to cut the sun. “They’re perfect.” I twisted the cap off the wine and poured, handing a cup to him. “And to tell the truth, this is much better than staying at the reception.”

He took it. “I can guarantee Rach had better food and definitely better drinks.”

“Company makes all the difference.” I held up my cup and he reached out and tapped his against mine.

“That it does.” He took a sip and I saw the grimace.

“Not your drink?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. I like wine well enough, but my mom likes fruit punch wine. Though I will have to make sure my mom gets some hard cider in the fridge.”

I took a small sip, surprised that the fruity wine hit the spot. We feasted on cheese and fresh strawberries while Beckett told me about the taproom which would be re-opening the weekend before the holiday.

“We are coming out of our slow season and into wedding chaos, but the concerts and live music festivals keep us just as busy these days.”

I sat cross-legged, the cup dangling from my fingers as I relaxed by degrees. After our...*moment* on the horse I wasn’t sure what to expect. Easy conversation hadn’t been on my list. “What made you start doing concerts?”

“Between my cousin and my now brother-in-law, we ended up with people showing up for jam sessions so much that it only made sense to make a stage for them. Originally, we had a small distillery with a tiny stage made of scrap pallets. It suited us for a few years until more people showed up than we could handle. My brother Justin pushed the idea to use some land that wasn’t really fit for planting. It was just sitting there doing nothing.” Beckett popped a cube of cheese in his mouth. “I wasn’t about to stop him from getting involved with the orchard.”

I frowned. “I thought it was a family operation.”

“With two hundred plus employees at this point.” He grinned at my slack jaw. “We’ve grown over the years, but Justin is what I’d call go with the flow. He did a little of this, a little of that—the kid can fix damn near anything—but I could tell he was bored. He was partying too much.” He propped his head on his hand. “I was a little worried the concerts would just give him an excuse to party more, but he really stepped up. Good thing because I’m not at all interested in the social media crap that entails.”

I laughed. “You don’t seem much of a share to social media kind of guy.”

He dug out his phone and flashed an iPhone that had to be at least five years old or more. It was dinged and dented and I was pretty sure the camera had a crack in it. “What was your first clue?”

“It’s refreshing. Most of the people I know have their phone surgically attached to their hand.”

“Not you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind using it as a shield when it’s convenient, but as you can see I haven’t reached for mine since we...”

“Connected?” He grinned and reached over to take the cup from me.

I swallowed. “One word for it.”

He gently urged me onto my knees to get closer to him. “I feel like you’re one of those master conversationalists. You’ll have me talking all about myself for the next hour before I know it.”

“I’m interested in you,” I protested, but I let him maneuver me closer.

“Because you’re a sweet and attentive woman.”

I frowned. “I don’t want to be sweet.”

He rolled onto his back and lifted me to straddle him. “Is that so?”

Trapped by the mirrored glare of his sunglasses I couldn’t quite tell what he was thinking. Was there laughter behind the lenses or that brief bit of heat I remembered from the bathroom? It had all happened so fast I couldn’t be quite sure.

Nervously, I set my hands on his chest. He was warm from the sun and the hard plane of muscles dried up all the moisture in my mouth.

“Nervous?” His hands fell to my hips, lightly holding me against him.

“Can’t say I’ve ever done...*this* outside.”

His lips tipped up as his fingers slipped under my shirt. “This alabaster skin has never seen sun?” He scraped the tips of his fingers along my midriff. “I’m not surprised. You’re soft as water under here. Sure you want my rough hands on you?”

He slowly went up another few millimeters with each upward stroke only to tease me and return to the waistband of my jeans. When he was just about to graze the underside of my breast, he slid around to stroke up my back instead. I let out a slow breath, trying not to end with an annoyed sigh.

“Helena?”

“What?”

“Is this okay?”

“More than okay. You’re killing me.”

“Says the woman with her perfect ass rubbing on my hard cock.”

I hadn’t realized I was rolling my hips in time to his touch.

“Don’t stop.” His voice was rough.

I bent down to take in his citrus scent, my fingers roaming up his chest to his neck. “Is there a reason you haven’t kissed me yet?”

He’d had his hands on the most intimate parts of me, but not his mouth.

A quick flash of his face between my thighs made me flush.

Beckett’s lips were a slash of thin lips with a hint of a smile. “You were imagining my mouth somewhere else?”

I swallowed. “Maybe.”

He quickly rolled me onto my back. I yelped as he pulled me under him. “I aim to provide the best service. We like a very satisfied customer here at Brothers Three Orchard.” He caged me in with his elbows, but he didn’t move to kiss me.

I tugged his sunglasses off and tossed them toward the cooler. He did the same with mine and we both laughed. The crinkles by his eyes spoke of years in the sun, as did the glint of gold in his dark blond hair. I reached up to twine my fingers through his hair.

His eyes slitted at the stroke. His eyelashes were so long and blond tipped from the sun. My nipples instantly reacted to the bliss on his face at my touch. The pulse of a muscle in his jaw urged my fingers to search it out and lightly graze through his short beard. His heavy-lidded eyes opened once more. My heart hammered against my breastbone at his direct gaze. His eyes reminded me of the summer sky and the faded blue jeans I was wearing. Clear and bold with hints of softness.

Somehow the day had started with hurt and now, thanks to borrowed clothes and an old quilt in a secluded space, I was ending it with a man intent on showing me what a day could hold. In all my thirty-three years, no one had taken the time to show me such a simple kindness.

Yes, there was the sex element simmering between us, but it wasn't a manipulated move. It could have been, and for any number of men I knew it would have been. Nothing here on this blanket, or since I'd gotten on his horse, spoke of a rush to get me out of the way.

It was a day out of time.

I didn't know why I knew that, but I was thankful for it.

I lightly brushed my fingertip along his lower lip. There was patience in his gaze and a smile that made everything inside of me shimmer with expectation.

He nipped the tip of my finger. "You gonna kiss me or not?"

I laughed at the question. I couldn't remember a time when I'd been the one to initiate anything. Everyone in my life had taken the lead.

I brought both hands up to frame his softly bearded face. I was surprised by the texture of the bristles. I expected it to abrade, but instead it urged me closer. I stroked my thumbs along the angles of his cheeks and then his jawline.

When my gaze lifted to meet his eyes, the playful tone in his eyes had tipped into a flicker of intensity. A hint of the Beckett he mentioned outside the bathroom door. There was more underneath the easygoing facade than he offered up to most people.

I kept my eyes open as I touched my lips to his. The citrus blend of his scent, the strawberries and wine, and oh, the heat. It was all there. The way he caged me in with his body without crushing me, the weight of him, and the warmth of him allowed me to tap into the bravery I didn't believe I possessed.

My eyes fluttered shut as the kiss drifted from chaste to soft sips. Unhurried as a late spring breeze, we learned the shape of each other's mouths. The distant sound of water faded under the pounding of my own heart until the easy kisses weren't enough to sate the churning need inside me.

I slid my tongue along his lower lip and flicked inside. His breath hitched and for the first time I felt the tension in his arms. My fingers slid into his curls and around the back of his head to get a grip on the nape of his neck.

My eyes slitted open and met his gaze. No easy summer skies now. They were fierce with an echoing need held banked. To protect me? Himself?

I was tired of missing out on something amazing. The fear held me for a moment. All too often, I'd been on the precipice of something wild and I'd

stepped back from the edge.

Not this time.

I slid my other hand down to fist into the warm, soft cotton of his dress shirt, tugging the tails out of his jeans.

The smooth, hot skin of his lower back burned my fingertips as I nipped his lower lip.

It was all it took to unleash the fireball living in this man above me. He crushed his lips to mine, opening me with a deep groan that climbed inside of me and activated all the places inside of me shut up tight.

My hand snaked under his shirt and up his back, my nails seeking out the map of his muscles as my thighs slid open to seat him against me.

He groaned again and rolled his hips, grinding the seam of my jeans against the center of me that was already primed from our trip on Storm. He rose above me, blocking the sun and the breeze until there wasn't anything I could focus on besides him.

His breathing was heavy as he stared down at me. Confusion and wonder crawled across his features before he buried his face in my neck.

Did he feel it too?

CHAPTER 6

BECKETT

SUNSHINE AND DENIM

She smelled like a spring garden and her skin was smoother and more fragile than I'd imagined.

I scraped my teeth down her neck to her shoulder where her scent pooled and stretched the neckline aside to taste more of her. The potency of her dug inside me like thorns.

I'd been prepared for a sweet afternoon and maybe some fooling around.

I'd talked a good game at my parents' house, but I didn't actually believe we'd do anything other than mess around. From the moment we started the ride here, I realized just how wrong I'd been. She wasn't like the women I usually spent time with. She was refined and probably as close to proper as a man like me would ever touch.

Oh, I'd hooked up with plenty of rich girls over the years. Many a pampered college coed looked for a good time when they were on roadtrips with their friends, but they knew the score. Sometimes even more than I did. I'd mistaken fun for something deeper a time or two and had withstood my share of heartbreak in my early twenties. As my responsibilities increased, I learned to enjoy a steamy night more than looking for forever. It was easier to find someone who understood that sex could be a release valve, some more intense than others.

Helena didn't fit in that slot. She explored me with a sense of innocence and hint of challenge that left me the one off balance. And her huge golden eyes were going to kill me.

That definitely couldn't happen.

I needed to take control of this situation or I'd be taking a dip in the cold spring just to stop my brain from sizzling into dangerous territory where huge

mistakes could be made.

I inched my way down from her neck to cup her handful sized breast through the threadbare shirt. Christ, I could see the shell pink of her nipple through the material. I wanted to drag it up and get a good look before I tasted, but something told me that was the road to perdition.

Once I got her naked, I might not be able to stop myself from exploring every inch of her and that wouldn't be happening in the middle of a field where anyone could come up on us.

The odds of it were slim.

The only people at the orchard this weekend were involved with the wedding. They were more than busy with the reception and the gossip surrounding Helena. While that *should* keep people from exploring the edges of the orchard, my brothers were known for sneaking away to show off the sights with women they wanted to impress.

Kind of like me.

Even if I hadn't brought anyone to the spring in too many years to count, I knew how a randy twenty-something year old male felt. At the very least, Justin might have the same idea I had.

And right now, I sure as fuck felt like a horny kid. I plucked at the tight little tip and her back arched. She locked eyes with me. Her hazel eyes wavered between gold and green depending on how the light hit. Wild cat's eyes right now. Frustration and the feeling of overwhelm crashed into fascination as she sunk those long, elegant fingers into my hair until I wanted to growl.

Annoyed that her touch urged me to lean in for more gentleness, I closed my mouth over her nipple through the material. She hissed out a surprised breath and the circle of wetness may as well have been tissue paper covering her.

I moved to the other one and sucked strongly. The cotton worked like a barrier to allow me to get my head back on straight. The hem of her shirt shifted up, showing off her fragile midriff.

If I just pushed it up a little and got one taste, I should be fine.

Surely, I wouldn't strip her bare and spread her out.

I dragged my chin across the slice of skin and she undulated her hips. A tiny rip at the hip seam of her jeans showed another hint of skin.

She was bare under there.

I knew firsthand there was only denim covering that sweet slit. She'd

been greedy for my fingers. Just how would she react to my mouth?

I fumbled with the snap of her jeans, ripping the zipper open to get a look at what I'd touched less than an hour ago. I still had her scent on my hands and now it filled my head. Flowers and salt. So delicate and yet it was more of a siren's call than any other woman I'd taken to my bed.

Even as my brain warned me not to take it further, I peeled her jeans open and flicked my tongue along the softness where her thigh met her pussy. Her lilac scent was sharper and headier there.

Not yet.

Don't take her yet.

I licked that seam and arched my nose up to her hip, rolling her so I could pull the jeans down.

Just a little.

I just needed a little more of her.

She was toned and tight with a heart-shaped ass made for gripping. My big, scarred hand on her looked wrong, but it felt so right. My fingertips dented her skin. I wanted my marks on her. It shook me how much I wanted to leave indelible proof that I'd been allowed entry here.

She craned her neck to watch me, her lips parted in shock and hunger as I lowered my mouth and grazed her firm cheek with my teeth then tongue before setting her back on the blanket.

Her hips lifted for me.

"So eager to get my mouth on you." I nipped her hip. "Almost as bad as I want your wetness on my tongue."

She flung her head back as pink stained her cheeks before she covered her face with her arm.

I straddled her and moved up to pull her arm down. My dick was throbbing behind the stiff denim of my dress jeans. No worn denim here, not like hers that invited my touch and slipped from her hips without any effort. Mine were a starched prison, but that was a good thing.

I needed the barrier.

"No. No embarrassment here, Helena. Watch me taste you." I dropped to taste her mouth first. My tongue slipped in to sip from her heavy lower lip and teased her sharp bow-shaped top lip until we found a rhythm with lashing tongues and shuddering breaths.

Knowing she needed the steady helped me to even out as well.

My cock surged against my zipper painfully, but I rode that pain. It kept

my brain sharp. I didn't dare give myself room or relief.

If I did, I'd surely be inside her and I wasn't prepared for that kind of action.

How I wished I was the guy who packed a condom in my wallet as easily as my driver's license, but it had been a damn long time since I'd been this impulsive.

A family wedding didn't inspire a whole lot of one-night-stand opportunities, so I hadn't even thought to carry one, just in case.

I groaned as I backed up enough to lower myself to the blanket once more, trapping my dick into submission as I tugged worn denim over her thighs to her knees.

Her eyes were pure black with a ring of shining gold as I pulled one foot free and left the other leg caught, hoping the uncomfortable bunched material would help me behave as I took care of her. I'd never been a man to shy away from oral. The control of it fed the need inside of me. Watching a woman fall apart under my touch was the pleasure for me, but the eagerness with how I wanted her taste in my mouth rang a few alarm bells.

Lust was snapping under the leash I usually had on myself. I wasn't sure a full audience would deter me right now. Not with how her chest rose and fell faster as if she couldn't drag in enough oxygen.

I pushed her free leg up until her knee was tucked up against her breast. So fucking flexible. The ripple of muscle spoke of some elegant form of exercise like yoga or pilates.

She pushed up on her elbows. "Beckett, what are we doing?"

"You're not going to do anything right now. You're going lay back and enjoy my mouth on you under this big ol' oak tree."

I wrapped my big hand around her other thigh. Christ, she was so damn tiny. I dragged in a slow breath, her scent unleashing a hungry groan in my chest. "Foot over my shoulder, Helena."

She listened and I scooted lower to get my first hit of her sweet heat. She was slick and still swollen from the ride and our kisses. I snaked my tongue into her pussy and she arched up.

"Touch your t—breasts." *Don't be so rough, asshole. She's not some bar pickup.* "Tug on your nipples. I can see them through your shirt. So tight and small."

Already lost to the lust firing between us, she followed my directions. First tentatively, then plucking more intently.

“Is that how you do it when you’re alone? When you are riled up from a long day and need to come?”

Her cheeks went red, but she nodded.

“In the middle of the night, when it’s dark and safe?” I didn’t want to think about anyone else’s hands on her. I could handle the idea of her own, but that tool from the wedding made a growl curl up from my chest and rumble against her clit.

“Nothing like this.”

I stared up at her as a lightly circled my tongue around her clit. Even that was tight and delicate. Tucked in under her hood as if hiding. I lowered to dip into her depths again. Honey and flowers and that undefinable taste of woman. I chased more of her wetness and she provided. My thumb slid along the top of her pussy to chase my tongue inside.

Her hips lifted, and her breathing was ragged, but she was so quiet. So trapped inside herself. I slicked my way around her clit with my thumb as I spread my hand across her belly to hold her still. My tongue and thumb worked in tandem until she was so slick I was able to tuck my thumb inside her. She clamped down on me. God, she’d feel so good around my cock. Tight and soft.

Starved for her, I sucked and licked while I pulsed my thumb inside of her.

When she slapped the blanket, I knew I was in the right spot to push her over. But instead of doing that, I pulled back and gentled my licks.

Her thighs shook and she threw her head back as she gripped her nipples with harsh tugs. Again and again, I could taste her frustration on the air.

“Push up your shirt.”

I shouldn’t have said it, but I needed to see her.

Her eyes locked on me, her cheeks high with color and the baby soft strands of her hair stuck to her temples.

“Just you and me here.” I licked at the skin between her belly button and the top of her mound. “Show me. It’ll feel so good.”

She fumbled with the hem of her shirt and bunched the cotton up to her neck. Tight and small, the tips were a shade or two darker than the rosy color of her pussy. They were painfully hard and I needed to touch them too.

I slid out of her and dragged my slick thumb up her quivering belly to cover her hand. “Show me how you like it.” I rubbed my chin into her wetness, knowing I’d wear her on every part of me that day.

She hissed out a frustrated gasp. “You seem to be doing just fine.”

I grinned. “This is about you. I’ll be figuring out the puzzle of you long into the night, Helena Danbury. Right now, show me.”

She rolled the tip of her breast between her fingers then tugged and repeated it. I pushed her hand away and repeated the gesture.

She hissed and her eyes flared. “Harder.”

I moved my mouth to cover her clit as I sucked that and tugged at her left breast. The combination dragged out the first moan from her. I did it again and she tried to hold back, but that wasn’t happening. I turned my face to nip the inside of her thigh. The tiny bluish star shape that rose fired me up. “Just you and me and the sky out here, girl. You don’t have to hold back.”

I went back to work and her hand slapped over mine as her hips reared off the blanket.

Not yet.

Just before she was going to go over, I went with a soothing stroke and took a gulp of oxygen. Her scent was intoxicating, and I knew it would be better if I waited for another round, but God, I wanted to take her over.

Wanted her to fall apart for me.

I scraped my fingers back down between her breasts and over her belly to slide my thumb back inside her and dug deep for where I knew it would blow her mind. I moved my mouth to suck the back of her thigh that was free of the denim and pinned her other knee wide with my shoulders. I needed her skin and sucked strongly there as I fucked her with my thumb and rubbed her clit with my fingers until she was arching for me.

“So fucking wet,” I mumbled against her skin. My gaze shooting from her perfect pussy to her face as she rolled her nipple with one hand and grabbed my head with the other.

I growled against her skin as she fractured.

I chased her up the blanket as she tried to get away from me.

“Too much.”

“Not enough,” I said. Then I had to have my mouth on her. I rode each pulse inside her pussy and used the friction against her clit to push her over and when I finally heard that sweet cry of surrender, I reared up to cover her mouth with mine.

Taking all that exceptional release inside of me as she rode my hand.

“That’s it,” I said against her mouth. “Just for me this time.”

“I can’t.” But there was a dreamy smile on her face. “There’s no way I

could right now.”

Still on my knees, I leaned back to sit on my boots, and she slipped her leg from my shoulder. “Let’s not take bets.”

She curled onto her side, clamping her thighs shut around my hand. “Sensitive.”

I lowered my head to kiss the outside of her knee then eased my hand from her. “You win.”

She hid her face in the crook of her arm, but when she peeked at me, I brought my fingers up to my mouth. Those scorched cheeks of hers made me laugh.

“Are you laughing at me?”

The fire in her eyes made me laugh harder. “Definitely not.” I hauled her off the blanket and onto my lap. Since she was wearing only the threadbare baseball shirt, I dragged the corner of the quilt over her thighs.

She stared down at the buttons of my shirt. “I can’t believe we did that.”

“I can’t be the first face that’s been between your thighs, Helena.”

“You’d be surprised.”

My eyebrow winged up. “Pardon?”

She shrugged. “Relax, I’m no virgin. I’m nearly thirty-four, for God’s sake. But most of my partners have been...”

“Selfish?”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t say that. Just perhaps a little on the proper side.”

“Boring. Because I don’t care if you run an office or an orchard, you get in there and please your woman.”

She peered up at me. “Not sure I’ve been called someone’s woman before either.”

“Whether it’s one night, one weekend, or a month, there’s no excuse for neglecting your partner. I can guarantee the man had no trouble asking for head.”

“You do have a way with words, Beckett Manning.”

“Sorry if I’m crass.”

“Not at all.” She pressed her hand to my chest. “I just mean how easily you speak your mind. Eloquent if a little rough around the edges sometimes.”

“And you’re nothing but class are you?”

Those golden eyes met mine, cool and direct. “Class has no dollar figure.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. One of the classiest women I know came from nothing. And Aunt Laverne would have my head if I offended you. While I am a little rough around the edges as you say, I make sure my partner knows she’s wanted when she’s in my bed. Or on a quilt.” I maneuvered her until she straddled me. I made sure to tuck her tight against my still very hard cock. “Or against a rock, or against a wall, a car, on a counter. It doesn’t fucking matter where, you’ll know I want you and it’s not just to get off.”

She gripped my shoulders and the tips of her breasts stood tight and proud against her shirt. A light breeze came up, blowing tendrils of golden hair around her face from her frayed braid. Her eyes were still blown out from my tongue and fingers.

I hadn’t meant to say so much, but it chapped my ass that she didn’t know what it felt like to be desired.

“I want all of the above.”

I gripped her hips. “And you’ll get it. Come home with me and I’ll show you all you can handle.”

CHAPTER 7

HELENA

STORMS

I found myself on Beckett's horse for the third time today. I wasn't so sure he was saving me this time, and I wasn't at all upset about it.

There was quiet between us. As if words were too precarious in this moment. The air was stirring, and I couldn't say why I smelled rain. The clouds were still puffy cotton balls on a stretch of impossible blue above the canopy of pines and oaks by the watering hole. I swore we rode through another type of apple trees. Just how many variations could one orchard grow? They were heavy with fruit in varying sizes as well as colors. Yellows, greens, and a fascinating blend of red striping through others still. Some were squat and fat, others taller and more robust. It all smelled...green. Not quite like the earthy fruit I was used to. As if they weren't quite ready to show off their true beauty.

Underneath it all, there seemed to be a heaviness to the air.

Maybe it was just the uncertainty pushing down on me. Had I really demanded Beckett to show me all the facets of how he wanted me?

That was very unlike me.

I didn't demand anything of anyone—period.

Maybe it was the orgasm talking. I still felt a little drunk from it. I definitely hadn't imbibed enough of the wine to use that as an excuse.

I was dragged back into the moment as he veered onto still yet another path—the orchard seemed to be a maze of them. From stately old trees, to more spindly and craggy types, we blazed by them as Beckett gave Storm his lead. The press of his thighs seemed to be the only conversation needed between him and the strong working horse.

Each time he pressed his thighs into Storm, the firmness of his muscles

rippled under me. I was sitting in the front of the saddle again and I'd never been so cognizant of my body and the rhythm of riding before in my life. It had been many years since I'd been on a horse, but nothing—not even a harmless crush on the trainer who introduced me to horses in my teen years—could compare to the exhilaration of riding with Beckett Manning.

Every part of him was so...solid.

And intense.

I couldn't forget the intense part.

His arm slid tighter around my waist as we turned onto another path. His thumb traced lightly along my ribs, just below my breast. "Not far now." His lips brushed my ear and it was like he had a direct line to my nipples.

I was almost embarrassed about how taut they were. Literally like headlights. I'd never gone braless in my life. Even my bathing suits had built-in bras in them. And here I was wearing borrowed clothes and sans underwear of any kind.

This man, who I barely knew, had somehow changed my life in the span of a handful of hours. Showing me kindness had been more than generous. He hadn't stopped there. Instead, he'd pushed me to embrace a little fun instead of crying over another embarrassment to add to my collection.

The only crying I was doing with Beckett Manning was of the visceral and carnal kind.

Which was also a revelation.

"Do you always think so loud?"

I laughed. "I'm not sure anyone has accused me of being loud in any way."

"My missing hank of hair, heel mark in my shoulder, and my name used as an exclamation mark thirty minutes ago says otherwise."

I elbowed him and he laughed.

"If you've changed your mind—"

"No." I swallowed down the near panic in my voice. I didn't want this day to end. I surely didn't want lose out on what else the evening could hold. Even if my nerves were starting to bubble up again. "No, I'm not having any regrets about today. I'm actually surprised where I ended up." I glanced up at him, my eyes tripping over the fullness of his lips. Lips that had given me more pleasure in one hour than I'd experienced in over five years.

"I didn't see my day heading in this direction." He brushed his cheek along mine. "Not mad about it either."

“Neither am I.”

“Looks like we’re on the same page.” His hand coasted up my belly to cup my breast with an absent affection that left me breathless. But he didn’t stop there. Instead, his big, rough hand curled lightly around my neck to tip my chin up. “I’m no gentleman, Helena. If I do anything to make you uncomfortable, I want you to speak up.”

I swallowed against the light pressure on my neck. “Gentlemen are overrated.”

His blue eyes cooled as his gaze dipped to my mouth then back to meet my eyes. His hold tightened slightly. “Going to enjoy slumming, Ms. Danbury?”

My eyes narrowed. “Whomever you may have had relations with before and put that in your head is your problem. That’s not what this is.”

His eyebrow spiked up. “Relations?” And just like that eyes went back to summer sky warm, but he didn’t laugh. Instead, the amusement and a tinge of remorse washed over him and he relaxed. “You do have a turn of phrase with that Ivy League mouth of yours.”

“My degree has nothing to do with you being an asshole.”

This time, he did laugh. “You’re right. I apologize. And yes, I have been a summer fling for a few college girls in my day.”

“First of all, I’m not a girl. And secondly, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

His eyes went fierce and bright. “I don’t think you do.”

“I may not have had a lot of bed partners in my life, but I’m no innocent. Not with the men and women I’ve known in Manhattan and New Hampshire. I’m walking—or riding, rather—into this knowing full well that I could be making a mistake. But for the first time in a long time, I’m trusting my instincts. This doesn’t happen between people that often.” I covered his hand with my own. “And maybe it’s easier for you to push me into a safe category. Rich girl looking for fun. But to me, I’m in awe of connecting with someone for the first time in my life, and I want to drag out every little experience I can. Even if it’s just one night.”

His jaw tightened. He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “One night, no boundaries, then?”

“And no preconceptions.”

“I can handle that.” He slid his hand back down to my waist and tucked me tighter against him. “Hold on. That’s my place up ahead.”

Whatever I'd been expecting, it wasn't the cabin that came out of the trees. Massive pines and birch trees speared up into the sky as we climbed the rocky path. The house itself wasn't huge, but the wraparound porch was organic in scope and I could only imagine its breathtaking views.

It had three levels—the first, a lower porch with a surprising amount of flowers and greenery. Though I suppose Beckett was a farmer at his core, so it shouldn't be that shocking. I just couldn't see him taking the time with all the things he had on his plate these days.

Pinks, reds, and deep violet flowers spilled out of barrels. I recognized the flowers, but didn't know the names. Small petals clustered together, and still others twined out on vines. Some barrels were stamped with Happy Acres and others with the new Brothers Three Orchard logo. Most were cut in half and laid on their side, others were bisected to create different levels of bowls. And still another had been made into a rustic water feature using a series of old wrought iron spigots.

It was sweet and showed he loved and cared for his house.

Beside the lower deck was a stable with a sleepy ginger cat tucked in the shade of one of the barrel planters by the door.

The second level deck was attached to the house with an outdoor kitchen, chairs, and a sturdy table that could easily seat ten people, along with a massive grill and pizza oven.

But it was the third level that stole the show. It was all wood, stained dark against the lush greenery of the trees and landscaping. It reminded me of a treehouse with the way it was tucked into nature. The top deck was only accessible by a spiral staircase from the second floor deck and seemed to be an extension of the top floor. Perhaps it was off the main bedroom. I couldn't really get a good look now that we were so close to the house. What I could see included a set of massive windows glinting in the late day sun.

The trees swayed with the increasing wind. Those pillowy clouds were rapidly connecting now and taking on an angry purple tinge. The air was swollen with humidity and an unsettling distant thunder spoke of a summer storm coming our way.

As we got closer and approached the stable, I suddenly had a thought. "Will Storm be okay?"

He buzzed my temple with an absent kiss. "He didn't get his name by accident. And believe me, he's spoiled rotten. I'm pretty sure his stable will stand longer than my house."

“I don’t know how, it’s gorgeous.”

“Thanks. I’ve been building onto it off and on since I was nineteen.”

I twisted to look at him. “Nineteen?”

“Should’ve seen the shack it was when I was gifted it by my uncle. It used to be his hunting lodge.”

I shivered as I turned back around.

“Don’t worry. I’m not interested in hurting defenseless animals in the name of sport.”

I relaxed again. “Can’t say I’m sad about that.”

“Would it be a deal breaker?”

“Probably.”

He huffed out a laugh against my hair. “Good to know. I like a woman who stands by her values.”

The path opened up to a vibrant green lawn, but it didn’t look like the usual yard. Being a city girl, I couldn’t say I knew much about the different grasses out there in the world, but I had a feeling it was similar to the sweet grass Storm had been munching on by the watering hole.

Beckett Manning was a thoughtful man about the things that were important to him. His horse definitely seemed to be high on the list.

The closer we got to his place, the more details came into focus. He was definitely right about the stable. It was a mix of wrought iron and cherry stained wood much like the lower level of his house. Behind the stables was a triple car garage and gravel drive.

I couldn’t imagine the shack he spoke of underneath all the improvements. It was somehow cozy and masculine at the same time. It also felt like a space out of time. Much like the day as a whole.

He slid off Storm and reached for me. “I have to rub him down. It’s been a lot of activity today.”

“That’s okay.”

He slid his hand down my flank and gripped my ass. “You can head inside. I’ll be right after you.”

I arched a brow at him. “What if I poke around?”

“You could.” He lowered his mouth to mine. “Or you could find something better to do.”

I grinned against his lips. “Oh, really? Like what? Hop in your bed naked?”

His grip increased, lifting me onto my toes. “That’s an option.”

I'd tastefully been undressed a time or two, but sat there waiting? No, that was definitely not something I'd ever thought to do.

His gaze went dark, his blue eyes glittering under the shade from his jet-black cowboy hat. "Now I'm imagining this soft skin on my sheets, and I think I should retract that request. In fact, I should probably quickly go change my sheets and beg forgiveness for any messes in my house."

A giggle bubbled up and out of my chest. "I like the way you smell."

He lifted me off my toes and up until I wrapped my legs around his waist with a squeak. "I'm a farmer, Helena."

"One who knows what a shower is for, I'm sure."

"I'll give you that. But there's only been me in that bed for a long time."

I gripped his shoulders. "Now you're telling fibs."

"I don't bring women home."

The way he said it made my smile fall away. "And you're bringing me home?"

"I am."

"And you're okay with that?"

"No boundaries, remember? That house has been my sanctuary for a long time. Family is different, but..."

I swallowed. "Second floor only," I whispered.

He nodded. "Caught the dining deck, huh?"

"Maybe."

His gaze dropped to my mouth then lifted to meet my gaze. "The idea of you in my bed..."

His fingers dug into my hips and I couldn't help but close the gap between our mouths. The kiss was as hot as a brushfire. My ankles crossed and locked at his lower back before I broke the kiss. "I want that so much."

To a dizzying degree, if I was going to be honest with myself.

Distracting myself with the actual structure that Beckett had put his heart and soul into was one thing, but walking into it was quite another. Or being carried into it. Especially knowing that he didn't roll women in and out of his bed made it all the more intense.

I could honestly say no one had been in my bed either, but that was more situational than due to Beckett's reasoning.

He huffed out a laugh as he tipped his head back. "I really didn't think this was how today was going to go." He let me slowly slide down his body until my feet hit the ground, then he met my gaze again. "Now I can't

imagine it any other way.”

“Don’t be too long.” I stepped back and bumped into Storm who whinnied and snorted. I laughed and turned my face into the horse’s neck, giving him a hug. “Sorry, pal. Beckett will get you all situated. I can wait.”

I was pretty sure I could anyway.

“Follow the path there and up the stairs to the second floor. There’s a key under the green pot.”

“Okay.”

I hurried off before I did something stupid like ask him to take me into the stable and roll me in the hay like some cliché. Storm had performed heroically today and deserved some pampering.

The ginger cat lifted his head and gave me a sleepy look before putting its head back down to resume napping. I snuck a quick look at the sky again and was glad we’d headed back to his house instead of staying at the spring.

An intricate design of wind chimes clanged and danced in the increasing bluster as I got to the top of the stairs. I hurried to the door and found the small pot with a key stuck to the bottom. Letting myself in, I reached for lights, but they flickered on before I could find a switch.

The kitchen was all light woods and streamlined for ease of use. Edison pendant lights and black fixtures added a modern aspect to the endless wood cabinets and countertops. The real star of the kitchen was the massive window bisected by shelves and more plants.

I wouldn’t have pegged Beckett as a plant dad, but the greenery lent a fresh scent to the room. Then I realized all the plants were actually herbs with a few vining plants I recognized from photos in magazines.

Definitely not my parents’ house. Theirs was sterile and show worthy with perfectly curated antique furniture.

Beckett’s home was vintage, homey, and masculine. The kitchen flowed into a cozy living room with similar chairs and couches to his parents’ house. Unsurprisingly, there was also a massive television situated over an equally humongous fireplace.

I wandered in and was pretty sure I could actually step into the hearth. Old brick was stained from endless fires. I could imagine how comfortable it would be to sit by it on a stormy night. A smattering of photos on the mantel showed Beckett and his family in various candid shots as well as a woman with dark hair who had her cheek plastered to his, flashing a cheesy grin.

She was gorgeous and statuesque in a way I’d never be. Was this the type

of woman he found appealing? How did we end up...doing what we were?

I set the photo back down and swallowed down the urge to compare the two of us any longer. He obviously had a past, and it wasn't any of my business why he'd have a woman on his shelf and not in his life romantically.

At least I was pretty sure he was single.

He wouldn't...

No.

"Stop it," I ordered myself.

I was so bad at this one night stand stuff. We both were unencumbered and that was all I needed to know. Not if she was an ex or a friend or maybe she was even a cousin. Just because I hadn't met her at the wedding didn't mean anything.

I spotted the stairs to the next floor and followed them up to the top floor. I was expecting a hallway and a few bedrooms, instead it was one massive room with windows from floor to ceiling on two sides.

The view was breathtaking as I entered. The ceiling was vaulted with a series of beams and skylights reminiscent of a greenhouse. A trio of fans spun lazily above, keeping the room pleasantly cool.

A gas fireplace stood dormant on the wall as I walked in. The floor was dark hardwood save for large area rugs scattered around the expansive room. One huge one framed out the king-sized bed that stood against the one wall without any glass.

The bed was simple and instead of a headboard, it was situated in front of a stone wall with two sconces above the bed. A massive painting of what had to be the orchard filled the space. It was a dramatic piece with an aerial view of the trees and the skyline at dawn.

I dragged my fingers down the simple green blanket on his bed. I wasn't surprised the bed was made, but I was surprised it was a linen duvet. Maybe the brunette from the photo had helped him.

Ugh.

I had to put that aside or it was going to drive me crazy.

A tobacco-brown leather bench at the foot of the bed had a shirt and a pair of pants thrown over it, showing he wasn't rigid about his space. An armoire was tucked into the corner beside a door to what looked like an en suite bathroom.

I turned back toward the massive windows where a pair of comfy couches filled the rest of the space. Instead of another television, there was an endless

row of short bookcases framing the bottom of the windows, stuffed with books and interesting art pieces I'd want to look at later.

But it was the French doors that I couldn't resist.

I opened them and the wind whipped my hair around my face. The sky was darkening quickly, and lightning slashed the sky. I went right for the railing and Beckett's backyard opened up. More trees hid the house, but in the distance, the orchard rolled out below.

It was a beautiful space, but I couldn't drag my attention away from the view. And the storm racing our way.

I backed away when the first fat drops of rain hit my hand.

"I was hoping to see you in my bed, but this is the next best thing."

CHAPTER 8

BECKETT

JUST ONE NIGHT

It had been a damn long time since anyone had been in my private space. And here she was, a near stranger, looking exceptionally perfect in it.

Her wispy blond hair whipped around her shoulders in the increasing wind. The summer storm was practically overhead. Based on the roiling clouds behind her, it was going to blow through hard and fast.

Kind of like us.

I hadn't been prepared for her.

I still wasn't.

A smarter man would have taken her to a fancy hotel like she deserved. Where the sheets were a high thread count and the memories could stay apart from my everyday life.

Compartmentalizing sex had been the only way I could do my job. When my family obligations sat heavy and I had no room to breathe, this house was my sanctuary.

Now a pint-sized socialite was standing on my balcony in borrowed clothes, no makeup, with a touch of wildness breaking through those burning gold eyes.

All for me.

I was used to shouldering big responsibilities. The Manning legacy had been my sole purpose for more years than I could remember. I'd been made to step up.

But this woman pulled at something I couldn't name. From the moment I'd seen her sneak into Clay and Rachel's reception with those big, wounded eyes, I'd felt the shift. I'd wanted to ignore it. I was damn good at staying in my lane.

She'd been there with that dick, Pierce. He'd treated her like an afterthought, and still, I put her out of my mind. I didn't poach. There were certain lines in the sand, and that was mine.

But then she'd run at me with eyes brimming with shame and hurt and there was no going back.

Just like now.

The wounded part was less now. It was banked under the inescapable pull between us. I'd tasted her. Experienced her flying apart under my mouth beneath an oak tree that had been part of my land since before I was born.

That was nothing compared to having her in my sanctuary.

She was going to be a storm. I knew that as plainly as I knew when the trees were ready for harvest. The real question was would I be standing by the end of it?

I stood in the doorway of the balcony and lightning bloomed behind her. The jagged trail of it branched out behind her like wings and ozone burned the air. The crack of thunder followed quickly and she jumped, rushing toward me as the skies opened up and the wind doused her with rain.

She laughed at her own reaction. Her hair was plastered to her neck and that tissue paper-thin shirt stuck to her shoulders and her magnificent breasts.

She was slight and fragile in ways that made me feel inept. But I still moved forward to catch her close.

She tipped her chin up as rain dotted her cheeks and starred her eyelashes. "You got here just in time."

I cupped her face in my rough hand and swiped the gathered droplets off her cheek. "Remember how I said I wasn't sure I could be gentle?"

Her smile faded, leaving molten gold behind. "I do."

All my muscles were tight and my chest ached. "You deserve gentleness."

"All I want is you." She went onto her toes. "The real you. I'm tired of everyone being gentle with me. Show me how much you want me. No boundaries, remember?" She laid a hand on my chest. "Show me."

I caught her hand and lifted it to my mouth. I scraped my teeth over the fleshy part of her palm before pressing it to my cheek. "I don't have much choice. I want you far too much."

The air was oppressive and thick. I tugged her farther into the dryness of my bedroom and would've closed the door but she shook her head. "Don't close out the storm. I want to hear it while you--while we're together."

Make love to her?

It wouldn't be anything so sweet. I was glad to see the knowledge in her eyes. Because there was only one way this was going to go the first time. I just hoped I had enough control to make it as good for her as possible.

And if not, I'd make it up to her. Because we had all damn night.

She stood in the middle of my living area, the stone gray sky and lightning our only light. She deserved candles or at the very least firelight and maybe I'd manage to give her that a little later. It was still technically daylight, even if the storm had eclipsed the sun.

Rain slashed at the windows and the skylights, though I barely heard it over the pounding of my own heart. Her cool hand drifted down my jaw to my neck and to my shirt. With shaking fingers, she slipped the first few buttons free.

I covered her hand then stepped back so I could crouch before her. I untied her boots and slipped her foot free from one then the other, followed by the comically thick socks under her jeans. Her feet were just as elegant as the rest of her, her dark toenails showing off a little of the spice she hid from the world.

I hoped to draw out more of that during our time together.

She slipped her fingers in my hair, drawing my gaze back up to her. God, those golden eyes were going to end me.

"Undo your hair." My voice was hoarse as I stood.

Her fingers went to her braid, slowly unwinding the strands as I stood. Shaking it out over her shoulders until the heavy silk swung down her back, gossamer fine and wavy from the braid.

I reached behind her neck to gather it into a tail for one long, slow stroke before I wound it around my palm, drawing her head back. I dragged my bearded chin down her neck, following the faint blue vein down to her fluttering pulse. I wrapped my lips around the skin there and swirled my tongue along the thrumming pulsepoint.

She drew in a shaky breath as I held her there and nibbled my way back up to the spot behind her ear. I'd already learned a few secrets on the picnic blanket, as well as in the doorway to my parents' bathroom. Her lilac scent was strongest there and she gasped as I sucked strongly enough to leave a small mark.

Knowing a tiny part of me would be left behind when she was gone stabilized some of the growing tension inside of me.

I released her hair to strip off her shirt.

I watched her face as I lightly tugged at the rigid tips of her breasts. Her mouth parted and her eyelids grew heavy, but her focus never wavered. Even when I palmed her with my rough hands and left a faint trail of abrasion on her water soft skin, she was still locked on me. Her breath fluttered out on a broken sigh.

Her soft, worn jeans were next. They were just loose enough to slip to the floor with little help.

The storm was right above us, flashes of lightning and shuddering thunder chasing each other until I couldn't tell which started and ended. It lit her face and body, showing every gentle curve and line of her in stark relief.

She threw her shoulders back and the passion in her eyes nearly brought me to my knees.

I scooped her up, continually shocked at how small she was. She was so delicate, so refined, but in this moment, my rough, calloused hands and all that came with them were what she wanted. I couldn't help being in awe that she trusted me with what she needed. I knew this wasn't like her. For all intents and purposes, I was probably taking advantage.

I simply didn't care.

For once, I wouldn't stop myself from taking everything tonight.

With a few steps, she was on my bed. Her skin glowed off the dark green bedding as I quickly stripped off my shirt and wrestled with my boots.

She rose onto her elbows with a laugh.

“Think it's funny?”

Her husky laugh transformed her from achingly beautiful to something far more dangerous. “Maybe a little.”

I finally got my foot free and dragged my undershirt over my head.

The skylight above my bed left her in a wash of watery light. Her golden hair was dark with rain and she didn't bother to hide her body. Nor did she hide her appreciation of me stripping for her. Then suddenly her eyes widened.

“Enjoying the show?” I pressed one knee onto the bed.

She rolled onto her knees and crawled to me. My breath backed up in my lungs when her cool fingers went to the scar along my ribs then skipped to the other one that slashed across my chest. “What happened?”

I froze at her tender touch. I hadn't had a whole lot of tenderness in my life. “It was a long time ago.”

Her gaze burned into mine, obviously not about to let it go.

“Stupid kid stuff. The chest was from my motorcycle.”

She knelt in front of me, sitting on her feet. The pose was submissive and dragged my brain into places she didn't belong. My cock throbbed as her gaze dropped to my zipper, then she licked her lips. Her nipples tightened even more and I couldn't resist cupping her to drag my thumb over one taut tip.

Her eyes fluttered shut as she leaned into my touch before blinking back open. Her pupils were dilated with arousal. “You ride a motorcycle?”

I nodded. “Not as much as I used to, but yeah.” My voice was hoarse.

“And your ribs?”

“I wasn't quick enough when a branch broke on the old oak I was climbing. Sharp fucker.”

Her fingers slid back along the ridges of muscle above my zipper then snuck under the tongue of my belt and flicked it out of the loops. “Will I find any more under here?”

I slid my arm under her back and lifted her against me. No way could I handle her hands on me right now. I'd managed to hold myself in check thanks to the clothing barrier between us, but now I was too close to the edge.

I couldn't think about her gentleness or her obvious distress about my scars. I had a damn lot of them all over me. My job wasn't an easy one even now that I was more of a manager than in the fields. I still got dirty every damn day during harvest.

I drew her up to the top of the bed, settling her under me as I braceleted her wrists together in one of mine and drew her arms above her head. “What you'll find is trouble.”

She blinked up at me and I couldn't resist her parted mouth. I delved in with a scorching kiss that had her moving restlessly under me. With my other hand, I cupped her breast then down to her stomach and nudged her thighs wider.

She moaned into my mouth as I found her silky warmth.

“So wet for me. Thank God, because I'm about at my breaking point.”

She wiggled. “Let my hands go and I'll help you out.”

I laughed. “If I let you go, this will be over in a minute.” I dragged my knuckle through her soaked slit. I watched her eyes widen as I found her clit and slowly circled it again and again until her thighs shook. She was close. So primed to react to me. I turned my hand to slip a finger inside her and

groaned at how perfectly tight she was around me. “Oh, girl. When I feel this around my cock, I’m going to be so gone.”

She let out a shaky breath. It was a moan and a hiss of reaction to stretching her that tripped together into a sigh as I slowly pulsed inside of her with one, then another finger.

“There. So good,” I said against her mouth. I dragged my thumb along her swollen pussy above my fingers to find her clit once more.

Her hips lifted off the bed and I swallowed the first rush of breath as my fingers worked in tandem with my tongue on her neck before racing to find that sweet spot behind her ear again.

“Come for me, Helena. Let me know I got you off at least once before I lose it. Before I drive into you like I need to.”

I thrust a little harder, the clasp of her pussy on my hand not enough. I ground my hips into the mattress to keep myself from ripping my zipper open and replacing my fingers with my throbbing cock between her sweet thighs.

Her leg came up and around my hip as she lifted herself in time with my hand. I held her hands down at the wrists still and she bowed up, crying out as she soaked my hand.

“That’s it.” I lowered my mouth to her neck as I widened her legs. Finally, I had to let her hands go to get lower. I scraped my teeth over the curve of her breast and belly, but I needed to taste her again. I pushed her thighs flush with the mattress and slipped my tongue inside, dragging her flavor into my mouth.

I pressed my dick into the mattress, wishing it was her, but I needed one more scream from her.

I craved it like her breath I’d stolen moments ago.

I wanted to take everything of her inside me that I could.

My hands slid under her ass and lifted her pussy to my mouth as I circled her clit again and again, following the pattern of her cries and shifting hips until I found exactly what she needed.

She arched up and then curled around my head with her legs and body, her fingers in my hair as she cried out and shook around me.

I was drowning in her scent and her taste and finally broke free to stretch over her. I fumbled for the drawer under my mattress. My bed had hidden storage under it and I thanked God for my stash there.

“Beckett, please.” Her eyes were still wild as she reached between us for my zipper. This time, her clever fingers bypassed the rough denim of my

dress jeans and fisted around me. “Not enough.”

“I know, I know.” I groaned and pushed my shaft into her hand.

There was no going back now.

I finally got the box open and managed to tear off a foil packet. I crashed onto my hip as she pushed at my jeans.

“Help me.” Her voice was throaty and desperate.

I groaned as her lips coasted over my chest and she scraped a nail over my nipple, burying her nose in my chest hair. She kept moving lower and I hissed as her tongue lashed over my lower stomach. She pushed me onto my back and peeled open my jeans.

“Helena,” I dragged in a groan as she reached into my underwear and scooped me out. When the flat of her tongue dragged its way up my shaft, I swear I saw angels.

It was probably the lightning overhead, but she was going to kill me.

She crawled over me and pressed the head of my cock against her belly.

“Hurry.”

“Right.” Snapping out of my stupor, I ripped open the condom and barely got my jeans over my ass before I gave up and sheathed my dick before I did something stupid. “I want you to ride me more than anything, but I’m afraid I’ll be too rough.”

I curled my arm around her back and flipped her onto her back.

She opened for me. Her skin was angry pink in so many places from my rough hands and beard. I gripped the bedding, and she drew my head up with a gentle hand until our eyes locked.

“I want this. You feel so good, but I know this will be even better.” She lifted her mouth to line up with mine. “Inside me, Beckett. Inside me,” she said against my lips.

I took myself in hand and slid the head of my cock along her slit. The heat of her overwhelmed me. Finding her slick and waiting for me, she nearly made me beg.

She draped her legs over my thighs and lifted her hips.

As if I had any other choice but to slide into her at this point. It felt like I’d been on the precipice of this all day. I took it as slow as I could, but with each inch, my spine burned with the need to power into her.

To lose myself inside the clasp heat waiting for me. I’d been denying myself through the day to make sure she was taken care of.

Now I was nearly rabid.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.” I gripped her hip. “Relax for me.” I pressed my forehead to hers and listened to her as she breathed out. Her body was clenched tight against the newness of us like this.

I lightly pulsed against her, then redirected my hand between us to stroke along the top of where we were almost joined. I made tight little circles around her clit as she slowly relaxed and panted.

Her body knew what it wanted, I just had to get her there.

She let out a broken sob as her thigh quivered. I could feel her fluttering around my shaft, and I wanted nothing more than to feel that for the rest of my natural born life.

Her head tipped back as she cried out and lightning flashed overhead as I sank fully into her.

Her ankles locked at my lower back, and she dragged me even closer.

She was the sweetest perfection. Now that I was inside, it was like she was meant for me. I looked down at her and found wonder in her eyes as we moved together. The world above us rumbled and stormed, but there was nothing but smooth, gliding warmth between us.

A bead of sweat rolled down my nose as my hips flexed again and again. I pressed my face into her neck as I tried to coast on the clasp pressure of her body around mine, but the way she rolled her hips pushed me closer and closer to my breaking point.

“Helena,” I growled into her neck.

She choked out a sigh as she widened her legs for me.

As if she knew what I needed.

The slowness grew to a deep rocking as I pushed up on my knees. My fingers dug into the backs of her thighs to spread her wide. Reckless need overrode my senses as I drove into her.

Her arms went up over her head into the pillows, scattering them as she tried to hold onto something. Her back arched off the bed.

I used my knees for leverage and surged into her. The thunder roared, or maybe it was me—I wasn’t quite sure at that point. I moved my hands to her waist to hold her where I needed her. And she took every punishing thrust. The angle gave us both the friction we needed, and her shout came right before I went blind.

I came so hard, my brain emptied and the relief left me a shell of a man. My own legs shook so hard with the aftershock that I had to catch myself from falling on top of her.

I crashed beside her and we both gasped for air, staring at the strobing lightning above us. For a moment, we were both silent.

A joyous laugh broke through the haze. I glanced over at her as she giggled again, before twisting on her side toward me. "What was that?"

I covered my face with my forearm and continued to try to drag oxygen into my deprived lungs. "I believe the term is, the angels wept."

Her delighted laughter filled the barren wasteland of my chest with something I couldn't quite identify. I was afraid to reach for her because I knew that golden fountain of happiness was dangerous.

One night.

I reminded myself once more that was all we were ever going to be.

With that firmly in mind, I dropped my arm and looked at her smiling face. "I wasn't expecting laughter, Helena."

"Neither was I. But I'm pretty sure I've never had multiple orgasms in my life. Seems a reason to smile." She propped her head up with her hand. "No wonder people want to have sex all the time."

I stacked my arms behind my head so I didn't grab for her again. I needed a minute to collect myself, dammit. I arched a brow at her. "And you don't?"

She shrugged, then she sat up to stretch her arms above her head. "I would if it was like that the other times I tried it." She gave me a delighted smile over her shoulder. "Is it wrong that I'm famished?"

I sat up and kissed her shoulder. "Not at all. We worked up quite the appetite."

She slid off the bed and reached for my shirt on the floor. She wrinkled her nose as she lifted it. "Think I could borrow a different shirt?"

"I think we can arrange that." I rolled off the bed on the other side and took care of the condom. "How about I show you my shower first?"

"Is it as impressive as your mother's?"

"Better." I pointed at her. "Also no mentioning my mother while you're naked."

She snickered. "That's fair." Then she streaked by me into the bathroom.

I followed her delighted moans and reminded myself, yet again, it was just one night.

But that night was nowhere near over yet.

CHAPTER 9

HELENA

CONNECTED

Beckett was a man who knew exactly where money should be spent on luxuries. I was a limp noodle by the time we both dragged ourselves out of his steam shower. I was technically clean of body, if not of mind.

He also had inventive ways to help me get cleaned up.

I sat on his bed in a towel as he rifled through his armoire.

“You’re going to swim in all of these.”

“No other scraps from your sister?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me. “Definitely not.”

I patted my hair with the extra towel. “At least you’re not offering up something an ex left behind.”

“Because I don’t have one of those.”

“Oh, c’mon. You had to have a relationship sometime in the last few years.”

“Nope.” He snapped out a shirt with a large asterisk looking symbol on the front that was faded from many washes. “Handy for you I don’t throw anything away.”

“How old is that?”

“Think I got it when I was fifteen. My first show.” He held it up in front of his substantially larger chest. “Thankfully, I filled out a little.” He tossed it at me.

I turned it around to see the band name. “Red Hot Chili Peppers?”

“Yep.” He flipped his towel over his shoulder then slid on a pair of black boxer briefs.

I pressed my lips together as I enjoyed the exceptional curve of his butt. He was a rare one who looked good coming and going.

“Are you objectifying me, Ms. Danbury?”

I blushed. “I would never.”

My gaze slid over his shoulders and down to the tattoo of a barn owl spread over his shoulder blade. I recognized it from the logos around the orchard. This one was a little more detailed than the stark woodcut style used at the café and my vague memories of the labels on their alcohol.

Otherwise his skin was tanned, with a few patches of freckles, along with a sundry of scars from a manual labor kind of life. Everything about him was different from the carefully cultured men I’d known in the past. Including the fact that he didn’t hesitate to make me feel beautiful.

He turned with a pair of boxers in his hand. “These have never been worn, so they should be relatively safe.”

“Because they are wow.”

“Our stocking stuffers for Christmas are eclectic, to say the least. Zoe thought she was funny with this one.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a Harry Styles fan.”

He flipped them around to show off the entire boy band of One Direction on the backside. “Equal opportunity.”

I swallowed down a laugh. “I’m shocked you never wore them.”

“More shocked I haven’t used them to clean the toilet.”

I laughed and took them. “I’m in luck.”

“If you’re cold, I can probably roll up a pair of sweats for you.”

I shook my head. “There’s a really nice fireplace downstairs.”

“It’s a good night for a fire. And some food.” He grabbed a pair of faded sweats and tugged them on. He crossed his arms. “Not gonna get dressed? You in a towel activates a whole different hunger.”

I let the towel dip until the tops of my breasts peeked from the oversized blue cotton.

He stood in front of me and picked up the T-shirt I’d set on the bed. “Lift your arms.”

“I can dress myself.”

His blue eyes darkened. “Up.”

Because I knew the towel would drop, I decided to play his game.

He stretched the shirt over my arms and slowly pulled it down. The faded red cotton obstructed my view for a moment and the lightly furred hair of his belly grazed my breast before he settled it down to cover me. He gently gathered my damp hair out of the shirt and down my back.

“I keep finding threadbare shirts to cover you in.” A muscle ticked in his jaw.

I tipped my chin up to meet his gaze. “On purpose?”

“Subconsciously maybe.” He brushed his thumb along my lower lip.

My nipples tightened. It seemed like that was their perpetual state of being around this man.

I laid my hands on the warm skin of his sides and some bold part of me decided reaching around to cup his butt was a good idea. What the heck was this man doing to me?

I’d never been one to instigate sex and here I was teasing him. It felt... good. Fun in ways I’d never allowed myself to be.

“That is not going to get you fed. Well, not with food anyway.”

My eyes widened as my gaze dropped to the front of his sweatpants.

He groaned. “Temptress.”

I leaned forward to brush a soft kiss on his ribs, right where his scar lay. “I’ve never been called that before in my life.” His abdominal muscles flexed as I lightly traced the ridges down to the fascinating vee at the top of his sweats.

He tried to step back, but I held onto his butt until he flexed under my touch. “Helena.”

I licked a line across the waistband to just below his navel. Bold with the obvious happy reaction of his body, I dragged at his sweats from the back, taking his underwear with it until the base of his cock came into view.

His hand slid around the back of my neck to my hair. “You sure about this?”

“I’m no expert, but it seems like you want this as much as I do.”

“Girl, I’ve thought of nothing else but those lips around my cock today.”

“Nothing?” I brought my hand around the front of his sweats and pushed them down to his thighs then wrapped my fingers around his shaft.

His head fell back. “Fuck.”

He was warm and hard. Actually, he was beyond warm. His skin was scorching, and his shaft filled my hand. He’d been so adamant to control our first time together, I hadn’t been able to really explore him.

And in the shower, he’d been focused on me.

I wasn’t used to this level of attention and wanted to reciprocate.

No, I *needed* to show him. It was well beyond want. Everything about Beckett seemed to blow past what I’d experienced before. I pressed his shaft

up along his lower belly to lick along the underside. He stiffened even more until his skin took on a darker hue that seemed painful.

I traced a prominent vein to his flared head. Following instinct, I curled my tongue along the underside before taking him between my lips.

His hand tightened on my hair and the tiny spark of pain made me moan as I stared up at him.

His focus was on me again.

Those blue eyes were as dark as midnight as I let him guide me where he needed me. I trusted him to show me what he liked. Anytime I'd done this before had been purely performative, but not here. I wanted to give to him as he'd given to me all day.

I took him deeper and he hissed out a breath. "Relax for me."

I blew out a slow breath through my nose and swallowed him down.

"Just like that."

When he wrapped my hair around his hand, my nipples tightened, and heat pooled in my belly. I opened my legs to bring him closer to me. I took him as deep as I could again and again. He lightly moved me by my hair until we were locked in a push and pull that left me restless and aching.

I tightened my hold along the base of him until he growled out my name.

"Are you wet for me? From doing this? Taking me deep?"

I nodded as I licked him from root to tip before greedily taking him in my mouth again while cupping his heavy sac.

He tugged at the towel pooled around me until he could get between my thighs. "So wet for me. You're soaked."

I choked as he went a little deeper than I could manage.

He tried to back up, but I held him tight and licked the tip of him. "More." I moved so the pricks of pain from his hold on my hair gave me another little zing. I flattened my tongue to drag it along the underside of his shaft. "Again."

"Fuck." But he understood and tightened his hold and thrust into my mouth. His other hand gripped my thigh, pushing them apart. "Can you touch yourself?"

I slipped one hand between my legs. He was right, I was shockingly soaked. I moaned around him, surprised at how I was reacting to this. But I'd never felt like I was a part of it before. Instead, I'd been just a receptacle for my partner's pleasure.

Not with him.

Pleasure bloomed between us.

Nor had I ever touched myself for a man. I was tentative at first. I was still sensitive from before, but with each flex of his hips, I found an echoing rhythm. I kept myself on the edge as I concentrated on him. Listened for his rare moans, lived for the grip of his fingers on my hair. Those were the keys to his pleasure, which translated to more for me.

Never before had I known this plateau of being stretched between the syrupy bliss of power and satisfaction. I didn't want it to end even as I felt the tightening of his muscles and heard the quickening of his breath. Everything was strung so tight between us.

I wanted to ride the edge for myself a little longer, but his hold on my hair shot white lights behind my eyes as I groaned around his cock.

“Helena.”

Even in my limited experience, I knew that was a warning.

I chased it. Welcomed it even as I braced for it and swallowed him down. My nails dug into his belly as I gripped his shaft with my other hand and took it all. Even as it overwhelmed me, I loved that I could bring him here.

That I could be for him just what he'd been for me.

All the times he'd made sure I was comfortable or beyond needy for him.

I looked up to find his chest heaving as if he'd run a mile. He dragged me up by my hair and I saw that there was still some bit of wildness in him.

As if I'd unleashed it with an orgasm.

His mouth slammed on mine and I was shocked at the intimacy. He let my hair go and cupped my ass until I was on my toes. I followed the directive and wrapped my legs around his middle. He rolled me back onto the bed and pushed at my shirt.

His mouth was ravenous on my skin, his teeth razoring over my flesh just a hint away from of pain.

I cried out his name. My system was overloaded. Since my focus had been on him, I didn't realize how close I was too.

He scraped his teeth down my ribs to sink into my hip. I clamped my thighs shut over his hand.

“Let me in.” His eyes were nearly feral, and my heart skipped a beat.

Did I do that to him? Shy and sedate Helena Danbury had never incited that kind of reaction from anyone.

Instead of waiting for me, he dragged me closer and rolled us so I was straddling him.

I threw my head back at the sudden friction of his hair roughened skin on my sensitive skin. He was half hard against me already. Dear God.

But he didn't stop there, he reached down to that drawer and pushed a condom at me.

"Yes." Shocked that he could be ready for me again, my fingers shook as I ripped open the packet.

"You're going to kill me, but I need to be inside you again."

I inched back, surprised at how hard he was along the curve of my ass. I rose up to make room so I could sit on his thighs.

"You should probably do this."

He shook his head as he sat up. "You wanted to drive me to madness, you get to do this."

"Madness?" I looked up from the very hard cock in front of me.

He reached down to tease his fingertips through my wetness. "Madness. Watching you take my cock like that. Fuck. I'll never forget it." He gentled his strokes as he stretched me open. "So ready for me." His other hand went back up to the nape of my neck. "You like this too."

My eyelids slid closed at the increased pressure. "Never before you."

"Made for me," he muttered darkly as he crushed his mouth to mine.

Surely, I hadn't heard him right.

But I was too far gone to think through anything other than getting this condom on him so I could get him inside me again.

Later.

Later, I'd go over all of this when I was alone again.

My hand fisted around him at the thought of being alone again. I couldn't think about that. Not right now. With trembling hands, I rolled the latex down over him and prayed I'd done it right.

With the speed in which he dragged me forward, I figured we were all systems go.

God, why did it have to be so awkward?

But my need for him overrode the nerves and I slid down, taking him deeply and slowly. I threw my head back as he stretched me until I nearly couldn't bear it.

His hands were at my waist, guiding me until there was no air between us. Nothing but us as he gathered me closer. As my eyelids lifted, his stunningly rugged face filled my vision. Wild blue eyes locked on me as we slowly moved.

I rocked forward, annoyed when I realized I was still wearing his shirt.

I flipped it off, needing to feel his skin against mine. My arms slid around his shoulders until the last of the space between us was gone. His arms followed suit around my lower back and crushed me in tightly. Friction and fullness wound us tighter, tangling us up in one another until there was no end and no beginning.

Just us.

Faster.

There was nothing but Beckett.

Nothing but us.

Connected.

Locked.

Holding me together, even as I flew apart.

He swallowed my screams, fusing us together there as well.

The sob surprised me, but he didn't flinch. He just thrust up into me and took every emotion I couldn't control. And gave me back safety and himself.

More than I could have ever dreamed.

CHAPTER 10

BECKETT

HOT SAUCE REALITY

Murder by sex wasn't the worst way to go out.

Nor was with an armful of gorgeous, sated female. Especially when she smelled like me from every fucking pore. From my soap to our blend of truly magical sex.

I definitely hadn't been expecting her bring me to my knees with her mouth.

That heavy upper lip all swollen from working me over would live in my dreams for a damn long time.

Just one night.

Just one night.

I had to keep reminding myself of that.

Because nothing about us felt like one night and that was dangerous territory. She wasn't sticking around. She certainly wasn't for me.

What the hell did I have to offer her?

Two hours a week between my insane schedule running the orchard? Oh, yeah, I was a real catch.

This was why I didn't do relationships. I needed to get my head out of my ass about it and enjoy it for what it was—period.

She softly moaned and turned her face, so her cheek rubbed against my chest and all of the cornsilk perfection of her hair slid across my shoulders and down my arm.

I didn't want to move her.

I'd rather pretend this day didn't need to end.

I sure as shit would prefer to stay inside the sweet perfection of her body for the rest of the hours I had her, but that was an even more dangerous road

to travel. Instead, I slipped my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck.

She purred, reminding me of how she reacted to my strong grip on her hair when she'd been sucking me blind. There was a piece of me that I had to lock down. I preferred to let that part of me out only with strangers.

And while I'd probably never see her after tonight, I didn't trust myself with her. I wouldn't hurt her—that wasn't my way, but she wasn't made for a rough ride. For God's sake, her skin was already marked up just from what we'd done so far.

She lifted her head and gave me a sleepy smile. "Sorry. I went full on limp noodle on you."

"I don't mind."

She turned her face into my neck, pressing a sweet kiss to my stubbly skin beneath my neat beard. It went unruly fast, my facial hair just as thick as the chia pet on my head. "As much as I enjoyed you as my appetizer, I'm starving. Tell me you have something in your kitchen."

I laughed, some of the tension sliding out of me. Food I could handle. "I might be able to throw something together."

She shifted and hissed. "How are you still hard?"

"Because your pussy is one of my new favorite things in all the world."

I hadn't meant to let those coarse words out. I opened my mouth to take it back, but a huge smile transformed her face. She was achingly beautiful, but that smile was pure feminine pleasure. And full of power which had been missing during our first round.

Multiple orgasms must've been a confidence booster.

Then she clenched down with those muscles that could easily make a man lose the power of speech.

"Ah, babe. You're gonna kill me."

She nipped my ear. "Is it wrong that I don't want to move?"

I groaned, but I slipped my hand between us to make sure there wasn't an accident of epic proportions. I gripped the band of the condom at the base of my dick and eased out of her. The way her mouth turned down made me lean in to give her a quick kiss. "Lucky for you, I have the Costco-sized box of condoms in that drawer."

At her blank look, I slid out from under her and took care of it. If that didn't show the difference between us, I don't know what did.

She grabbed the blankets on my bed for the first time, pulling them over her as she propped herself up on her elbow. "I'm assuming you mean a large

box?”

“Bet they don’t have warehouse clubs in Manhattan.”

“No, not in the city. It’s not like I haven’t been in one before. We just don’t happen to have that one in my part of New York.”

“Saks has one?”

She sat up, fitting the bedding around her breasts. “Now you’re just being an asshole.”

I sat on the side of the bed with my back to her.

“I’m well aware we live in two different worlds, Beckett.” She scooted closer to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. “That doesn’t have to matter tonight, does it?”

I blew out a breath. “Just not something I should forget.”

“Can’t we though? I’m just Helena and you’re just Beckett. At least for one day.”

I gripped the edge of the bed. When her slim, cool fingers slid along my cheek, I shut my eyes.

She turned my cheek toward her. “Please don’t ruin this with reality.”

I groaned as her lips brushed mine, then sighed and kissed her back. Not like I could resist her. She was right, reality would be intruding soon enough. Instead of taking the kiss deeper, I scooped her off the bed and onto my lap.

She squeaked and her arm hooked around my neck with a laugh.

Laughter was easier to deal with.

Tomorrow would suck, but it didn’t need to just yet.

“So, are you a salty snack or a sweet one post-sex?”

She nibbled on the corner of her bottom lip. “Good question.”

The fact that she didn’t know spoke volumes. I swung her up in my arms to keep the mood light. “We need clothes.”

I deposited her in front of the bathroom door. “Do whatever it is girls do and I’ll get your clothes.” When she turned away, I swatted her ass. “Make it quick.”

Surprised but laughing with it, which made me relax even more, she closed the door in my face.

This time, I dug out a pair of sweatpants for her too then also dug out a couple pairs of socks for both of us against the cool night. I got dressed and handed her the pile of clothes through the crack in the door.

The storm had finally blown over, but the temperatures had definitely dropped. I checked the deck for any damages. The sun was low in the sky,

peeking from what was left of the angry clouds. A few branches dotted my lawn, but nothing I needed to worry about just then.

I checked my phone to see if any emergencies had surfaced. My brother chat thread was the only one I cared about. I saw a few others, including one from Rachel. That was definitely a nope right now.

HAYES

You good?

JUSTIN

Did you kidnap her?

HAYES

I'm assuming you're not coming to the reception.

HAYES

You dead?

HAYES

Seriously. One of Rach's old friends is actually flirting with me. Don't make me come find your ass.

HAYES

Dude. She's hot. I'll kick your ass if you just turned off your phone.

JUSTIN

She is above his paygrade, but we let him have his fantasies.

HAYES

<middle finger emoji>

Be a pal.

Jackass. Did your horse leave you in a ditch?

I huffed out a laugh. Considering the last time my brother had dated was in the last fiscal year, I took pity on him. And because the time of the text was over half an hour ago, I quickly fired off a reply.

I'm fine. Have fun. Helena is safe as well.

He didn't need to know anything more. I closed the balcony doors and was about to turn off my phone when it buzzed in my hand.

HAYES

Does that mean she's with you?

I flicked off my notifications and tossed my phone on my coffee table as she came out of the bathroom. My sweatpants were way too big on her, but she'd rolled them down at the waist and up at the ankles to make them fit—sort of. She looked like a damn teenager with her hair up in some sort of knot.

Female witchcraft. I was pretty sure they could do anything with a paperclip and a rubber band. Maybe that was MacGyver. Whatever.

She was cute and I wanted to muss her up again.

When she frowned at me and glanced at my phone, I smiled at her. “Nothing important. Just let my brothers know you were okay.”

“Oh.” She twisted the hem of her shirt. “That was really irresponsible of me.”

I caught her hand and held it against my chest. “Bet you don't do anything irresponsible.”

She shrugged and stared at my chest.

I tipped her chin up. “Remember. One day—no rules.”

She nodded slowly. “Right.” Then more firmly. “Yeah. Let them wonder.”

“Exactly.” I took her hand and led her out of my room. “Now let's see if my fridge makes us happy or sad. I can't remember the last time I went shopping.”

“Eggs?”

I got to the bottom of the stairs and turned around. She was on the last stair and we were almost eye to eye. “Maybe.”

She looped her arms around my neck. “At least we can make scrambled eggs.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I lifted her up and walked her through living room, her feet dangling. Her delighted laugh was a balm I didn't realize I needed right then. I set her on my kitchen island with a quick kiss then turned to my fridge.

“Eggs are a...” I trailed off, making sure the date was okay. “Yes. They're a yes. Cheese, and a questionable pepper.” I set all of them on the countertop beside her. “We won't starve.”

She hopped down. “You find a pan, chopping board, and knife, and we're in business.”

I was a passable cook, but she was more creative than I was expecting. She flitted around the kitchen, looking at my herb pots as she broke off a few here and there and dumped them into the egg mixture.

Pretty soon, the kitchen smelled amazing.

She left me to make the actual omelette and disappeared into my living room.

I put the top on my pan for the eggs to cook evenly without burning—hopefully—and opened a bottle of wine from my meager stash. Mostly, my wine came from gifts from local wineries. Part of running the orchard included doing some community functions.

I'd been pushing our hard cider pretty intensely, getting it ready for distribution. Luckily, Ronan Parrish, my brewmaster, liked doing most of the publicity crap. He'd brought two of our bestsellers to the Catskills for a cider and wine festival.

I was pretty sure the fact that we'd placed in our first outing was why we managed to get our distributor to take us on. Brothers Three Orchard was finally on the map. But I couldn't slow down now—not when we were finally making tracks.

While I was pouring two glasses, the piano heavy tones of an album I had on my turntable floated into the kitchen.

She came back into the kitchen with a pleased smile on her face. "You have a record player."

I held out a glass for her. "I do."

"Impressive collection too. Guess you lean country?"

"Rock and country pretty exclusively. A little Motown when I'm feeling blue." I took a sip from my glass and hurried back to the stove. Handily, I was about ten seconds away from burning it and caught it just in time. I slipped the massive omelette on a plate and grabbed a bottle of hot sauce and two forks.

"I like this. Never heard of the band, but was too hungry to dig for something else." She followed me into the living room. "Not at the table?"

I set the plate on the end table beside my recliner. "Nope. No rules."

She grinned over the lip of her wineglass as she took a sip. "Somehow I think you usually eat in here since your kitchen table has a stack of papers on it."

"Guilty. Kitchen table is pretty much my desk."

She looked unsure where to sit where we could eat off the same plate and

I dumped her on my lap. She yelped and held up her wineglass, classy as could be because she didn't spill a damn drop.

I kicked out the recliner and settled her against me. "Perfect."

For the first time, she looked a little unsure of where to put herself. She shifted and tried to sit up, but I nudged her into the corner of the chair where we could comfortably sit together then put the plate on her lap.

I forked off a corner of the omelette and popped it in my mouth. "Hot sauce?"

"I...yes."

Surprised, I grabbed for the bottle and handed it to her along with the extra fork. "I can handle whatever you can."

She cut off herself a small bite then uncapped the hot sauce and gave it a dainty sniff. She turned the label around then dabbed the pad of her finger on the edge.

I laughed. "It's not going to bite you."

"I've watched *Hot Ones*. I'm not stupid."

"Have you now?" She was full of surprises.

"Amazing what you'll watch when you have insomnia." She shook it over the eggs liberally, then looked up at me. "What?"

"Nothing." But I couldn't stop smiling at her as she forked off another meager bite.

"What? Stop it." She elbowed me.

"I'm trying to picture you eating hot wings." I slipped my arm around her to get my fork in there, but it was a little awkward. Not enough to want to move her though.

She caught on and cut me off a piece, holding it in front of my mouth. I watched her eyes darken as I took it off the tines slowly.

"So you secretly get hot wings from Postmates or Uber Eats or whatever is the city equivalent?"

She rolled her eyes as she chewed and swallowed. "Why would you live in New York City and not get pizza and wings?"

"Why indeed. Though I'm a Sicilian kinda guy."

"Sacrilege," she muttered.

"You haven't had a House of Cheese pizza with all the fixings." She held up another bite with an alarming slash of red sauce on it. When she only stared me down, I opened my mouth. It took everything in me not to cough at the burn.

She added more hot sauce to the eggs and tucked the bottle between her knees. “Good.”

I picked up my wine glass and downed half of it—manfully.

I hoped.

“More?”

I shook my head and kept drinking. Was the wine making it hotter?

She finished the last few bites, then rescued a stray pepper and scraped off the last of the sauce and popped it in her mouth. “Mmm.”

I finished my glass and sat up, collapsing the footrest. “Gonna get a refill. Need anything?” I scooped her up and set her back down in the chair.

She laughed. “I’m good.”

I hightailed it into the kitchen.

“Some milk might help,” she yelled after me.

It did. Thankful that I’d just bought the milk the day before, I glugged right from the container. When the heat died down, I recapped it and shoved it back in the fridge then grabbed a Firefly hard cider from the back of my fridge.

She was standing on the edge of the kitchen with a huge grin on her face with the plate and her glass when I closed the door. “How was that milk?”

I rushed her and lifted her up and over my shoulder, gripping both her thighs to pin her against my chest. “Freaking milk.”

“Wait! Beckett, I’ve got a plate.”

I backed up enough for her to put it on the island counter. I took a sip of my brew and started out of the room once more.

“Wine!”

I backed up and she lifted herself enough to grab the bottle, her laughter filling my kitchen. There was a surprising amount of strength in her core. “Anything else, highness?”

I could see her in the reflection of the windows surrounding my kitchen. Night had fallen while we’d been cooking. She was drinking from her damn glass, her eyes dancing. “Nope. But I reserve the right to raid the freezer later if you have ice cream.”

“Of course I have ice cream. I’m not a caveman.”

She wiggled her butt next to my face. “Then onward, my magical steed.”

If I’d had another hand available, I’d have slapped that perky ass. Since it was so close, I turned my face to take a bite.

She yelped and her laughter turned into a gasping giggle that echoed all

the way up the stairs.

When the day started, I hadn't expected to have this much fun.

Now I wasn't sure what I was going to do with myself when she left.

CHAPTER 11

HELENA

MORNING SUN

I woke to a rustling beside me. My discarded wine glass came into focus in the watery early morning light.

Beckett was digging into the bedside table.

I shoved my arm under the pillow and tucked it under my cheek. “Whatcha looking for?”

He closed the drawer, clutching something in one hand and stroked down my hair with the other. “Go back to sleep, it’s early.”

“Okay.” I gathered the sheet and blanket around me against the coolness of his bedroom. I wasn’t used to sleeping naked, but Beckett wouldn’t hear of a sleepshirt last night. He’d pled his case spectacularly with his very talented mouth.

Who was I to argue?

I watched him pad across the room to the doors and go outside.

Going back to sleep now just wasn’t happening. Reality and morning was far too close. What was he doing out there? Some morning ritual in his farmer brain?

Maybe he didn’t know how to sleep in.

Maybe he didn’t want to stay with me in the light of day.

I sat up, trying to turn my brain off from its internal spin cycle.

We’d both tried to fight off sleep, reaching for one another through the night, each time more desperate than the last.

Then morning came and now I wasn’t quite sure what to do.

Did I follow him outside?

Lure him back in. “*One more for the road?*”

Yeah, that sounded like a ridiculous scene from a shitty movie.

Did I just get dressed and call an Uber?

Was that a thing on an orchard?

Oh, hey. What's the address, my guy?

How very New York City of me. Except I'd never been that girl, even living most of my life in Manhattan. At least there was a cab or the subway available for a walk of shame.

Not that I could do that even if I wanted to. I didn't have my purse or phone, for God's sake.

I really sucked at this one-night stand stuff.

Epically sucked.

"Just go out there. Be an adult," I whispered.

There was no walk of shame because I wasn't ashamed, dammit. I was a grown ass woman who'd decided to take a lover.

Okay, that sounded pretentious as all get out, but it was the truth. I'd never allowed myself to just go with the flow with anything until yesterday. Even if the flow was more like a raging river of emotional meltdowns to start.

The rest of it had been amazing.

I wasn't going to ruin it by being an idiot now.

I inched off the bed, taking the sheet with me in lieu of fighting my way back into the sweatpants from the night before. I shuffled across the living area, marveling at the view.

The orchard was in shadow with just the barest hint of butter yellow painting the edges of the dark. Trees surrounded his house, cloaking his balcony in liquid gray.

Beckett was an inky shadow leaning against the railing. He tipped his head back and a plume of smoke floated above him.

Smoking?

I'd been intimate with every part of him yesterday and no part of him had smelled, or tasted, like an ashtray.

"I thought you were going back to sleep."

"Didn't know you were a smoker."

He looked down at his hand, then back out to the view. "I gave it up years ago."

"Except for your emergency pack?"

"Takes one to know one?"

I came up beside him. "No. My brother has quit a dozen times, though."

He grunted and took one last drag, the cherry end glowing bright. He

filled his lungs and held it before using the underside of the railing to put out the half finished cigarette, then dropped it into a cup on the ground. He let out another stream with something akin to a sigh. “It will always taste better than it should.”

“Why did you need your emergency stash?”

He looked down at me. “Because you taste the same.”

I swallowed. I wasn’t quite sure what to say to that one.

He lifted his hand to my face. The morning mist clung to his fingertips as he tucked my hair around my ear. “I should get you back to The Lodge before people are everywhere.”

I went up on my toes and he met me halfway. The kiss was slow and soft. The damp balcony under my feet, the coolness of his lips, the warmth of his chest—I wanted all of it imprinted on my brain.

I had to let him go.

Reality was intruding with each bit of sun breaking over the orchard.

The kiss spun out, the late night desperation bleeding into the misty morning air.

I turned him, both of us stumbling the few feet to the outdoor chaise. He sat down hard as I stood in front of him. Deja vu from last night. This time, he allowed me to be in the power position. I was pretty sure he was only letting me think so.

One night and I already knew so much about him.

He peeled back the sheet I’d tucked around me with a low groan. He pressed his forehead to my belly for a moment and the heat of his breath fanned over my skin. I threaded my fingers through his hair as morning sounds dented the quiet. The birds in the trees, the breeze through the leaves, and the hum of animals waking up.

Then he looked up at me.

His eyes glittered in the faint light as his rough hand glided over my hip to tug me closer. My fingers slid down to grip his shoulders as he stroked his tongue over my nipple, dragging it deeper with strong, sucking pulls.

He nudged my legs open, drawing me even closer.

I hissed out a breath when his fingers slid between my legs. After hours together, he knew exactly how to touch me. The roughness and the gentleness becoming a sensory delight of mouth, fingers, and even his beard.

All leaving marks on me.

Leaving Beckett tattoos on my skin to take home with me.

At least until they faded.

Then I'd just have memories.

I wanted to watch. I ached for every moment to be catalogued, but he knew me too well. Knew exactly how to drive me high and fast so that my head fell back with a cry.

My legs shook and knees went to water and still, he pushed for more.

Sensitive and raw, I accepted that the last time wouldn't be sweet.

It really couldn't be.

It was a tempest. Just like our first time together under the booming thunder and lightning, this time, it was a storm inside of me. My heart raged as I dragged in oxygen around each seismic shift inside of me. From the woman who didn't know what it meant to connect, to this one who would be forever changed.

I gripped his forearm as he thrust rough fingers inside me.

Not enough.

Not nearly enough.

My name was a hoarse expletive as he turned his hand to curl those clever fingers deeper inside of me, the pliant tissues inside swallowing each bone-jarring invasion. I soaked him, soaked my thighs. Coming one time after the other at the angle he'd found.

I gripped his shoulder so I didn't fall down. "Inside me. Inside me," I chanted.

"I am."

"No."

"Helena, I—"

I dragged at his hand and climbed onto his lap, fumbling with his boxers. I took him in hand and dragged the head of his cock along my slit.

He tried to stand, but I was too far gone.

I took him inside with one grateful groan and he swore ripely.

"Fuck. Fuck." His head fell back as I rocked forward, taking him even deeper.

Every muscle inside of him locked, including his insanely hard cock.

I latched onto his mouth, infusing my chaos into him. His fingers dug into my ass, taking charge of the slide and glide of our bodies. The sheet slid free, slipping to the deck as I wrapped around him, burying my face in his neck.

Again and again, I took him inside me. My toes barely touched the deck and still I levered every muscle in my thighs to ride him.

His arms came around me at the small of my back.

There was no air.

No space.

No time.

Just us racing for the end.

I didn't want it. I fought it even as it came at me like a car crash.

One of his hands fisted my hair to drag my face to his as the sob rolled through me like thunder.

He swallowed my cries, answering with a guttural groan that would live in me long after we were apart. Long after I cleaned him away.

A smart woman wouldn't have allowed a near stranger to come inside her like that. Not when condoms were literally feet away from us.

I squeezed around him as if even my body wanted to hold onto him too.

He stroked a hand down my hair. Gentleness under the rigid body armor he was already building. I'd never really been so in tune with someone physically to notice.

Maybe because I was usually the one with all the walls.

Or the glass.

I was so used to looking from the outside in.

And here it was, all over again.

I laid my cheek against his shoulder. When he tried to lean back, I held on tighter.

"Just another minute."

He scooted back on the chaise and gathered me tighter. I watched the sun slide over the deck. Lemon-gold fingers chasing after me.

Chasing me away.

I couldn't be ashamed of the tears that rolled. If I didn't let some of the pain out, I'd go crazy with it. I allowed just a few. Enough for me to collect myself and put a smile on my face as I leaned back.

I rearranged my own walls of glass. Drawing the snow globe around me. For the first time, I welcomed it.

I'd be able to hold the rest of it inside me. Enough to get home and put things back together.

I was becoming a master at starting over.

"Helena—"

I leaned in and brushed a soft kiss on his lips. "I'm gonna miss you, Beckett Manning."

His jaw firmed. I saw the indecision, then the acceptance.

It rolled over him like the shadows I'd found him in. Right then, I had to worry about me. For the first time, I had to put myself first.

I nearly wobbled when he slid out of me. The ache was as swift and sure as all the promises we were so careful not to make to one another.

When he moved to help me, I shook my head and nimbly climbed off him and snatched the sheet off the ground before hurrying back into the safety of his bedroom.

I ordered myself to gather up Zoe's old clothes from the day before then I slipped into the bathroom. The clothes were dry thanks to Beckett's smart thinking sometime in the night. He'd draped them over the bench at the bottom of his bed.

One look at my own haunted eyes had me averting my gaze in the big mirror. Part of me wanted a shower, but the other part of me wanted to wear his scent on me for a little longer.

Practical Helena be damned.

I tugged on the clothes and rinsed my mouth. I tried to brush out my hair, but the tangles were impossible. I quickly braided it to get me through to the Lodge.

When I came out, Beckett was already dressed. Broken-in jeans hugged him perfectly and a Brothers Three Orchard T-shirt emphasized every part of his broad shoulders that I'd enjoyed sleeping on the night before. His beard was thicker already. His eyes distant even as he smiled at me.

Reality was as stark as the sun streaming into the bedroom.

The bedclothes were still twisted. The flat sheet a pile in the center of the bed.

"Do you want me to help you strip the bed?"

"No." His voice was rough. "Do you want some coffee?"

I shook my head. "I can get some at the Lodge."

He nodded. "Right. Smart. Laverne's coffee is miles better than mine."

I laughed because we both needed it.

Because I would likely sob like a baby if I let myself.

Maybe later.

Maybe never.

I didn't want too much sadness to touch this because there was no regret. Taking something for myself wasn't wrong. A night spent with a man like Beckett who made everything perfect didn't merit those kind of negative

connotations. I wouldn't put that kind of weight on it and diminish it in any way.

I crossed to him and went onto my toes to press a kiss to his chin.

He shut his eyes, all his muscles locking.

"Beckett."

He swallowed, but he didn't answer.

I reached up and cupped his face, tipping it down to me. Still, he kept his eyes closed. He was closer now and I could reach his mouth. For a moment, I savored those firm, warm lips that had mastered my body all night long.

Patiently, I lightly kissed him until he eased, until he lowered to meet me. His arms slid around me, dragging me tightly against him. The kiss spun out. Tongues, warm breath, achingly perfect.

No man had ever learned how to fit me—especially in one night.

I wound my arms around his shoulders as he lifted me up. Just like that, my legs went around him as we became dual vines feeding off the sun streaming through the overhead windows.

Finally, I drew back and met his blue eyes.

"I wish..."

I leaned in and kissed the words back into his mouth. "Don't wish it away."

"Never."

"Good." I patted his chest and he let me down. "I don't regret a moment."

Then I rushed out of the room before I climbed back into his arms. I couldn't do that. I wouldn't rearrange my world for a man again.

Even Beckett Manning.

CHAPTER 12

BECKETT

CHEWED UP & SPIT OUT

The drive back to the main part of the orchard was quiet.

I didn't know what the fuck to say to her. The fact that I was the one who was churned up about the morning after pissed me off.

This was what I did. Had a great night then moved on.

Nothing different.

Lies.

Everything about last night was different. Dangerously different because it felt like it had been more than just sex.

And she'd been the one to say no regrets and she meant it.

My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. I forced myself to unclench and the ache in my shoulders reminded me of a jarring fall from a tree I'd had when I was twenty. It had taken a half bottle of Hayes' moonshine to let me sleep comfortably that night.

I had a feeling it might happen again.

Waking with her vined around me this morning had felt far too right. Not the cloying, race for the door kind of reaction I usually had. In fact, I'd laid there for ten full minutes just stroking the silky smoothness of her arm draped over my chest before I climbed out of bed and looked for my smokes.

I'd thought a cigarette would settle the jangling nerves flooding my system. An itch under the skin that wouldn't leave.

Instead, it just reminded me that some things were hard habits to break.

Before that day, there'd only been one thing on my list.

I swore as we bottomed out over a rut in the gravel road from the storm yesterday. Helena gripped the dashboard as she slammed back into her seat after catching some air.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“The rain really ate up the roads.” I sighed. Replacing the gravel with blacktop was on the ever-growing list of updates needed now that the orchard was expanding. We were all right with capital at the moment, but the actual blacktopping was a huge ordeal that I wasn’t really up for.

Evidently, I needed to move it further up on the list.

“I imagine both rain and snow can be rough on all the trails you have. It felt like we were in a maze of them yesterday on Storm.”

“Yeah, that is one of the reasons I got Storm. He could get me around the property faster than the tractors and trucks.”

“Just you?”

I relaxed at the inane conversation. The orchard I understood. “My brothers weren’t interested in learning to ride, but we have added a few on for the hayrides in the fall. I managed to lure a couple guys from a nearby ranch over here who were interested in doing something less labor-intensive.”

Her lips twitched. “You stole them?”

I chuckled. “You could say that. Cara, she works the front desk at the Lodge, convinced her uncle that working for me wasn’t technically retiring. He brought a few people he trusted, and voila, we have horses. More importantly, I wanted to make sure the horses were happy here.”

She reached over and laid her hand on my thigh. “Not a lot of people would think of the animals first.”

“No, they don’t. How I got Storm. His owner worked him nearly to death then dumped him on a website to get rid of him.” I flexed my hand on the lower part of my steering wheel. Storm had needed a lot of time to get comfortable with me and even longer to trust me. But now he was mine, just as much as I was his.

The fact that there were echoes of those unruly tendrils in this damn truck was pissing me off. Helena wasn’t some battered animal that needed rescuing. And I needed to remember she wasn’t meant to be mine.

“You were meant to find him.” Her hand slipped away.

I swallowed hard. “Yeah,” I agreed, my voice rough.

As we drove into the drop-off zone in front of The Lodge, I put the truck in park and turned to her. Before I could figure out what to say, she leaned across the console and pressed her lips to mine. She laid her hand on my cheek. “No regrets, remember?”

I opened my mouth to say something.

Anything.

The high bark of my dog and a thumping fist against my window broke the spell.

Justin's face filled the window as he motioned to roll down the window. I turned back to Helena only to see her sliding out of the passenger seat.

"Wait."

She gave me a sad smile. "Bye, Beckett." Then she slammed the door and took off for the lobby entrance.

I slammed my head against the headrest twice, then I lowered my window.

Justin winced. "Sorry. Did I interrupt the sayonara?"

"What. Do. You. Want?"

"Right. So it wasn't any good?"

I gritted my teeth and said nothing. *Good* didn't cover it and if I thought about it too long, I'd probably rearrange my brother's face.

"Worse. Too good, hey?" He braced his forearms on the window frame, leaning in far too close.

"Is there a reason your hot coffee morning breath is landing on my neck?"

"Maybe you could use some." He held up a thermos.

I took it before I bashed his forehead with the aluminum body of it. I desperately needed the jolt of caffeine to deal with whatever problem my baby brother was coming at me with. I reached over for the to-go cups I kept in my glove box and filled one to the brim.

"Why are you here?"

"Well, while you were playing hooky yesterday—"

I bristled. "No one was working yesterday, jackass."

"Testy." He took the thermos back and took a swig before recapping it to shove under his arm. "Usually you're in much better spirits after a little..."

"Just shut it, Jus."

His eyebrows shot up. "Okay then. Anyway. Some of the cousins got especially blitzed last night and borrowed," he made exaggerated air quotes with his fingers, "one of the tractors."

"For fuck's sake." While most of the Mannings and Ronsons were localized to the orchard, I had a few aunts and uncles who weren't part of the business. Unfortunately, we had a few degenerate branches to the family tree.

"Yeah. They rolled it."

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

Casey yipped from the ground beside Justin. I glanced down and his tail was wagging like a feather duster on speed. He plopped his rump down then sat on his hind legs waving at me. “Well, come on then.” I reached across and opened the door on the passenger side and got a whiff of Helena’s perfume. My chest tightened and I bit back a groan.

I got a face full of fur for my trouble, with an extra helping of dog breath and a tongue bath. “All right, I missed you too.” I let Casey plant his paw on my shoulder with happy squeals before I pushed him away with a ruffle of his ears.

“Which orchard?”

“Out by the springs. They tried to impress one of Rachel’s city friends by taking a ride out there.”

I straightened on my side of the truck and closed my eyes, worst case scenario reels playing behind my eyelids. “When?”

“Just before the storm.”

We’d been right there. If we hadn’t left, they’d have either crashed our party or probably plowed into our picnic. I sighed. “Anyone hurt?”

“A few drunken bruises and a sore head from too much of our apple pie moonshine. Otherwise, no. But Jolene took a drink.”

Jolene was our smaller tractor, the one we used for tending the younger trees in the orchard as well as the pear trees we were trying to revitalize. They were a bitch to grow, but the taproom had done well with a pear blend for hard cider, and I was determined to get them established again.

My never-ending list of projects sat heavy on my shoulders. Harvest was still months away, but it would be here before we knew it, and I was still finalizing the rental units we wanted ready for late summer.

I did not need this.

But it also reminded me why I had no room for mooning over Helena Danbury. Casey sat where she’d been, his stupid tongue lolling out with a goofy smile. I reached over to rub his silky ears one more time.

“I’m assuming I’ll need a winch?”

“I got it hooked up on my truck. But Jolene is gonna take both of us. Maybe even Hayes’ Jeep. I’ve got your gear in my truck. We’ll call in Hayes if need be.”

“Great.”

I glanced at the ornate doorway leading into The Lodge. The urge to go after her was strong. Stronger than it should be with the current bullshit I had to deal with.

But it was better to keep my mind off of the *could have beens* and *might have trieds*.

I glanced at Justin. “Need me to drive you to your truck?”

“Nah, I’m over near the bakery. I’ll bring breakfast burritos.”

I gave him a half grin. “Least you can do.”

He punched my arm. “Gotta work after we play.”

“There’s always work waiting.” I put the truck in drive and Justin stepped back, shielding his eyes against the bright morning sun.

I pulled my aviators down from the visor and headed out to the spring. It wasn’t as easy to get to as on horseback, but there was a reason why I had four-wheel drive on my truck. The jarring dips and roots forced me to concentrate on the drive instead of memories of our picnic.

Of her—

“Dammit,” I muttered as I hit a dip. “Get your shit together, man.”

Casey barked out an affirmative, which made me laugh.

As I pulled up the hill, all thoughts of my perfect afternoon with Helena disappeared. Jolene’s signature black and green tire was sticking up from what once was a gorgeous rock formation.

Now the biggest boulder had tumbled into the water.

I opened my door to let Casey out then reached in the back seat for one of my ball caps and tugged it on. I grabbed my gloves, stuffing them into my back pocket before I hopped out for a closer look. There were deep ruts into the grass that had been pristine yesterday when I’d left. I jammed my hands on my hips as I peered down into the spring.

At least the boulder had saved the John Deere tractor from being fully submerged. The front grill was half under water and the front tire had been punctured on the way down.

Just as I was about to climb down to take a better look, Justin pulled up.

“Wait!” He leaned out from his window. “I tried that earlier and almost caused a slide. The heavy rain shifted some of the rocks.”

I stepped back onto the muddy grass. “Damn fools.”

Justin did a three-point turn and his black truck backed over the grass to where I was standing. I shook my head at the newest addition to his never-ending alterations on his behemoth of a truck. Metal cutouts over his brake

lights gave off a sinister glow with spooky eyes.

He jumped out then hopped into the flatbed to wrestle his winch down toward the tailgate. I helped him lock it into place in the grooves he'd welded to the metal. My brother was nothing if not industrious with his tools.

"We'll try with just me and I have yours under the tarp in case we need it. It's pretty wedged in there."

I nodded. Justin's engine should be enough to pull it out, depending on just how the rocks moved on us. "So who pulled this stunt?"

Justin glanced at me. "Guess."

I rolled my eyes. "George."

"Yep. Found out this morning that Lisa left him right after Christmas. He was a mess at the reception. Think he singlehandedly kicked one of our smaller kegs of Firefly. Then he got into Hayes' stash."

"Shit." Firefly was one of our higher alcohol content hard ciders. Add in the moonshine and my cousin must've been feeling no pain. Couldn't say I blamed him for drinking to forget.

The memories behind my eyelids were plenty strong from only one night. I couldn't imagine after years of marriage.

My gut tightened as a flash of a halo of blond hair on my pillowcase hit me like a left hook.

"You good?"

"Yeah." I reached around for my gloves and put them on. "Let's just get this done."

The storm had cooled down the temperatures a little, but after two hours of fighting with Jolene, my brother and I were sweating our asses off. It took Justin's truck and mine to even move the stupid thing a few feet.

If we didn't get the right leverage, we'd end up having to call in a tow truck from town.

"Remind me to send George the bill for this," I said as I waded into the water around the front of the tractor.

"Careful. Maybe I should go in and do that."

"You calling me old, son?"

Justin's eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'm taller."

Casey barked from across the spring. I gave him our hand signal to stay. I didn't need him jumping in the water with me thinking it was some sort of game. The dog laid down with a whine, but didn't come any further.

"Just get in your truck." I spun my cap backwards. He might've been

taller than me, but I couldn't have Justin out of commission if one of us got hurt. He was our fix-it guy for the whole damn orchard. I moved to the front of the tractor and braced my hands on the front grill.

He stopped at my truck to make sure my winch was locked so the tractor wouldn't fall any farther forward then hopped into his truck. He waved his arm out the window and gunned the engine.

My arms shook as I pushed, but I finally felt the give of the tire—or what was left of it—as it rocked over the flat piece of shale. It started to crumble, splintering in every direction. I ducked my head, but I felt the sting of a splinter of rock in my cheek.

I heard the whoop of my brother's voice as the truck moved forward, dragging Jolene out of the spring. I tossed my hat onto the rocks then slid onto my knees in the water and dunked my head.

The burning sun streamed above my head, but the cool silence felt damn good after muscling the son of a bitch out of the crevice. While I was under, I looked around to see if there was any real damage, but the bottom of the spring just had a new boulder to add to its collection.

When I surfaced, Justin was right in front of me on the rocks. I reared back. "Jesus."

"Shit, you scared me. I saw blood."

I touched my cheek and came back with a streak of blood. "Shale."

Justin blew out a breath. "Nothing broken?"

"Just my pretty face."

"Eh, we're safe there." He held out his hand. "Was already ugly."

I grabbed onto his forearm. "Ass."

He laughed and hauled me out of the water. I wasn't quite sure when my scrawny bean pole of a little brother got so goddamn big. His arm bulged as he singlehandedly dragged me out of the drink.

I dropped to the grass and flopped onto my back. I was getting too old for this bullshit.

"How bad is she?"

Justin crouched in front of the once bright chrome of the John Deere. "Water didn't do her any favors. I'll flush her all out and see how bad it is when we get her back to the barn."

"How the hell did he find the keys to the tractor?"

"We used it to bring over more kegs for the reception. Rachel and Clay's people sure know how to drink."

He tossed my hat at me and I put it over my face. Maybe I'd just lay there and take a fucking nap.

"You send him the bill for all the shit you have to buy."

"What's he going to pay me with? His grocery money? The idiot is renting a piece of shit apartment in Turnbull."

"Goddammit," I muttered as I sat up.

"Aunt Laverne got a hold of him though. And Ma."

"Well, at least that's something. Where was Uncle Tommy?" George's father was usually better at corralling his kids. George was still in his twenties and evidently, still stupid.

"The aunts and uncles had already turned in. Couldn't hang with the loud music." Justin dropped next to me.

"And Ma did?" Shock didn't really cover it. I'd expected her to be back at their ranch before sunset.

"Should have seen her and Aunt Laverne cutting up the dance floor."

I put my hat back on against the blazing noontime sun. "Liar."

"Swear to God. Kain had everyone doing a conga line sometime around one in the morning."

"Well, that makes sense." I shook my head.

Kainoa N'ai was our resident chef for the taproom. He blew in on his motorcycle and often blew out in the same way. But the man knew how to freaking cook. Between our new brewmaster and Kain's cooking, the opening of our taproom had exceeded expectations last year.

He was also a big beast of a guy with a personality to match. But I had a feeling there was much more to him — because no one was that audacious unless they were hiding something. And audacious was the word of the day around him unless you watched closely.

I'd seen the signs of his restlessness last winter and then suddenly, he'd disappeared. The taproom was seasonal thanks to the shitty winters we dealt with out here. I was half surprised he'd returned a month before we were due to reopen the taproom. I'd been grateful, of course, but part of me had wondered if we'd be hunting down a new chef this season.

Hiring the two of them had been the best damn decision I'd ever made. Even if I'd had to face the wrath of Kira, my best friend and manager of the taproom. I'd chased down Ronan Parrish for his brain and his out-of-the-box thinking and hired him without her input. Then pushed her to hire Kain on a gut feeling.

Kira Webb didn't do anything based on her gut. She was all data points and careful deliberation. That was until she'd hooked her heart to Ronan. A lot of changes had been happening at Happy Acres the last few years. Least of all our rebranding to Brothers Three Orchard.

Sounded like the changes weren't lost on my folks either.

"Sure hope you got video. I bet it'll never happen again."

Justin stood and grinned down at me before he held out his hand. "Oh, I got video. At the very least for blackmail."

I reached up and Justin dragged me off the ground. "That's our mother you're talking about."

"You didn't see her with Kain. Good thing Dad was half cocked with Hayes in the back of the room. It was embarrassing."

"What happened to Hayes and the girl he was crushing on?"

Justin slapped my back. "His size thirteen ended up in his mouth. If he'd just let her talk, he'd have been in in like Flynn."

I sighed. "What did he geek out about?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Probably the properties of moonshine or some shit. All I know is that Jenny chick's eyes glazed over and she wandered over to George."

"No."

"Yep. And that's how Jolene ended up in the spring. He was showing off for the hot chick."

"So we can blame this all on Hayes then?"

Justin scratched the back of his neck then hopped onto the tailgate of my truck. "Kinda."

"Good, then he can pay for it." I reached into the back of my truck for the cooler of water bottles I kept there. I tossed one to my brother.

He caught the bottle and unscrewed the top. "You're a cruel dude. I like it."

I sat beside my brother as the sun tipped past its zenith. The smile I'd managed slid away by the time I'd drained the bottle. I glanced at what once had been our pristine picnic spot. Muddy tracks zigzagged over the exact spot we'd enjoyed the day before.

Even that had been ruined.

"I'll have a few of the guys come out and turn over the grass. It'll be as good as new in a few weeks."

"Yeah."

“You good?” Justin took a sip of his water, but he kept his eyes on the spring.

“I will be.” I hopped down to unhook the cable from Jolene. “Let’s get the trailer so we can haul her in.”

A few minutes later, both winches were stowed and I whistled for Casey.

Justin slammed his tailgate closed. “Hey, at least we didn’t have to hire Butch to get her out.”

I grunted. My soggy jeans were worth not calling the local tow truck guy. “Yeah, I’m out of favors there. He’d charge me a damn kidney.”

“You mean Hayes’ kidney.”

“Damn fucking right.”

“I’ll meet you at the barn.” He gave me a salute before driving off toward the main part of the orchard.

I held the door for my dog and got in my truck to put the spring in my rearview one more time.

CHAPTER 13

HELENA

AMBUSHED

I'd escaped up the stairs to my room at the Lodge before anyone had spotted me. The idea of hiding in my room until next week was tempting.

Room service was excellent at Laverne Ronson's establishment. But I knew sooner or later someone would find me.

While the shower wasn't quite as luxurious as Beckett's place—or his mother's—it did the trick. And okay, maybe I'd shed a few tears while my face had been turned up to the spray.

I was entitled.

Somehow I had to find a way not to feel like an open wound before I left.

Surrounded by my arsenal of beauty care, I carefully shored up my walls once more, layer by layer. From retinol to tinted moisturizer with SPF, the old Helena slowly emerged. The smattering of freckles that had appeared after a day in the sun was now hidden under powder. My bruised and red eyes were a little harder to hide, but sunglasses would do the trick.

I returned to my bedroom. Sunlight streaked over my freshly made bed and open suitcase. I pulled out a tailored pair of linen pants and set them beside the rumpled jeans. I shook out the jeans and carefully folded them, repeating the process with the T-shirt.

I would send them out for laundering and hope that Laverne could get them back to Beckett's sister. Not that Zoe would probably notice if I took them home.

"No." I shook my head firmly. "You're not taking them home to moon over Beckett. That's pathetic."

I shut my eyes.

"And now I'm talking to myself. Great."

Before I could talk myself out of it, I strode through my bedroom and out to the living room of my suite with the pile of clothes. I shoved the clothes in one of the laundry bags on the desk near the window and scribbled a note on the cleaning instructions tag.

“I’ll take that with me.”

I screeched and whirled around toward the voice, my towel dropping precariously before I grabbed onto the corner.

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Laverne sat in one of the club chairs with a mug in her hands. A tray sat in front of her with pastries and a carafe of what I could only hope was coffee.

I jerked up my towel. “Um, why are you in my room?”

“I had a feeling you were going to try and skip town.” She calmly sipped from her mug. “Didn’t we, Rachel?”

“Dear God.” My gaze crashed into Rachel’s huge blue eyes.

She wiggled her fingers in a little wave. She also had a mug in her hand and took a long gulp. “We just wanted to check on you. You left without telling anyone. We were worried. And I figured you needed coffee.” Her gaze flicked down to my towel. “We can wait for you to get dressed though.”

“Um, yes. Dressed would be good.” I stumbled back a step and into the desk. “This is...I’m just going to go back—” I bolted for the bedroom door and slammed it shut before I collapsed against it.

Seriously? Did this family believe in personal space at all?

A memory of Beckett scooping me up and hauling me into his childhood home said that was a no. Maybe it was a family trait.

I caught myself clenching my fingers at my sides and forced myself to relax. They were probably just worried about me. Which was still a novel thing to me. No one had worried about what I was feeling in so long.

My stomach twisted.

Sure, let’s continue to feel sorry for ourselves. Perfect.

I stuffed my travel kit into my bag and crunched a silk T-shirt. The urge to unpack my travel steamer almost overrode my need for a quick change. After wearing borrowed clothes from over ten years ago, a little wrinkle in my shirt wouldn’t matter, dammit.

I quickly donned a comfortable bralette and still felt hemmed in after being naked or sans bra for a full day. I’d never gone a day without a bra in my life and now I wanted to slingshot the stupid thing out the window.

What was going on with me?

I finished dressing, clipped up my still damp hair, then stepped into my trusty ballet flats before returning to the living room. It was the best version of armor I had right now.

Rachel stood when I came out. She rushed around the couch and reached for my hands. “Hey. We realized we ambushed you, and after yesterday, that really wasn’t cool.”

Some of the tension slid out of my shoulders. She really was a lovely woman regardless of the circumstances of how we started. “Don’t worry about me. It was your wedding day. I don’t even know why you’re here right now.”

“Ransom is flying us into JFK for our flight late tonight.”

“Still. What happened wasn’t your fault. You should be spending the day with your new husband at the very least.”

A lump formed in my throat at the word. Twenty-four hours ago, I’d been lamenting the fact that I’d almost been Mrs. Winslow. Now, the idea of anyone other than he and Rachel being together was ridiculous. If I hadn’t been standing right beside her in that chapel and seen the love shining like a sunbeam between them, I couldn’t miss it today.

Her huge blue eyes were so full of happiness and...was that pain? Surely not for me.

I squeezed her hands. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Rachel sniffled and her eyes went glassy with unshed tears. “I know. You’re a grown ass woman. But what Reid did was... I just have no words. After you left, Ransom almost broke his face.”

“Can’t say I’m sorry about that one.”

Rachel laughed. “I wasn’t looking for bloodshed at my wedding. But I also don’t envy my sister dealing with Ransom right now. Another reason we’re not heading to the airport yet.”

“I hope you know I never would have brought Reid as my date if I knew about...the rest.” I couldn’t even begin to piece together the drama of Reid being in a relationship with not one, but two of Ransom’s sisters.

I’d been on the outskirts of the friend circle when Reid, Clay, and Ransom’s friendship had fractured due to romantic drama. I should have known better to even look at Reid. But after Clay had set me aside, Reid had jumped at the chance to wine and dine me.

Until he got me, then he seemed to lose all interest.

Maybe it had been his game all along. From the insane conversation I’d

overheard at the wedding, it sure seemed like games were his favorite thing.

Reid Pierce was not the same young man I'd known in college. The day Marigold Douglas disappeared had changed all of them. Ransom had joined the army, Reid had become a tech giant who valued work more than relationships, and Clay had lived in quiet misery and guilt.

And I'd been so damn selfish.

Even without Reid and the sister number two mess, it had been selfish for me to bring him to the wedding. I wasn't cut out to be the bad girl.

"There's a lot going on in there, huh?" Rachel released one of my hands to tap my temple lightly.

"I'm sorry that I brought any drama to your wedding, Rachel. Truly."

"Stop. If anyone was wronged, it was you. And I'm sorry for it. I just hope you find someone who is perfect for you."

Now it was my turn to tear up. It wasn't Beckett, but part of me wished it was. No one had ever made me feel so seen and valued in one day. A perfect day that showed me what I'd been missing all this time.

Rachel suddenly dragged me in for a hug. I patted her back awkwardly. While we'd grown closer over the last few months, I wasn't really the hugging type. But her sweet jasmine scent was comforting, and I found myself leaning into the hug.

"I'm going to be fine. I promise."

She stepped back and we both dabbed at our eyes. "Well, after that sweeping romantic horse ride, I'd have to agree. I didn't know Beckett had it in him."

I looked down. "I'm just glad he helped out."

"Is that all he did?"

"Did you say you had coffee?"

Rachel gave me a long stare then nodded. "And apple fritters."

My stomach chose then to speak for me. I flushed. "Obviously, that sounds good to me."

"I heard that from over here, dear," Laverne chimed in. "C'mon over and eat."

Rachel steered me around the couch. "I stopped in to say goodbye to Laverne and saw you streak by. I almost didn't recognize you. That's why we hightailed it up here to find out what happened yesterday."

"Beckett informed his brothers that I was fine."

"There's fine, and then there's *fine*." Rachel laughed. "They're my

cousins, but I'm not blind."

"Beck is quite dashing on his horse," Laverne said as she poured me a cup of coffee.

I sat down on the couch and wished I could actually melt into the cushions.

"Two sugars, if I remember right?" Laverne grinned at me.

"Yes."

"How on Earth do you take it black?"

"I got used to it. My mother didn't allow dairy in the house unless I smuggled it in." I hadn't meant to say that. Obviously, I was hungrier than I thought.

"No dairy?" Laverne's eyebrows shot up. She held a small plate with the sugary confection and a mug out to me.

"Thank you." I accepted it and practically drooled at the scent of cinnamon and apples. I set the plate down in front of me before taking a grateful sip of the coffee. This time, I couldn't resist a groan. "What is this?"

"Rachel's chocolate coffee blend."

Rachel's eyes twinkled. "We've added a lot of coffee to the Cocoa Bus II. Still need the chocolate to keep it on brand."

"I don't even need sugar. And this is dangerous." Chocolate was a weakness of mine. I'd learned to enjoy dark chocolate because of the health benefits. Sweets were another thing that were hard to smuggle into my house.

Thankfully, our housekeeper had a similar affliction, and we hid our stash from my eagle-eyed mother. Mine was in the false bottom of my roll-top desk drawer. I didn't need to hide things now that I had my own wing of the penthouse, but habits were hard to break. A lifetime of my mother's exacting dietary constraints to keep me a perfect size four were embedded in my brain.

"Good to know." Rachel took a sip from her mug. "I still need creamer. You are hardcore."

"Eat up, Helena. That nephew of mine probably didn't feed you this morning."

Not food, no.

I hid the worst of my blush behind the lip of the mug—at least I hoped so.

"I'm glad Beckett gave you a safe space. Where did you two end up?"

Laverne acted like her question was innocent, but I wasn't so sure. "He spoke to you, didn't he?"

"Beckett doesn't give a whole lot of details. He just said you were fine."

“We got creative with Zoe’s old clothes he found at his parents’ house. Then he took me on a picnic.”

Rachel swallowed a gulp of her coffee loud enough for me to hear it. “My cousin Beckett?”

“You have another Beckett?”

“I’m beginning to wonder,” Rachel muttered.

“He was very kind.”

Rachel smirked, but she just sipped her coffee.

I cleared my throat. “I appreciate that you both worried after me. And again, I’m very sorry Reid caused such a scene. He was beyond rude.”

“No need for you to apologize for him.” Laverne waved me off. “He’s just lucky he left with two working arms and only a swollen eye.”

Evidently, things had gotten more heated after I made a run for it. “I want to say he’s misunderstood, but I can’t be that magnanimous anymore. He’s changed a lot from the younger man I knew, not to mention the man who—you know what? I can’t even whitewash what that was.” I gave up and broke off a piece of the pastry and shoved it in my mouth so I’d just stop talking.

Rachel leaned forward. “Clay says the same. It’s all right. He’s not the first man to get his heart broken, doesn’t mean he can go on being a...” She trailed off.

“Dick,” Laverne said and took a sip of her coffee.

I covered my mouth with my hand so I wouldn’t spit out the cinnamon-y treat. The three of us laughed and some of the tension dissolved.

“I’m sorry I missed your reception.” I shredded a corner of the fritter and was surprised to see more than half of it was gone.

“Apparently, things got out of hand last night before the storm. One of my cousins decided to take a tractor joyriding out toward the spring.”

I choked as the once moist pastry went to dust at the back of my tongue.

“Are you okay?” Laverne started to get up.

I shook my head and quickly lifted my now tepid coffee for a long drink. “I’m fine. When was this?”

“Just before the downpour, I think. We sent out a few of the sober-ish people to find him. I’m not really sure. I kept getting pulled into dances with everyone except my husband.”

Thank God we’d already left.

My face flamed as I imagined one of Beckett’s relatives finding us at the picnic. More like they’d have found a whole lot more of me. Flashes of that

afternoon made the rest of me flush.

“Is that where you were?” Laverne asked with a sly smile.

I hid behind my mug once more.

“Didn’t think Beckett had it in him anymore.”

“Aunt Laverne!”

“What? You seem to forget that your cocoa bus was my original traveling VW Bus back in the day. I parked next to quite a few different bodies of water myself.”

I looked down and hid a smile. I wasn’t ashamed of what I’d done. It was out of character, but it had been far too wonderful to regret.

Any of it.

Rachel turned her club chair toward her aunt and propped her chin in her hand as she leaned forward. “Tell me more.”

“Maybe when you come back from your honeymoon. And there’s more of that Sunshine Lemonade in me.”

Rachel sat back. “We’d both be on our butts. That stuff is dangerous.”

“Best time to gossip.”

I relaxed back on the couch with my mug. The pastry was still staring at me, but I tried to resist it. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so at ease with people. Even Beckett felt different than this.

And I had to leave.

My fingers tightened on the handle of the chunky mug.

Back to where I belonged in Manhattan.

Not that anything was truly waiting for me other than the never-ending calendar of society engagements for my mother and the charities that gave her the best optics.

Half the time, I was just a glorified assistant. Making sure everything ran smoothly for her because she couldn’t be bothered.

My temple throbbed at the thought of going back to that.

“Helena?”

I blinked out of my thoughts. “I’m sorry. Did you ask me something?”

“I was just asking if you had a way to get back to the city.” Rachel laced her fingers together in her lap.

One of the reasons why I’d run off with Beckett the day before was that very question. Before I could stammer out a reply, she gave me a soft smile.

“You’re welcome to fly to the city with us. Willow will be tagging along to keep Ransom company too.”

Fifth wheel and horning in on the honeymoon—definitely not.

“I appreciate that. I’m going to call a car service.”

“Uber isn’t exactly heading into the city.”

“No. My father’s company uses a service that has a satellite office in Syracuse, I believe.” At least I was pretty sure.

New York was a surprisingly large state. Living in Manhattan meant I could get around the whole city with ease. Rural Central New York, not so much.

“If you’re sure.”

I smiled at Rachel. “I appreciate it, but I almost ruined your wedding reception. I’m not ruining your honeymoon.”

“My sister is already tagging along. Not like I’m going to be swinging from the chandeliers in the back of the mini-jet.” She winced. “Sorry, Aunt Laverne.”

“Honey, my daughter is married to a rockstar. I’ve heard far worse.”

“That’s very true.”

“It would be easier to get a car from Teeterboro.”

I sighed. Less than twenty miles out of Manhattan was practically sitting on my doorstep. It would be stupid to say no.

But flying with all that emotional baggage. Then to go home to find some more. As well as my mother finding out about Reid.

The migraine was circling like a hungry vulture.

Rachel got up and came to sit next to me. “It’s okay, truly.” She laid a hand on my leg.

I covered her hand, touched by the comfort. I wasn’t used to people caring about my feelings. Especially ones that I wasn’t voicing out loud.

“Maybe she’s not ready to go home.”

My gaze tracked to Laverne.

“There’s no rush for you to go home. Unless you have something pressing in the city.”

I opened my mouth to immediately say I had to get home. But did I really?

It was just putting off the inevitable pain of saying goodbye to this place.

And the man who made me yearn for things that weren’t meant for me.

Laverne stood. “Why don’t we go have a little walk? I find some fresh air always clears my head. Then we’ll see what’s what.”

Maybe a walk wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

Rachel patted my hand. "If you change your mind, we'll be leaving around five."

"Okay. Thank you. I'll think it over."

"Good. All I can ask."

Laverne held out her hand to me. "Let's go, sweetheart. I have a few things to check on and could use the company."

"Oh, if you're busy, I don't want to impose."

"I have a feeling you don't impose on anyone. You deserve space just as much as anyone. Besides, I hear from Clay you're a wonder at organizing big parties. I'd love to bend your ear."

I blinked, surprised at the topic. "I guess you could call charity functions an excuse to do a party."

"That's exactly what it is." Rachel laughed. "And I don't miss a bit of it. You two enjoy."

"Go find that husband of yours. He's probably been texting you for the last hour." Laverne hooked her arm through mine.

Rachel checked her phone and winced. "He has been blowing up my phone."

"Field trip," Laverne chirped happily.

CHAPTER 14

HELENA

THE FIXER

I grabbed my purse and let Laverne lead me out of the room and down the hall to the winding staircase. When we got to the second landing, I spotted Clay looking around, then he glimpsed Rachel. The smile on his face and the way she seemed to be the only person in the room for him hit me as it did at the wedding.

It was softer this time, but it still left an ache in my chest.

Would that ever be something that happened to me?

Rachel rushed down the stairs into his arms. She snuggled right under his arm as if she was made for him.

As if she fit with him perfectly.

Laverne patted my arm, which she still gripped. When I glanced her way, she gave me a knowing look.

Maybe it was better for me to go home. There were too many reminders here of what I didn't have. Things I might *never* have.

As we got to the bottom of the stairs, a harried blond came running toward Laverne.

"What's wrong, Cara?"

The young woman was wringing her hands, her gaze darting everywhere. "Oh, Laverne, I messed up, I think."

"Well, tell me what it is, and we'll fix it."

"I don't know how it happened. I swear it. I'm so careful with bookings and this one is..." Her bluebell eyes filled and spilled rapidly.

"Okay, okay." Laverne rushed forward. "Nothing is that bad." She turned back to me. "I'm sorry, Helena. I need to deal with this."

"It's quite all right. I'll just go back upstairs."

“No. Why don’t you go outside and walk the grounds? It’s beautiful out there. No need to be cooped up.”

The urge to withdraw was so huge that I made myself do the opposite. “You’re right.”

“I’ll be out to find you as soon as I can.”

“No worries. I’ll be fine.” I pulled out my phone for the first time since the wedding. The alarming amount of text messages waiting for me made me shove it right back in my purse and head into the sunny atrium.

I didn’t want to run into any of the wedding guests who were still checking out. I knew there was a side entrance thanks to being part of the wedding party. I wandered over to the large apple tree that was the star of the show. They’d built the Lodge around the old, gnarled tree. Between the skylights and stained glass, the light wood floors were a kaleidoscope of colors. The heavy, glossy leaves threw shadows in with the scattershot sunlight beams.

The room was round instead of square with handcrafted touches that urged people to follow walkways leading to the conference and banquet rooms. I followed the winding walkway past the tree and past the smaller conference room.

I heard Laverne’s voice soothing Cara as they hashed out what to do with an overbooking. Wedding season was in full swing, but there were other summer parties still going on. The warmer weather often made people want to gather.

The orchard was a perfect place full of charm and surprisingly elegant touches in with the rustic. I tried not to listen in on the issue, but I couldn’t help but feel bad for Cara. It sounded like the milestone birthday party was important and all the rooms were booked.

I slipped out the side double doors to the garden where people were still cleaning up from the wedding rehearsal mayhem. There were still sections corded off with yellow tape from the man who tried to attack or abduct Rachel’s sister, Willow.

She was a well-known internet figure with a staggering number of followers. Fame came in all sorts of levels and kinds these days. Unfortunately, that brought out new and scary ways for stalkers and obsessed fans to fixate on people.

It was only two nights ago, but for me, it felt like a lifetime had occurred in between.

If you cut away the awful police tape, the garden was spread out with walkways and little nooks for people to congregate and gather. It could be repurposed with a few strategically placed smaller tables. Maybe move some of the Adirondack chairs that were clustered together and make one centralized table for food.

It could work for a birthday party.

I turned to go inside and paused. It wasn't my place to troubleshoot, and I had no idea if they had extra seating and tables they could use outside. The elements were always questionable, of course, but today the sun was shining, and the sky was clear.

There were enough trees to give cover...

Before I could talk myself out of it, I went back inside and found Laverne and Cara poring over a laptop.

"Laverne?"

She looked up from the screen, her glasses perched on her nose. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's going to be some time before I can get this wrinkle ironed out."

"I didn't mean to overhear on my way by."

Laverne pushed her glasses up onto her head, tucking her white hair back. "The curse of a busy season."

"I was just thinking maybe you could make the side garden into a space for an impromptu birthday party." I pitched my voice lower. "If the police have released the space, that is."

"Oh, yes. We just haven't opened up the paths yet again. We need to tidy things up."

I moved into the conference room and spotted the legal pad on the table. I turned the page. "Good. Then maybe rearrange a few things, add some tables." I drew a quick and dirty sketch from memory. "Make a few smaller tables for canapés, drinks here." I made a trio of circles on one side then mirrored it across from the fire pit. "Make one desserts and one appetizers, maybe?" I looked up at her wide eyes. "I'm sorry, did I overstep?"

"No. I'm just mad I didn't think about it before." Laverne laughed. "And to think I was going to ask you about a different party that stumped me and here you are, saving my bacon."

A warm rush of happiness slid through me. Years of my mother's insane requests for parties made me a professional troubleshooter. It was nice to be able to use it for something else for a change. "If it's an evening party, add some extra twinkle lights and maybe an outdoor heater or two. It would

encourage people to mingle instead of sitting at tables.” I set the pen down. “If it’s age-appropriate.”

Laverne rushed at me and enveloped me in a huge hug. “Age-appropriate. You’re so cute. But yes, it’s a fortieth birthday party. And for some of the older people invited, we can make a seating area.” She let me go and turned to Cara. “Call over to Kira at the taproom and see if we can borrow some tables and chairs. She always has contacts for tables too since all of our rooms will be in use.”

Cara nodded and gave me a grateful smile. “I think you just saved my job.”

I squeezed her hand. “We all make mistakes.”

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “I’ll just go get working on this.” She shot a worried glance at Laverne who only smiled at her.

“You’re not getting fired, Cara. This is just going to be a learning moment. Because you’re going to put this together.”

She gulped. “What? No. I screwed it all up. I can’t.”

“We all have to learn somewhere. I’ll help you out where I can.”

“I can help.” I heard myself blurt out.

Laverne turned to me. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“I don’t mind. When is the party?” I shook back my hair.

“Friday night.”

I swallowed. Another week here. Another week of being around Beckett? Did I dare?

Was I just putting off the inevitable? I wasn’t even sure he wanted me here.

“Are you sure? It’s a lot to ask. I actually just hired someone to help me with the entertainment arm of The Lodge. Beckett is also adding cabins to the property. Because I don’t have enough on my plate.”

She sounded a little overwhelmed.

“I was looking for excuses not to go home, to be honest. You’re doing me a favor.”

“I doubt that, but I’m desperate enough to take you up on it.” She gave me another hard squeeze.

Her pocket buzzed against me and we both laughed.

Laverne dipped her hand into the pocket of her lightweight cardigan. She sighed and put her glasses back on. “No matter how big I make the font on this damn thing, I need my cheaters.” She quickly texted someone back.

“Kain is over at the taproom and said he’d be happy to help out.”

“Great. Does he have a truck? Or do I need to contact someone?”

Please don’t say Beckett. I wasn’t quite ready for that one.

“I’ll send you and Cara up there with one of our trucks. You can pick out what you need and then we can go back if we need more.”

“Throwing me right into the mix.”

She laughed. “Welcome to Brothers Three Orchard, Helena. I almost said Happy Acres. It’s going to take some getting used to. My sister and her husband took to retirement much better than I did. Fred, my husband, doesn’t really know how to not be busy.” With a sigh, she shoved her phone back in her pocket. “Someday I’ll learn to slow down.”

“Maybe with your new hire, you can delegate some.”

Her laugh was immediate and booming. “That’s the dream, but I probably wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I didn’t have a million balls in the air.”

“When does...” I trailed off for the name of the person.

“Belinda Grayson. She starts on Monday. Poor girl has no idea what she’s in for, but she seems excited for the challenge. I desperately need the help. When we started doing weddings, I thought it would be a once in a while thing.”

“When Beckett told me about the rockstars and Zoe, well...I’d say you didn’t have much chance in not succeeding. Especially with how beautiful this property is.”

“You’re probably right. We don’t even do any marketing much to Rachel’s consternation.” Laverne huffed out a half laugh. “I can’t keep up with just word of mouth.”

“Might mean you need to raise your prices.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. We love being an affordable place for people to celebrate all kinds of things.”

“Then you’ll need to pour your revenue into more people. Your staff is wonderful from what I’ve seen. I’d replace the so-called professionals I work with in Manhattan with any one of them.”

Laverne’s eyes went shiny. “I’m pretty sure that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Well, you turned this emergency right around. Now let’s get you and Cara a truck to start getting this fiasco planned out. I’ll jiggle the schedule

around and see if I can get you some people to work the party. Then we'll have to figure out food."

I grabbed the legal pad off the table. "Mind if I steal this?"

"Not at all. We'll get you a tablet at the main desk too. Cara knows all the programs on there. She'll show you what you need to know."

"Perfect." I tucked the legal pad against my chest and checked my phone. Again, I ignored the half dozen texts waiting for me. I'd deal with them later.

Things went from zero to sixty after that. Somehow I ended up with a Barbie-pink tablet that charmed me far more than it should. Cara had changed out of her front desk suitable dress into jeans and an ancient Happy Acres T-shirt.

I suddenly felt very overdressed in my silk shirt. "Do you have any extra shirts I could wear instead of this?"

"Oh, sure." Cara held up one finger and ducked below the desk, coming back with a soft blue shirt with the Brothers Three Orchard logo. The fact that it was exactly Beckett's eye color was neither here nor there.

Right.

"I only have a medium so it might be a little big."

"That's fine." I took it from her. "I'll meet you outside?"

Cara nodded. "Thanks for helping me. I can't believe I made such a huge mistake." Her big eyes filled again, but instead of letting the tears spill over she looked up at the vaulted ceiling above us and blinked rapidly. She shook out her honey-blond hair then scooped it back into a tail through an equally battered ball cap. "But we'll fix it, right?"

"There's the spirit. We'll bumble along together."

"I don't think you've bumbled a day in your life." Cara's laugh was a little watery but much stronger than before.

"You'd be surprised. Is it too much to ask for a hat too?"

"You can ask for a car at this point." She disappeared through the narrow door then came back with a pink hat. "How's this?"

I laughed. "Matches my tablet. I'll be right back." I turned around and then back to her. "I'm assuming there's a bathroom around here?"

"Back down the hallway toward the atrium, there's a unisex bathroom."

"Perfect." When I turned back, a large group of people were coming in through the front doors. Never a dull moment at The Lodge, that was for sure.

My linen pants weren't exactly the best bet for this outing, but they'd have to do. I'd have to figure out some clothing options since I was extending

my stay. My purse buzzed and I sighed. I really was going to have to return some of those text messages, but it wasn't going to be right now.

After I swapped the silk shirt for the blue, I knotted the length at my hip. I suddenly wished I'd put on a real bra instead of the bralette. Not like I could create bigger breasts, but illusions helped. I took a minute to add a little makeup and put my hair up like Cara.

I looked about twenty instead of my actual thirty-four, but that couldn't be helped. I shoved everything back into my purse and headed back out. The crush of people who'd arrived seemed to have doubled.

I slipped around the front desk and the seating area where people were waiting their turn to be checked in. A gorgeous woman in a white pantsuit was the center of attention, telling me she was probably the bride. Her dense dark curls spiraled around her shoulders and down her back in perfect ringlets.

Something niggled at me. Then she turned her head, and I recognized her.

"Dammit." I walked faster, pulling the bill of my cap down to hide my face. We weren't friends, but I was on a half dozen charity boards with her. The Washington family was big business in Manhattan and Long Island.

I really didn't need anyone to see my walk of shame. She probably hadn't heard about what happened between me and Reid, but the gossip mill was as quick, sharp, and vicious as a winter wind.

Hurriedly, I slipped around the people milling at the front. They were too busy taking photos of the stunning stained glass to notice me.

Cara was waiting by a black truck with an owl on the door. She was typing furiously on her tablet and juggling her phone in the other hand.

"Sorry. It was a little crazy in there."

She looked up and fumbled her phone. I quickly swept down and picked it up, then I handed it to her.

She took it and slipped it in her pocket. "Crazy because it's my fault."

"Okay, the woe time is over. And your backup starts soon, remember?"

"Yes, but I should be in there helping." Cara's eyes welled again.

"Laverne has it well in hand."

She sniffled. "I know. I just wanted to show her I was ready to step up to be the assistant manager of the front desk and now... Oh, Helena, I just really ruined everything."

"Nope. We learn from our mistakes. Believe me." And it often took me a few more times than I'd like to own up to, that was for sure. "Now tell me

you can drive this truck because I've only driven a car in the last ten years. And it's been at least seven months since I have, at that."

She dabbed at the corner of her eye with the back of her hand. "I've been driving a truck since I was fourteen."

"Well, that's impressive. And not altogether legal."

She waved it off and opened the door, shoving her stuff on the seat. "My uncle worked for a local ranch—now he's the head of the horse stables here—and he made sure I could drive anything with wheels."

I went over to the passenger side and climbed in. As soon as I got inside, my system went haywire. Beckett's leather and citrus scent hit me like a fist. My heart slammed in my chest and I had to remind myself to breathe.

"You okay?"

"Fine." I quickly snapped in and gave her a bright smile. "Ready."

"Okay. Off we go." She stomped on the clutch and we lurched forward like a rocket.

I grabbed the dash. "Pretty sure the taproom will still be there if we go at a normal pace."

Cara's gleeful laugh filled the cab of the truck. "You'd think things were at a slower pace on a farm and yet—nope!"

The tires spit as she hung a hard right and the truck hit a steep incline. She hit something on the console, and the truck tires grabbed at the gravel like a beast.

At my startled look, she gave me a daredevil grin. "Shortcut."

What the heck had I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 15

BECKETT

SURPRISE DISTRACTIONS

I dragged my exhausted ass out of my truck. I should have gone out to the back field to check on the progress of the seedlings. Or to check the status of the cabinets I'd ordered for one of the cabins me and Justin had been renovating for rentals this fall. Or... I had a list of things on my clipboard that I should be doing.

But after hauling Jolene out of the spring, all I wanted was a sandwich and a brew.

And to forget a certain woman's soft skin and killer whiskey and sunshine eyes. Since forgetting Helena was going to take some time, I settled on heading over to the Brothers Three Taproom for some grub. They weren't officially opening for another week or so, but Kain was already in residence.

And that meant food was usually quick to follow.

I waved at the cleaning crew wiping down the front windows from the storm. The parking lot was a maze of mud and debris from it too. The taproom was situated above the orchard in the more densely forested part of our land. We'd carved out a space to build onto the old barn that had been abandoned during the rougher period of Happy Acres.

My dad and uncle Fred had fought to keep the orchard running for a string of years. We'd even had to rely on my cousin Lila's rich prick of a now ex-husband for help with a loan. That had been the first day I'd started planning ways to diversify the orchard.

It might've taken me the better part of a decade to get us in the black, but now we had enough capital to continue to grow. Since me and my brothers had taken over the brunt of the orchard operation and modernized into the Brothers Three Orchard, I just had to make sure it stayed profitable.

The concert stage and Brothers Three Taproom had been a huge step in the right direction.

I bypassed the front door and took the path along the side of the taproom to the back entrance.

“I was wondering how long it was going to take you to come out and see me.” Kira Webb leaned against the doorway to the brewing workshop, her arms folded as she gave me a wide grin. Her dark hair was wild around her shoulders, and she had on a pair of dusty shorts and a canary yellow shirt streaked with God knew what. “It’s a new record. Only took you three hours to check your texts.”

With a wince, I dug out my phone. Sure enough, there were a few texts waiting for me. Hers was straight to the point with no bullshit. I looked up from the screen. “So what’s the news?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come sit down before you fall down,” she called as she disappeared into the work room.

“So damn bossy,” I muttered as I followed. Kira had gone from my right-hand employee in the orchard to my staffing manager for the ever-changing seasonal needs during our growing and harvest seasons. I’d always known she was far too brilliant to be stuck in the orchard. It felt as if I was missing an arm in the orchard some days, but I’d known she would be perfect to run the Brothers Three Taproom.

It had taken some convincing, but in the end, she was even better at the job than I’d hoped. It had taken a load off of me knowing she could handle anything that came her way when it came to our newest venture.

She was also my best friend and the only person besides my siblings who knew me inside and out.

“I just wanted to raid the kitchen.” Even to me, my voice sounded damn whiny.

Her eyebrow rose. “How do you know I have food here? We aren’t open.”

I collapsed onto the worn leather couch in Ronan’s thinking area. Probably other things happened on the damn couch knowing them, but I was too damn tired to care. “I can smell it from here.”

My stomach growled at the familiar scent of Kain’s famous Hawaiian pork. He was probably bribing his kitchen staff with some crazy changes for the new season. The man was never satisfied with the menu for someone who wasn’t technically a chef.

She sat across from me and tossed her hair over her shoulder. I still wasn't used to this ultra-feminine version of Kira either. She had gold flashing at her ears, neck, and fingers. Now more often than not, she wore dresses, makeup, and she was rushing around in stilts that made my feet pinch just looking at them.

"Did you really race off with a chick on the back of Storm?"

I slid down and laced my fingers over my belly. "I don't want to talk about it."

She slid off her sandals and crossed her legs under her, then propped her elbows on her knees and leaned forward. "You disappear with some icy babe, and I'm not supposed to ask questions?"

I frowned. "She's not icy."

"Is that so? How would you know?"

I crossed my arms to hide my fisted hands. I didn't want to pick apart my very obvious one-night stand with Kira. "Can we talk about what you asked me in here for?"

She grinned wider. "Deflecting. Point two in the 'I don't wanna talk about it' arsenal of Beckett Manning. Let me see what this girl looks like." She leaned back and took her phone out of her pocket.

"Give me a break. I don't want to talk about Helena."

She gave a delighted laugh that grated on my nerves. Then she waggled her eyebrows and turned her phone around to flash me a photo from the wedding. Helena was smiling, but it was a distant, sad smile. Not like the ones I'd seen up close.

She turned the phone back around to flick her thumb over the screen. "She's...not your type."

"How do you know my type?"

Kira snorted. "Hot, a little dangerous, ready to fuck and run."

I shifted on the couch. She wasn't wrong and I wasn't sure why it suddenly bothered me. "Why do you care? You weren't even there."

"I know. I'm sorry I missed it. Especially after I found out how exciting it got." Her dark eyes went from shiny with glee to serious in a heartbeat. "I'm glad Willow is okay."

I sighed. "Yeah, we are too. Scared the shit out of us."

"But then the next day, all the fireworks." She flipped the phone around again and this time there was video.

"Put that away." My voice was flat with warning.

She cackled, completely undeterred. “You swooped her up in your arms like a Disney prince!”

“Shut up. She just needed some help is all.”

“Oh, I bet she got it.” Her head fell back as her laughter thickened.

“Can you not?”

She dabbed at her eyes. “Oh, stop. I know you’re honorable. Probably too much so.”

Kira might be my best friend, but she didn’t know everything about me. I just made sure to keep whatever romantic relations I’d had over the years away from the orchard. With women who knew the score.

I was good for a sweaty weekend when I needed to get my frustrations out with a willing woman. When it was over, I was back here where I belonged—taking care of the orchard and my family.

“You know, it would be good for you to enjoy some time with a woman.”

I sat up with a sigh. “You just have the rose-colored on because of Ronan.”

She glanced down at the flashing yellow diamond on her left hand. “Maybe. And that’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Finally going to make an honest man out of him?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you start too. I haven’t had time to plan a wedding. I was making sure this place was ready for a new season. I didn’t expect to have so many parties in here during the off-season.”

Relaxing now that the topic had turned to work, I got up to find a bottle of hard cider in the shop fridge. Ronan always kept something new in there. “It was a cold winter, but we didn’t get nearly the snow we usually do.”

“I know it. And my budget definitely didn’t mind it. We have a tidy bank account to do some really amazing things this summer and fall.”

I found a bottle labeled with the number eleven and knocked off the top with the edge of the workbench. I took a long sip and my eyes nearly crossed at the flavor. It was whisky-smooth and had a cinnamon finish.

She grinned at me. “Good, right?”

“Amazing.”

“Still knocking around names, but think it’s *Not Your Grandma’s Apple Pie*.”

“Works for me. New theme is tongue in cheek this year?”

“Might be. We’ll see how it goes. You know how Ronan is when he’s in work mode.”

“That I do.” I tended to give Ronan a wide berth now that he’d proven his mettle. I sat back down on the couch in front of her. “Is that what you wanted to discuss? You know I trust you with whatever you want to do.”

“I appreciate that.” She twisted her ankles, her eyes focused on her hand again. She toyed with the underside of the band with her thumb.

“Everything okay?”

She laughed. “I think so. At least it better be or Ronan will make my life hell.”

I frowned. “You guys having trouble?”

“What? Oh, no. Not like that. In fact, we are moving up the date of the wedding.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Depends on if you’re going to be excited about being Uncle Beckett.”

“Oh, shit.” My gaze went right to her still flat middle. Kira was more on the curvy side, but not that damn curvy.

She giggled and slid her hand across her middle. “Yeah. We were *not* trying, that’s for sure. Though you wouldn’t know it by Viking.”

“Okay, no details.”

She snickered. “No, really. We’ve both been so busy with the distribution deal for The B3 hard cider and me with the events. I just thought I was tired as hell from everything.”

I laughed. “Still managed to make a baby, now didn’t you?”

“I guess we did. We wanted kids, just thought we’d wait a little bit until the timing was better.”

“Sometimes timing doesn’t matter for them.”

“Don’t I know it. That crazy man was ready to have kids with me the first time we messed around.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“I know. Anyway...so, we’re gonna do a wedding. Right here.”

“In the brewing room?”

She laughed. “Don’t give him that idea.”

“What?” I looked around at the rough cut beams over our heads. “It’s... rustic.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, in the taproom. I want to do it before I’m showing so we were thinking July.”

“Okay, then. Not much time.”

“No. Why we went out to see Ronan’s folks. Wanted to tell them first.

But you were the first one I wanted to tell.”

I stood up and dragged her into me for a hug. “I’m happy for you, Key.”

She laid her head on my shoulder. “Thanks.” She backed up. “Oh, and would you walk me down the aisle?”

My throat closed. I hadn’t been expecting that one. “Man. I’d be honored.”

Her eyes sparkled and she laughed as a tear escaped. “Okay good. Now enough of the mushy stuff.”

“Damn straight.”

She held out her hand, and I noticed Ronan in the doorway.

He came over to pull her against his chest. She immediately looped her arm around his back.

I held out my hand. “Congrats, man.”

Ronan shook it. His eyes were a little pink around the edges. “Sunshine is gonna give me a kid. How about that, huh?”

“Us a kid.” She drilled her finger into his belly.

He laced their fingers together and pulled them up to his lips. “Us.”

It wasn’t the first baby in our crazy extended family, but it was the first one to hit me with a real pang of something suspiciously like longing.

I’d never really thought about kids. It had always been more of a hazy future thing than on my actual radar.

“I’m really glad for you guys. Let me know if you need anything when working out the details.”

“We will.” Ronan drew her back out through the barn door. “Lennon needs you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Lennon doesn’t need me. She wants me to let her order some wild thing for the opening, I’m sure.”

“You’re the one who wanted to hire her,” Ronan teased.

“Some days I regret my decisions.” She reached up to tug on one of Ronan’s braids. “Did you hear about Prince Charming here?”

I groaned. “How long am I going to have to hear this?”

Ronan snickered. “Years, pal.”

“Always gotta be the hero. Save the day, get the thank you bang, and then off into the sunset as the Lone Ranger.”

“Shut up.”

Kira laughed before going onto her toes to kiss Ronan. “Catcha later, Daddy.” The tone made me want to crawl under a rock. Then she wiggled her

fingers at me. "Uncle Beck."

Then she was gone.

Looked like a lot of things were going to be changing around here.

CHAPTER 16

HELENA

IDIOT BOYS

I stumbled back on the edge of the flagstone, my ballet shoes not made for this kind of path. I quickly ducked back around the corner before they could see me.

I didn't want to hear anymore anyway.

"Always gotta be the hero. Save the day, get the thank you bang, and then off into the sunset as the Lone Ranger."

My heartbeat thundered in my head.

I hadn't meant to eavesdrop. Cara had zipped away to find someone to talk to in the taproom, leaving me to wander around the grounds. Then I'd heard Beckett's deep voice coming from the secondary building, and I'd been like a bee to a flower.

The woman's throaty laughter and the deeper, rumbling voices were like static as I tried to get my breathing under control.

A moment later, the statuesque dark-haired woman from the photo on Beckett's mantle swaggered through the massive sliding barn door. She was supremely confident and radiated happiness. Her long legs ate up the steps as she descended them from the taproom.

Her words still rang in my head as I turned and stumbled blindly along the path.

Words I wished I could *unhear*.

She wasn't wrong. Beckett had saved me, and he'd been well rewarded.

Absolutely no lies detected.

I was so stupid to have said yes to doing this favor. What had I been expecting? *Oh hi, can we pick up from where we left off for another week?*

God, I was such an idiot.

Now I was about to look even more pathetic. Again.

Would I never learn?

“Can I help you?”

I whirled around, my hand to my throat, and came face to face with a half buttoned fuchsia chef’s jacket. I tipped my head back and goggled. The familiar rugged face and wild beard was so unexpected, my voice came out in a squeak. “Kain?”

“*Haleigha*? What the hell are you doing here?”

My gaze dropped to his chef’s jacket then back up to his face. “Back at you. Wait.” My brain caught up to the second shock to my system in as many minutes. “You’re the Kain Laverne told me to meet?”

He wiped a big palm along the leg of his pants. He glanced around, then he looked back down at me. “Shit.”

“What’s going on?”

He gently wrapped one of his big paws around my upper arm and hustled me along the path toward a swing at the top of the hill. “Just my fucking luck. I swear, what is it about this damn orchard?”

A question I asked myself often, but for a very different reason. Unless Kainoa N’ai, famous freaking architect and now sole owner of N’ai Construction, was also hiding out from a disastrous love life. “What are you doing here?”

“Keep your voice down.” He urged me to sit on the swing and blocked me with his huge body. He glanced back at the building next to the taproom, then he returned his gaze to me.

“Is this where you’ve been?” I dropped a hand over his and squeezed. I was used to reading articles and hearing about his crazy exploits in the years since we’d met, but he’d gone radio silent last year. “I was sorry to hear about your dad.”

He closed his eyes. “Thanks.” His voice was uneven and unusually quiet. He cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?”

That was a very good question. I thought I’d had a handle on that until just a few minutes ago. “Helping Laverne.”

“How long are you here?”

“Nice to see you too, Kain.”

He sighed. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, but things are...complicated.”

I pointed to his jacket. “Anything to do with that?”

He slumped back against the bench seat, his green eyes unusually serious.

“Look, I know this is a very heavy and weird ask, but could you not mention how you know me to anyone?”

I tipped my head. “You want me to lie? Because I’m pretty sure a billionaire doesn’t need to be a chef at a taproom.”

“Bah. Billionaire.” The disgust was heavy in his voice. Kain had always been more comfortable in battered Carhartt pants and a rude T-shirt than in a suit. Evidently, now he had a chef’s jacket to add to his collection. “For fuck’s sake.”

I turned my knees toward him on the swing until they pressed against his tree trunk-sized thighs. “It’s what you are. If you weren’t before, you certainly are now...” I let the sentence trail off.

My father was more into the real estate end of business than actual construction and building like Kain, but the N’ai name was synonymous with eco-friendly, high-end architecture. And to my mother and father, those optics meant status, clout, and money—their favorite words.

They were willing to overlook the less than desirable traits of Kain’s personality because of it.

“Can you stop being so damn loud?” He swiped his hand over his head, pushing off the stretchy hair wrap he was wearing until his dark hair sprung free. His sides were shorn, but he still had a ton of long, wild curls that whipped around his shoulders in the breeze.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Can you stop being so evasive?”

I’d worked with Kain’s company on a major renovation of The Children’s Hospital in Manhattan. My parents were on the board of directors and of course that meant I handled the mundane things my mother found boring.

We’d hit it off during endless meetings and had remained friends.

He sighed. “I just like it here. It’s quiet and no one expects anything from me. Well, except for cooking. And that’s infinitely easier than...everything else.” He kicked a foot out and set the swing to rocking with the heel of his boot. He didn’t look at me now, his gaze on the orchard below. His face was far more pensive than the man I remembered with the gregarious laugh and shocking humor.

I followed his gaze and my breath backed up at the view. Sunlit green-capped trees were lined up in the valley below. Some as straight as soldiers, while others were clustered in cheerful bundles. It was a vast property and from way up here, it didn’t show the maze of trails I’d raced over the day before.

A day ago. It felt like a lifetime.

Yet here I was, looking for ways extend the fantasy. It surely wasn't based in any reality considering what I'd overheard a few minutes ago.

We sat in a companionable silence for a few more moments.

"I know it's asking a lot, *Haleigha*."

The old nickname in his rumbling accent made me smile. It also was his way to cajole. I remembered it well from when he didn't want to deal with meetings.

At least his machinations were mostly sweet-natured, unlike my mother's.

"I'm not great at secrets, Kain." They caused far too much pain in the end.

"It's not exactly a secret, just a...lack of full detail about what I do when I'm not cooking for the taproom."

I snorted. "Oh, you mean lying?"

He sighed. "I just don't want to answer a lot of questions. When I'm here, I'm just Kain."

"What about your company? All the builds you've designed need your attention."

"I handle it on my phone like everyone else. Besides, Malia runs my company better than I do."

I knew his assistant well. She was a no-nonsense woman that scared most of the crew who worked under Kain. Heck, she'd scared me a few times during our project together.

"How did you even find this place? If it's out of the way for me, it's a half a world away from you."

"Ronan." He leaned back and stretched his arm out behind me. Kain didn't know how to not take up space, but his was a soothing presence. The swing squeaked a little under our combined weight, but thankfully, it seemed sturdy enough. "My best friend since I was...hell, nineteen? Maybe earlier."

"And when do you need your best friend?" My voice soft with understanding.

"Only place I could think to go when the old man kicked it. Only Jack would drop dead in the middle of a build." His laugh was humorless and full of pain. The use of his dad's name also told me things between them probably hadn't improved between them since the last time I'd seen him.

I placed my hand on his leg and let him keep talking.

"After I cleaned up the legal end of his death and dealt with the pomp and

circumstance of burying him in Hawaii, I just wanted quiet.”

I looked back out over the orchard. “This place seems to have a special knack for that.”

“For you too?”

I nodded and relaxed beside him.

“What the hell brought you here?”

“Long story.”

He nudged me with a shrug of his shoulder. “What’s the abridged version?”

“Wedding with a side of drama.”

He frowned. “Not that family one.”

“One in the same. I was a bridesmaid and everything.”

He whistled softly and kept swinging. “I heard some murmurs about some excitement at the start of the reception, but I was too busy tapping kegs with Justin and Hayes.”

I huffed out a laugh. Kain’s partying was legendary, whether the party was a picnic or black tie. “You mean drinking the kegs?”

He grinned with a shrug. “Maybe. That cider will sneak up on ya.” I recognized the distant look in his eyes. There had been many a time where Kain had disappeared due to some wild hair. His creative brain was staggering. “Anyway, I don’t really know Rachel. I’ve seen her a few times in passing, but she keeps pretty busy in the main orchard with her Cocoa Buses. Pretty genius. Wish I’d thought of them.”

“Your buildings are in Architectural Digest.”

“That they are.” He laughed. “But I’m learning that sometimes smaller is more impactful. These damn food trucks—or in this case, drink trucks—are genius as hell. Why I like it here. Everything is about building things to work within the framework of the orchard. Innovating to better the place, but not change the heart of it.”

The wistfulness in his voice made me a little sad. “But you’re not doing any of the building.”

He glanced down at me. “You haven’t had my pork sandwiches.”

My stomach chose then to answer.

His booming laugh drew out an answering one. “So what do you say? Not gonna rat me out?”

“People will wonder why we know each other.”

His arm fell down to squeeze me close. “Can just pretend we know each

other from a whirlwind love affair.”

I elbowed him. I felt the blush creep up my neck and burn my cheeks. “Stop it.”

“Oh, c’mon. You know we flirted around it in the city.”

“We did not.”

“Only because you were fake dating that Clay dude...oh, shit. No.”

The realization of how I knew Rachel and Clay seemed to spin and click like puzzle pieces in his brain. “Yeah.”

“Man, I always told you that fake dating bullshit would bite you in the ass someday.”

“Oh, it sure did.”

He kissed my temple. “I was more than willing to show you how a man should treat you.”

And I had been tempted. Who wouldn’t be? Kain was unbelievably attractive and exactly the kind of man my parents would have died to have attached to our family. But the spark had been little more than a flicker between us. He also never seemed able to settle in one place.

At the time, Clay looked like the safer bet. Obviously, my instincts were nonexistent.

He slid off the bench and dragged me up into his arms. “I’m glad to see you, *Haleigha*.”

I held onto him, still smarting from the tumultuous emotions I’d been wading through since the start of the day. Not to mention what I’d just overheard the brunette say about Beckett.

Kain eased me back and tapped the brim of my cap. “You sure you’re okay?”

I nodded. “I will be. I’m actually here for a good reason.”

“Not just to bust my balls?”

“Just an added benefit.” I straightened my shirt, showing off the Brothers Three Orchard logo. “I’m helping out Laverne with an impromptu party emergency.”

His eyebrows shot up as he scraped his hair up into a messy knot with the elastic on his wrist. “No one knows how to plan a party better than you do.”

“Actually, I’d say Rachel owns that honor—or at least she used to—but she’s on her way to Greece.”

“Can I say again how fucking small this world is? There’s gotta be some weird vortex around this freaking orchard.”

“I know. I jumped at the chance to help Laverne because I didn’t want to leave. There’s something about it that crawls under your skin.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Exactly why I don’t want to ruin a good thing.”

I sighed. “I won’t lie, but I won’t volunteer any details. How’s that?”

“All I can ask.” He finally seemed to relax, then just as suddenly he draped his arm around my neck and tugged me against his chest. Being around Kain was never dull, that was for sure. “Now what do you need from the taproom?”

“I’d like to see what kind of chairs you have. Since the event rooms were overbooked, we’re going to use the gardens for a birthday party.”

“Smart. It’s definitely an underutilized space.”

I peered up at him. “You’ve been in the orchard proper?”

“I sneak over to have lunch with Laverne a few times a week. She likes when I surprise her with food that isn’t from the café or bakery.”

“You just like flirting.”

“That too. If only she wasn’t married.”

I laughed. “Okay, so you know the space. I have to figure out the specifics of how many guests and the food, but I’d like to see what I’m working with or if we need to rent.”

“Kira can help you with the rentals if need be. She’s the boss lady here and can make pretty much anything happen by the sheer force of her will.”

“Is she the one behind the bar? I think Cara was talking to her.”

“Nope. That’s Lennon. She’s our mixologist and head bartender.”

A sinking feeling settled over me. That only meant one thing. I would be dealing with *her*.

He steered me toward the taproom. “When’s the party?”

“Friday.”

“We aren’t officially opening until next week. I’m sure one or two of our bartenders—hell, even our wait staff—wouldn’t mind some extra hours.”

“I guess I need to discuss all of that with Kira then.”

The statuesque brunette I’d heard speaking with Beckett was Kira. Were they a former item? Friends? Cousins?

God, I hoped they were cousins.

How the heck was I supposed to compete with her? And now that just sounded even more ridiculous. It wasn’t a competition, dammit.

I was just a visitor. I had no ties to Beckett.

Even if it felt like something had started forming between us—or I really sucked at the whole one-night stand thing. Which was probably the latter.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I was just going over the checklist in my brain.”

He pulled me in front of him at the bottom of the steps then cupped my cheek in his big hand. The gentleness made my eyes prick with tears. “Are you sure about that?”

I cleared my throat against the lump. “It’s been a crazy weekend.”

His gaze lifted over my head, and suddenly, he shoved me behind him.

“What the hell is going on?”

My system jolted at Beckett’s voice. I pushed at Kain, but he kept me firmly behind him.

Beckett’s voice was deep and sharp. “Get your goddamn hands off her.”

“Back it up a step, bruh.”

“Touch her again and I’ll break your hand.”

“Try it.” Kain’s voice was laced with malice.

“Guys!” I moved to the side and Kain stepped in front of me once more. “Are you kidding me right now?” I shoved Kain, but it was like trying to move a boulder.

Kain curled me against his side. “What the hell is up your ass, man?”

My cheek was smushed against his starched chef’s jacket. “This is ridiculous.”

Beckett’s blue eyes were wild and dangerous. His gaze never left Kain. I’d never seen him like this. Not that I truly knew him very well, but he was very different from the man I woke with.

“Get. Your. Hands. Off. Her.” Beckett advanced until the two men were mere inches from one another.

Again, I got shoved to the back.

“Hello! What is happening?” I shouted at Kain’s back. “Beckett, you’re being ridiculous.”

Neither man was listening to me at this point. Kain had a few inches on Beckett, but it didn’t seem to make a difference. Beckett’s hands were fisted at his sides, and he was practically vibrating.

“*Haleigha*, stay back.”

“What did you call her?” Beckett’s eyes were icy cold and his voice was a near growl.

The posturing pissed me off, but before I could wade in between them,

Beckett took a swing.

Kain easily dodged it, but instead of swinging back, he grinned. “Oh, is this how it’s gonna go?”

“No, it is not,” I shouted.

This wasn’t good. Kain was the type to instigate rather than to calm a situation. Not that it mattered at this point. They both ignored me.

Beckett charged him, leading with his shoulder and Kain deflected with a spin. He grabbed Beckett’s arm and sent him crashing into the railing near us.

I backed up the steps and out of the way. Evidently, we were beyond talking.

Beckett pushed off the railing and used the momentum to get a shot in this time.

Kain’s head snapped back, and he lifted a thumb to the corner of his mouth. This smile was wider and wicked with mirth. “Been a minute since I’ve had a brawl.”

Beckett shook out his hand before he held them both up in front of him. “Same.”

Someone behind me pulled me the rest of the way up the stairs, the female voice near my ear both urgent and husky. “Girl, you need to get back.”

“I don’t even know what’s happening.”

“Raging bulls.” The woman put her hands on her hips and shook her head, but there was amusement there instead of worry. She was as bad as Kain. “Boys are idiots.”

“This is ridiculous.”

She looked me up and down then glanced back at the two men. “Are they fighting over you?”

“No!”

She cackled, throwing her head back. Her long braid snaked over her shoulder as she subsided into giggles. “Yeah, they sure are. Nice.”

“No. It’s not nice.”

She shrugged. “I’m Lennon. I’m used to these idiots. Beckett is usually way more chill though. What did you do to him?” Her espresso-colored eyes twinkled.

I glanced back at the two of them and winced as Kain plowed his fist into Beckett’s midsection. He doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. But instead of slowing down, he used the crouched position to ram at Kain.

“Whoa.” Lennon shoved a hand into her apron and pulled out a bill. “Twenty on the big guy.”

“You can’t bet on them.” I was beyond shocked at this point. Didn’t anyone want to break them up?

“I sure can.” Lennon snorted.

“I’ll put twenty on Beckett.” Came another voice from at the top of the stairs. The statuesque brunette that had to be Kira came down to meet us on the second level.

Lennon shot her hand out to take the bill from her. “Any other takers?”

A woman with shoulder length curls rushed down. “What did I miss?”

“Not sure. Beck and Kain are gonna need some ice though.” Lennon hissed. “Oh, that was a good one.”

The two men tumbled over an Adirondack chair and crashed onto the flagstone path.

“You break it you buy it,” Kira called out.

Beckett rolled off Kain onto his knees. He used the felled chair to get up and shoved the chair at Kain who blocked it with his forearm.

“Playing dirty, son?” Kain swiped his forearm across his mouth and popped up off the ground, staggeringly agile for a man his size.

“Forty on Kain,” the short-haired woman said.

“Oh, up the ante.” Lennon couldn’t conceal her glee.

“Are you all insane?” I sputtered.

Kira looked over her shoulder. “Where’s Ronan?”

The third woman waved at me. “I’m Annette. He left. Said he needed to go pick up yeast from Syracuse.”

Kira sighed. “At least I won’t have to patch my idiot up. He totally would wade into this.” She crossed her arms and leaned on the railing. “So I guess you did more than get a ride on Beck’s horse, huh?”

My face flamed.

Lennon’s jaw dropped. “Oh, you’re the girl from the wedding. Sweet. I bet he’s good in the sack, right? I mean, it’s always the quiet ones.”

I flinched as the two men grappled. Kain’s chef’s jacket was wrenched back, and his arms got stuck, leaving Beckett with the opening for a one-two punch to Kain’s midsection.

“They’re going to kill each other.”

“Nah.” Kira dragged in a quick breath. “Probably going to hurt like hell later though. Guess we’ll be breaking out the frozen peas.”

The three women all collectively *oohed* as Kain whipped off his jacket and grabbed Beckett by the shirtfront and lifted him off his toes.

“Raise it to sixty on Kain,” Lennon said.

“I’m in.” Annette pulled a crumpled bill out of her pocket.

“I need to go stop this.” I started forward and Kira caught me by my ponytail.

“Nope. You’ll just get hurt. They need to get it out of their systems.”

“It’s uncivilized.”

Lennon snorted. “Sometimes they just need to beat the crap out of each other. So did you sleep with both of them?” She held her hand out for a fist bump. “Guess that quiet one thing applies to you too.”

“God, no, not both—“ What was I saying? *Just shut up.*

Lennon whistled. “But you *did* sleep with Beckett? I’m assuming.” Her perfectly arched black brows rose. “Or did you sleep with the big guy?”

“No. Kain and I are just friends.”

“You actually know Kain? Like for real know?” Kira studied me. “Interesting.”

I was wading into dangerous waters here. I didn’t want to own up to exactly how I knew Kain. But the look in Kira’s eyes was thoughtful. Did *she* know who Kain was?

She had to. Now that I could put faces with names I’d heard over the last few years, some things made more sense. “You’re with Ronan, right?”

Kira nodded. “Gonna marry the idiot.” She hissed as the guys plowed over one of the fire pits and scattered stones everywhere. “Speaking of idiots, I’m making them put this all back together after. I don’t care how many bandages they need.”

“How long are they going to keep this up?” My shoulders were up near my ears and my heart raced at how they continued to hammer at each other.

The punches were losing steam, but neither of them seemed to be willing to surrender to the other.

“Beck is scrappy. He and Justin used to get into fights every weekend at the bar.” Kira propped her elbow on the railing. “He’s really got his dander up though.” Her gaze was on me again, even more thoughtfully this time.

Annette disappeared but came back with a basket. “Popcorn?”

“Oh, thanks.” Lennon took a handful and shoved two kernels in her mouth. She nodded toward Kain. “Good technique.”

“How can you tell?” At this point, every muscle was locked in my

shoulders and back. It just looked like chaos to me.

Lennon pointed. "See how Kain keeps his shoulders low. Probably has some martial arts training. He's been deflecting most of the punches from Beckett. He's probably trying to tire him out more than hurt him. *Ohhhh.*" She lifted a fist to her mouth. "Well, maybe hurt him a little bit."

Beckett's baseball cap tumbled across the flagstone as they crashed to the ground. He rose and weaved a little, then he took two giant steps back and shook his head.

"Oh, we might be done," Annette said and extended the basket toward Kira.

Kira shook her head. "I'm good." She straightened as Beckett bent to pick up his hat and put it on backwards. "Oh, here we go."

I swung my gaze back onto the men. "What's happening? Should I go down there?"

Kira shook her head. "Nope. Slow your roll, Barbie."

My jaw dropped. What did she just call me?

Beckett rolled his neck and shook out his hands. He lifted the hem of his shirt and swiped at his face. His shirt was streaked with dirt and blood.

He was lightning fast. Beckett caught Kain in the middle with two shots, then he ducked under the battering ram of a fist coming at him. Kain might have height and bulk on him, but I was pretty sure I was witnessing the term *scrappy* in technicolor.

Beckett landed a punch, then just as quickly he skipped back out of the way before Kain could grab him. Kain gave a roar at the third combination of punches Beckett landed and finally he got a hold of the front of Beckett's shirt, tossing him into a chair.

The chair rocked back, and Beckett tumbled to the ground, the chair making a mighty crack against the stone path.

I couldn't stop myself from rushing down the steps this time. Lennon and Kira called after me, but enough was enough. They were being absolute idiots, and someone was going to end up in an ambulance.

And at this point, it might be me who put them there.

CHAPTER 17

BECKETT

TRUTHS

The Adirondack chair splintered under me and the flagstone came rushing at me. I managed to twist my shoulder enough to avoid breaking some bones. Kira would give me enough shit about the chair, I didn't need to spend half the summer in a sling.

A pair of ballet slippers came into view as Helena stood over me with her hands at her hips. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I groaned and gave up trying to get up.

Suddenly, I was lifted off the ground and put on my feet. The world tilted and Kain's bloodied face came into focus. I flinched, waiting for another hit from his ham hock of a fist. Goddamn, he was a big dude.

"Kain, that's enough." Her voice dented the buzz in my ears from the number of times Kain rang my bell.

How the hell did she know Kain? And why the fuck was she talking to him like she knew him biblically?

After she'd just been in my goddamn bed. Hell, I still had her taste in my mouth, her smell on my skin. My bed was barely cool from *us*.

The snarl rose up in me, the red haze at the edges of my vision threatening again.

"You good, son?"

I weaved a little, but I managed to not list to the left even though my ribs were on fire.

"No, he's not good." Helena hovered near me, her hands fluttering as if she wasn't sure to touch me or not.

Because she felt guilty that she'd just been in Kain's arms?

Maybe even in his bed?

Even as the unwelcome thought registered, I denied it. *No*. I refused to believe she could've done that after what we'd shared.

Yeah, you sure acted as if you were full of trust, jackass.

"I can answer for myself." My voice held more of a growl than I'd intended.

She flinched once before the icy calm I remembered from the wedding descended over her face. "Fine, beat yourselves bloody."

"*Haleigha*, c'mon. It's over with. I mean, if he wants to go another round, I will, but I think he got it out of his system."

"Got it out—" Helena broke off and tugged at the brim of her ball cap before twirling to stalk off only to turn around and come right back. "You're both unbelievable."

Kain licked the corner of his mouth. At least his lip was busted from one of my fists. "This is nothing. You should see some of the fights me and Ronan have been in over the years. Funnily enough, Ronan pounded on me for a similar reason." He laughed. "I'm flattered all of you think I'm so irresistible to your women."

"I'm not his woman," she snapped.

"You sure about that?" Kain's grin got wider. "Not sure why he'd come at me like the Tasmanian Devil unless *he* thought so." He hissed out a breath as his lip split open again. "Damn, you do have a good hook, bruh."

"Back at you," I muttered.

"Anytime you want to spar, I'll show you how to actually hit your target more than twenty percent of the time." He winked.

"Fuck you."

He threw his head back and laughed. "You two have some talking to do it seems." Kain waggled his eyebrows at Helena. "You neglected to tell me you had another man on the hook."

She shut her eyes and stalked away. This time, she made a beeline for the taproom and met Cara at the bottom of the steps.

Cara kept peering around Helena to where I stood with Kain and then back to Helena. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but then again, it felt as if my head was full of cotton at the moment.

What was she doing with Kain? Had she been with him before?

Not that I could be mad about it. We all had a past, but the way she'd been snuggled up against him made my blood boil once more.

"Don't get that look in your eye again. I still have to cook three more

courses for the staff dinner tonight.”

I held my side as I picked up what was left of the chair.

Kain grabbed the other piece and we walked it over to the workshop. “Do I need to ask your intentions with Helena?”

“Is it any of your business?”

He snorted. “No. But I’ll ask anyway. She’s had shit luck when it comes to men. I don’t want to see her get hurt.”

“She wasn’t supposed to be here. I thought she was on her way back to the city.”

“And yet you can flying at me like a madman?” He made a humming sound and broke apart the chair, tossing the pieces in the woodbox just inside the barn door.

Once I was out of eyeshot from the crowd that had gathered, I sagged against the wall. “Jesus, you got vibranium in those fists?”

“Good old Hawaiian bones.” He wandered over to the leather couch and dropped into it, then he nodded at me. “Sit.” When I hesitated, he kicked out the club chair. “Sit before you fall down, *lolo*.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but it probably wasn’t complimentary. I lowered myself gingerly into the chair as I took a quick stock of all my aches. I was pretty sure Kain had pulled most of his punches, and I should’ve been more pissed about that than I was.

“Sorry, man.”

Kain waved me off with a grunt. “Women make a man crazy. Especially when it’s new and lusty.” He arched a brow. “I’m assuming.”

“None of your goddamn business.”

He settled back and spread his arms across the back of the couch. “That’s a yes. I know how it goes.”

I gritted my teeth against asking what I wanted to know. But did I really want to know? Picturing her wrapped around Kain was enough to make my palms itch again.

His smile slowly slid away. “Look, I appreciate that you don’t make a big deal about my life outside the taproom.”

“Ronan would’ve told me if you were an ex-con or something. Not that it would make a difference to me. Long as you did your time.”

“Wow, right to prison level. My life isn’t that exciting.”

“I mean, that’s the worst I could come up with for you not wanting to talk about shit. You don’t seem to be the military type.”

Kain snorted. “Definitely not. My father passed away last year, and it fucked me up a little.”

My hands relaxed in my lap. “Jesus. I’m sorry, man.”

Of all the things I was expecting it to be about, that hadn’t topped even the secondary list. But it made sense why Ronan had been so adamant when he asked for some leeway with Kain’s background check. Not that it would show on a check.

“Who are you?”

Kain drummed his fingers on the leather arm and stared holes in the coffee table.

“Look, if it’s too much to talk about, I’m not going to give you grief about it. You come to work, you do a damn good job, and you make the taproom a ton of money. And I’d like to think we’ve become friends.”

“Fuck.”

“Or not.”

“No, man, that’s not it.” He sat forward and gripped his hands between his knees. “Now it’s a thing, and it’s gonna sound ridiculous. But once people know about me, shit gets weird.”

“You do know I have famous people in my family tree these days. Weird is kinda a staple here.”

He dropped his chin and laughed. “Actually, that’s a very good point.”

“If you don’t want to dig into your whatever, it’s cool. Just tell me one thing.”

He met my gaze with an arched brow.

“How do you know Helena?”

“That’s where it gets sticky.”

How fucking sticky? Again, the images of her Velcro-ed to Kain’s side made my skin heat and my brain redline. And I didn’t fucking get why. I’d never been possessive about a woman in my life.

None had gotten into my head—or under my skin—in just one day. It didn’t make any goddamn sense.

She was making me crazy.

I stood up. “You know what, I don’t want to know.”

“I’m fucking rich, okay? I know Helena from working on a charity deal.” He collapsed back against the couch cushions.

I sat back down. “Not what I was expecting.”

“Yeah, it was getting exhausting finding a way not to say anything.

There's something about this goddamn orchard, man. Who the hell would know me here? It was perfect."

"And you have all these city people crawling around." I grinned at him and finally relaxed.

"Yes. Exactly it. I'm not really an East Coast guy. Most of my business is in California and the Pacific Northwest, but I've expanded over the years and do some things in Manhattan."

"So you're hiding out? And why am I paying you?"

He threw his head back with a shouting laugh. "I deserve my pay, fucker."

"You do."

"I like having the pocket money."

"Fuck you. Pocket money," I muttered as I shook my head. "Just how rich are you?"

He shrugged. "I don't kiss and tell, and I don't talk money. But it's a lot of goddamn zeroes. My old man left me everything too."

I let out a slow whistle. What the hell must that be like? The orchard was in the black these days, but it was a precarious balance and we carried a lot of loans for our expansions. Just because the bills were paid every month right now didn't mean it would always stay that way.

"So what do you do? How the hell can you disappear for months at a time?"

"A smart woman runs my business."

"I know how that goes."

Laverne had singlehandedly kept us from losing the orchard before I'd realized how bad off we were. She was the first one to add the bakery to the business and then the bed and breakfast which had become The Lodge.

"Anyway, I'm a builder. I have a construction business, and I'm an architect by trade."

"Well, shit."

"Yeah. Crazy, ain't it?" He slapped his thighs then stood. "I like it here, man. I didn't want to fuck it up with secrets, but I also didn't want to have to explain myself. Once people know who I am, it changes things."

"Doesn't have to. You want to slum it with us for the summer and fall, who am I to judge?" I rose. "Just don't be surprised when I don't give you a raise."

He deserved it, and I'd been keen to talk to Kira about giving him a bonus

this season.

“Why did I open my mouth?” He crossed his arms. They were scraped up from our repeated crash landings on the path outside.

The unspoken question sat between us. How well did he know Helena? And did I have competition for her?

More importantly, why the hell was she wearing one of my shirts today? I had a damn lot of questions that needed answers.

Just as many things that I needed to answer *for* at this point.

“Look, I know I was out of line with Helena.”

“Don’t tell me, tell her.”

I sighed. “Gonna be working on that one for a while.”

“She looked pretty pissed. But I’ll give you a little piece of advice about her.”

I jammed my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels. I was not going to overreact this time. I could be fucking calm. “Yeah?”

“She’s usually a cool cucumber. The fact that you got her all riled up is a good thing. Means she cares. Tread carefully.”

My muscles unlocked. “Got it.”

“Hurt her and I’ll rip your lungs out.” He slapped me on the shoulder.

I swallowed a groan. Had to be the shoulder I fell on. Goddamn him.

“Now let’s go clean up before Kira skins us both.”

“Yeah.” I was not looking forward to that conversation.

Or the one I’d need to have with Helena as well. But that would wait a bit.

Maybe until oh, June.

CHAPTER 18

HELENA

BATHROOM CONFESSIONAL

I stalked through the taproom and saw a sign for the bathrooms. Quickly, I ducked inside to collect myself.

“Helena, wait.”

My shoulders immediately went up toward my ears.

Could it be anyone other than *her*?

Of course not.

I didn’t answer, just let the door swing shut behind me. I went right to the sinks and turned on the tap, letting the cold water flow over my wrists.

“Does that help?”

I sighed and looked up in the mirror to catch Kira’s gaze in the reflection.

“Sometimes.”

“Is it working now?”

“I’ll tell you when my system recalibrates, and I no longer want to smash in a certain idiot’s face.” Surprised at my own words, my gaze darted back down to the sink.

What the heck had gotten into me? First, I’d actually yelled at Beckett. Not that they weren’t acting like children, but it still wasn’t like me.

And I still couldn’t get over the fact that Kain was here in Central New York.

Kira walked over to lean against the wall at the end of the trio of sinks. The room was jet black tile with matching enamel sinks and classy brass hardware. This bathroom could’ve been in any nightclub in Manhattan, to be honest.

“I like your taproom.”

She crossed her arms, one eyebrow raised. “Is that what we’re doing

here? Making nicey-nice?"

I'd been built for niceties. I'd been trained since childhood how to deal with small talk and how to make it effortless. Now I just felt stupid and out of my element. "Well, it is lovely," I muttered.

Kira laughed. "I appreciate it." She looked around. "I actually picked out the black. It's a bitch to keep looking clean, but it's worth it. Beckett thought I was crazy when I asked to paint the ceilings black with the wrought iron."

"I probably would have stayed safe with white. But I stay safe a lot."

Dear God, I needed to shut my mouth.

"Hopping on Beck's horse wasn't exactly safe."

I looked up, surprised she knew about it. "Were you at the wedding?"

"Nope. I was actually on a plane coming back from Seattle." She thumbed the ring on her finger, watching it glitter before looking at me once more. "Met the in-laws-to-be."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. And here I was worried about her and Beckett. I was as much of an idiot as he was being about Kain. "Congratulations."

"So polite."

I turned off the water. There wasn't enough cold water in the world to calm my racing mind. I moved to the towel dispenser, but Kira beat me to it. "Thanks."

"Look, I didn't follow you in here to bust your balls. I'm just watching out for my people. Beckett is on the very short list of people I care about."

"And yet you were betting on him instead of breaking up the fight?"

She snickered. "Like I was going to stop them?"

"You didn't even try."

"I learned a long time ago that if guys want to get into it, to just let them get it out of their systems."

"Until there's a broken bone?"

"It doesn't usually come to that. Mostly, I just dig out a few bags of frozen peas for the inevitable bruises. If they're really lucky, I might toss a tube of antiseptic at them."

I crunched the used towels in my hand. "They're grown adults. Shouldn't they be beyond that?"

"Oh, honey. Men never become real adults. They must hide it better in the city."

I tossed the towels in the garbage. "I suppose they just do it differently. They'd rather cut with words."

“I prefer a punch. At least I can deflect that one.”

“I’m sorry?” The idea of punching anyone was so beyond me, I was speechless.

She laughed. “Look, that fight was just idiot male stuff. Beckett can handle himself even with Kain. And I get you probably don’t see many fights at your glitzy parties, but it’s a way of life here on an orchard. Hell, I’ve put Beckett on his ass a few times when we were younger.”

My jaw dropped.

“Beckett used to be a helluva hothead, but after he took over the orchard, a lot of stuff changed. Not to say he doesn’t let off steam with his brothers here and there, but it’s not like him to go off like that. So, if you’re looking to make trouble, I’m just throwing out the warning here.”

“Trouble? *Me?*” That was the last thing I expected her to say.

“Pitting two dudes against each other? Never ends well.”

“I would never do that.”

Then again, that was a lie, wasn’t it? I’d brought Reid to the wedding to be a passive aggressive bitch.

I whipped the cap off my head and tossed it on the sink. “Or maybe I did do that. I don’t even know anymore.”

“I don’t know what happened between you two after the wedding, and I don’t want to know.”

I pressed my fingers to my eyes and willed back the sting of tears.

The most amazing day of my life had happened. And I was being selfish to come in here and think I deserved any more of his time. One night or six—in the end, I was still leaving.

I had a life in Manhattan.

But did I really?

I pushed down that little voice. I’d upended my life for men—or my family—all my life.

“Oh, shit. Nope. No tears. I don’t do tears.” She moved forward and patted my arm awkwardly. “I can go.”

My shoulders shook as I suppressed the maniacal laughter climbing up my throat.

“Oh, hell. Wait. Let me get Annette. She’s better at this stuff.”

Kira barely got to the door when the laugh escaped, echoing in the empty room.

I bent at the waist and couldn’t stop it. I was afraid it was going to roll

into tears. I'd gone from a morning orgasm to what I thought was a grown-up goodbye, and now I was being accused of playing with a man's emotions.

Two men's emotions. I hadn't even realized Kain had any. Not toward me in any case.

Thank God. I had enough problems.

"Are you laughing?"

"No," I said with a gasp.

Kira hopped up on the sink and folded her hands between her knees. "I recognize the crazy. Take a deep breath."

"I can't." It backed up in my lungs and got stuck as I collapsed onto my butt on the floor. "What was I thinking?"

"Maybe you weren't thinking. Orgasms tend to make us just as stupid as males."

"God, if that isn't the truth." I linked my arms around my legs and pressed my forehead to my knees. "I've never had *one* like that." I tamped down the giggle. "Let alone half a dozen."

"Dear God. Please don't give me the details. That's my best friend you're talking about."

I peered up at her. "You never thought about it?"

"Did you with Kain?" she shot back.

I sighed. "For a half a second. He's stupidly attractive and flirts outrageously." I propped my chin on my knees. "You and Beckett?"

I didn't really want to know, but I needed to.

"When I was in high school, I was dazzled. Football player, drove a motorcycle, dangerous and yet sweet at the same time. Then I started working at the orchard and we never clicked that way. Then I didn't want to ruin the friendship, so it kinda became a moot point." She wiggled the fingers on her left hand. "Meeting Viking showed me why it was never meant to be with Beckett."

"But you thought about it?"

She blew out a breath. "Not seriously. Not after I got out of my teens. And Beckett never looked at me like that. Not like he looks at you." She swung her legs. "I don't think he's ever looked at a woman like he looks at you. You should see that video of him putting you on the back of Storm."

"There's video?" I covered my face.

My mother wasn't exactly the sort to go on social media, but her friends were. And Clay and Rachel's wedding might've been small, but plenty of

people from Clay's company had attended. Which meant people who overlapped with my circle of acquaintances.

Now I really didn't want to check my text and voice messages.

"It was pretty impressive. Romantic even." She dug her phone out of her pocket and sucked air between her teeth. "Very romantic, evidently. Over one hundred thousand views."

"Oh, God." I drew my legs in tighter and hid my face.

"What? It's pretty awesome. Want to see?"

"No." I shut my eyes tighter. "Yes."

She laughed. "Here."

I looked up just in time for her phone to come flying at me. By some miracle, I caught it and turned it around to look. My gaze went right to the views and shares and my stomach dropped. So, so many views and reshares.

My thumb hovered over the replay button.

"Maybe you need a drink first."

"Do you have a keg of wine?"

She grinned. "I have kegs of exceptional hard cider."

"I'm partial to red wine."

"Not after we're done with you. Though I will miss my wine."

"Not good for business to be seen drinking wine?"

"No, I'm a red wine girl too. Or I used to be. Won't be for at least the next seven months or so. Or however long the little Viking I'm carrying will take to cook."

I blinked. "A baby?"

"Yep."

"Well, I guess that's two congratulations."

"Thanks."

I clicked off the phone without watching. I'd do that in the privacy of my room at The Lodge.

Rising, I handed her back her phone.

"You're not going to watch?"

"One bout of existential dread is enough for one afternoon."

"It's not that bad." She frowned as she put her phone away.

"Tell that to my mother. Optics mean everything."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's even worse than my mother."

"There was a reason I wasn't in a hurry to go home. Laverne just gave me an excuse to stay here for an extra week."

“I wondered how you got roped into helping at The Lodge. Then again, when it comes to Laverne, we all end up doing what she wants.”

“I volunteered.”

“First mistake.”

I was beginning to agree. “And that’s why I came here. Laverne mentioned we could borrow some chairs and tables, or you would know where to source them.”

“We? You’re all in already.” She shook her head. “Laverne has a way, that’s for sure.”

“I didn’t expect to see Beckett when I got here. Then the Kain thing.” I sagged against the counter. “Now I’m rethinking all of it.”

“Speaking of Kain, I wanted to talk to you about that too.”

I blew out a breath, unsure exactly where this line of question was headed. “Okay.”

“Look, Ronan is his best friend. I know exactly who he is. And I know he’s still not dealing with his crap with his dad.”

Relief washed over me. I didn’t have to lie. “No, he’s not.”

“How well do you know him?”

“We became friends during a project he did for The Children’s Hospital in Manhattan. My parents are on the board there and I handled a lot of the details.”

“Oh, one of his fancy architect deals?”

“Yeah. He did a major update on the old building. He’s brilliant.”

“That’s our Kain. He didn’t give us much choice on our house. Ronan bought a fixer-upper when he first moved here and Kain took over. The things he comes up with are amazing. Of course, now my idiot thinks *he’s* the genius because he made sure to have Kain build on a few extra bedrooms. Like he willed the baby into being.”

I picked up my hat. “Bet it wasn’t will alone.”

Kira barked out a shocked laugh. “We don’t have a problem in that department, that’s for sure. Have to admit I had you pegged as a snooty rich bitch.”

“I can be on occasion.”

“Honesty. I like it. As long as you’re not going to cause my guys grief, that’s all I care about.” She hopped down off the counter. “Kain is my friend too, but he’s also the head of my kitchen, and I don’t need the two of them busting up my patio every day over you.”

“I think we’re safe there. In fact, I think I’m just going to stay out of everyone’s way and get the party settled so I can get back to my life.”

“I think I’ll be betting on Beckett again when it comes to that one. C’mon, let’s see what Cara and Lennon got up to while we were in here.”

I frowned as I followed her out. What the heck did that mean?

Cara was sitting at the bar with both of our tablets in front of her as she furiously scribbled on a clipboard.

Lennon’s long braid twitched behind her as she unpacked colorful bottles from the boxes and moved them around on the large, mirrored shelves. “Fortieth parties need a special drink. Do we know anything about the birthday girl? Or is it a boy?”

“Girl,” Cara answered as she flipped through her papers. “She’s a teacher.”

“Well, that’s perfect for an apple drink, hey?” Lennon grinned. “I can do a variation of our Apple Pie moonshine.”

“Are you trying to take her out?” Kira leaned against the bar. “So how many people are coming to this shindig?”

“Eighty.”

She whistled. “Fair amount.”

Cara’s eyes brimmed a bit as she sniffled.

“Don’t start that again.” I came to stand next to her.

“There are so many things on this list. I can’t believe I screwed up so bad.” She flipped back and forth between the same three pages.

I put my hand over the clipboard. “Cara. That part is over. Now we just have to make the plan and stick to it. We’ll get it done.”

“Right. Okay.” Her big doe eyes were pink-rimmed. “We can.”

“Good. Then let’s get to work.” I pulled my tablet over. “Now show me this program I need to learn.”

Cara straightened. “That I can do.”

I tried to concentrate as she explained things to me, but I kept scanning the patio.

“He’s gone.”

I looked up at Lennon’s voice. She had her back to me, still refilling her wall of alcohol.

She glanced over her shoulder and smirked at me. “You can relax. He and Kain cleaned up and he left.” She hopped off the stool she was using and grabbed a bottle of water out of fridge, setting the aluminum can in front of

me.

“Um, thanks.” I unscrewed the cap and took a drink. “Was he okay?”

“Probably has a bruised rib or two.”

“How many of my chairs are kindling?” Kira asked as she absently scrolled on her own tablet.

“Kain ordered three. Two were toast. But he found a cool bench-style one. Can make a bigger conversational section in the back garden.”

Kira sighed. “Well, at least he has an eye for that kind of thing. They’re still blockheads.”

Lennon chuckled and set two bottles on the bar. “Let’s try some drinks, shall we?”

“So, about that. You’ll have to come up with a few virgin versions for me for the next seven-ish months.”

Lennon ran around the bar. “No way. No way!” She tugged Kira off her stool and pushed up her shirt.

Kira laughed and tugged her shirt down. “I’m not showing yet. That’s from my Kain burrito.”

Lennon pulled her in for a hug. “Soon to be a big burrito. Ronan is huge.”

“Girl, do not put that image in my head. I’m already freaking out a little.”

“I would be too.”

“Not helping.” Kira shoved her away, only to have Cara waiting for her turn for a hug.

A pang hit me once more. Kira had surprised me with the news in the bathroom. Evidently, it wasn’t general knowledge just yet.

Kids had been a nebulous dream. A someday kind of thing that I’d never allowed myself to think too hard about. For one thing, I’d never really felt settled enough with anyone to wonder if children were in my future.

If a man didn’t stick around long enough to be with *me*, how could I think about babies?

But seeing how excited both women were for Kira and the way they banded around her made me all the more cognizant of how alone I truly was.

My hand fell to my flat belly.

That last time with Beckett wouldn’t result in a baby. The timing was off, and I’d been on birth control for years, but I couldn’t stop the *what if*. And there would be no one for me to call and tell. No one to hug me and tell me they were happy for me.

Cara climbed back on the stool beside me and gave me a watery smile.

“Amazing news, isn’t it?”

I nodded and whispered around the lump in my throat. “Amazing.”

Lennon laughed and returned to the other side of the bar. “Guess we’ll be moving that wedding date up too?”

“You guessed right.”

Lennon grabbed a few mixers and spun them around her palm to make an apple-based drink with a few other ingredients before she plunked a cherry in the glass and set it in front of Kira. “Cradle Rocker.”

Kira took a sip. “Better than a cradle robber, I guess. Man, that’s good though.”

“Guess we’ll be adding some of those to the menu.”

“We sure will.” She lined up some glasses. “Now for the rest of us, how about a little day drinking?”

I closed the cover on my tablet. “I’m in.”

Cara’s eyes widened. “Shouldn’t we be working on the plans?”

“Birthday girl needs a drink, right? We’ll call this a working lunch.”

Lennon grinned. “That’s the spirit. Anything before three is lunch. We’ll make the big guy make us some food to soak it up.”

That was a far better plan than mooning over my lack of friends. It was high time I made a few of them.

Even if it was only for a little while.

CHAPTER 19

BECKETT

TRUTH & BRIDESMAIDS

Sundays were for checking on the property. After Kain kicked my ass, I wanted nothing more than my horse and a trip around the orchard to make sure things were in good shape. Having so many acres meant there was always something to fix.

By the time I'd scoured the western perimeter, my ribs were aching like a bitch. I sent off my weekly report over to my crew. A handful of fences needed tending and the drip irrigation for the pear seedlings was acting up. I made a note for Justin to check that one out.

He could fix damn near anything.

The sun was well past the tree line when I rode up to the stables by my house. I smoothed a hand down Storm's neck before stepping down. Casey met us with a happy bark while Tom, the barn cat that had adopted me, snoozed in his usual spot. I quickly rubbed down Storm and left him happily munching his dinner while Casey ran around, trying to get him to pay attention to him.

I dragged my way up the path to my cabin, stripping as I went. I needed thirty hours in my steam shower after the day I'd had. I dumped the clothes in the mudroom and walked naked up the stairs to my bathroom.

I found Casey on my bed as I was toweling water out of my hair. He was burrowed in the twisted sheets, his nose tucked under his tail. "I suppose you need feeding too."

His ears perked up and his feather duster of a tail swished, but his head stayed on his paws.

I tugged on a fresh pair of jeans and a Henley against the setting sun. Early May meant cool nights. I sat beside Casey and ruffled his ears. "I didn't

get to eat either, bud.”

He leaned into the scratch and closed his eyes with a little groan when I paid special attention to his ears. I pressed my face into his soft fur for a moment. Animals were far easier to figure out. Some love, some food, some sleep—all was right with the world.

I would only be getting one of those for now.

I wasn't ready to face my big empty bed, or the fact that the room still somehow smelled of her. What the hell was she still doing here? And how long was she staying?

Kain's confession had surprised me too much for me to quiz him on why Helena has been at the taproom. She'd been wearing Brothers Three gear which had hit me in places I didn't want to examine. Was it simply because she didn't have enough clothing before she went back to the city?

It didn't make sense why she'd be at that taproom anyway.

I should have just manned up and talked to Lennon and Annette, but I was too worried about licking my wounds. Kain had definitely kicked my ass. I could probably tag one of my brothers. Justin always seemed to know what was going on at the orchard, but I was too damn tired to deal with him busting my chops.

I stood up and Casey trailed behind me until we got to the stairs, then he had to be first. Damn herding dog. He ran circles around me much like he'd done with Storm until I dumped a few scoops of food into his bowl and gave him fresh water.

There wasn't much in my fridge and being in there reminded me of the midnight snack with Helena. I landed on a turkey sandwich, with a few handfuls of chips, and half a jar of spicy pickles. All of which I ate over my sink for easier cleanup.

I grabbed one of my Yankees hats on my way out the door, before I jumped in my truck.

Casey barked from the top of the driveway, and I reopened the door to let him hop in beside me. I rolled down the windows, and he happily stuck his head out to catch the wind as we flew down the back roads to The Lodge.

I boosted the volume on my radio at the new Josh Ross song as we made the short trip into the main orchard. The sun peeked through the trees as we pulled up to The Lodge. Solar string lights cast a glow on the flagstone walkways between the B&B and the now closed bakery. A pair of workers were stacking chairs outside of the café and wiping down tables.

I parked my truck and Casey jumped out to shake down the waitresses for treats. As usual, he got all the attention. He was technically my dog, but he roamed the orchard at will and managed to get food from everyone.

Good thing he was always running around to work it off or he'd be a tubbo.

I headed for The Lodge and was surprised to see one of the girls from the bakery manning the desk. "Hey, Beckett."

"Hi Jenny. Is Laverne around?" I tapped on the marble-topped check-in desk. Daisies and pink roses exploded out of a pair of vases on either end. It was blissfully quiet save for some dreamy, soothing music being piped through the lobby.

She nodded. "She's hiding in the Honeycrisp room." She leaned forward, dropping her voice to little more than a whisper. "Did you see Maple was at the wedding? I mean, wow!"

"Not sure I met her in all the excitement." From her wide eyes, I figured she was one of the famous people in the wedding circus.

"You don't know who Maple is?"

"Should I?"

Jenny's eyebrows lifted. "She's only on the cover of every magazine and fashion website."

Was she the one who had stirred up the trouble around Helena?

Jenny rolled her eyes at me. "Probably not your thing. I can't believe she's Ransom's sister."

I definitely had missed a lot of what had gone down. Before getting Helena out of there, I'd been focused on Clay's surprise for Rachel.

"Anyway, after Ransom decked that rich guy from New York City, the whole place went nuts. Holy cats, it was exciting in here for awhile. I had to get the First Aid kit to clean him up."

"I'm sure it was a hardship."

She flushed. "Anyway, I can't believe you took off with Miss Danbury on Storm. That was the most exciting thing I've ever seen. And we've had rockstars get married here, for goodness sakes!" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Romantic too. Miss Danbury is super pretty, isn't she?"

I cleared my throat. Not quite sure what to say to that one. "I was only trying to help."

"Oh, come on. That was more than helping." Her eyes sparkled as she twisted the ends of her ponytail. "That's like romance novel action."

“Anyone would have done it.” But it hadn’t been just anyone. It had been me, and now I couldn’t get her off my mind no matter how I tried.

Knowing she might still be here on the property—mere yards away—was driving me crazy.

Jenny sighed. “You would say that.”

A flash of Helena’s blond hair whipping around her head as she ran my way had my voice coming out rougher than I intended. “You said the Honeycrisp?”

“Yes. She’s hiding from the wedding party that arrived earlier. They’re here for a whole week.”

“Thanks.” I hurried off before Jenny could talk my ear off some more.

My boots were quiet on the thick, subtly geometric carpeting. The lobby smelled heavily of flowers and the apple melters Laverne always had going to remind people they were still in an orchard. But the banquet rooms were the jewels of this building.

We had a few smaller business centers for conferences, but the larger wedding venues were where we’d sunk most of our money. I passed the ancient apple tree we’d built The Lodge around. It didn’t bear edible fruit anymore, but the branches were impressively wide and made quite the statement in the atrium. I’d been reticent to mix stained glass with skylights, but as usual Laverne had been right. Not only was it stunning, but it had become an attraction for weddings because of the unique photos that could be taken.

Laverne’s voice rose over the familiar sound of the floor buffer. I hung a left toward the Honeycrisp and found her directing the workers in her usual no-nonsense way. Somehow she got all of us to jump and do whatever she wanted.

It was probably the snow white cap of hair that floated around her quietly pretty face. She’d swapped out her contacts for her old glasses, which perpetually fell down her nose. The lenses took up half her face, but she refused to replace them.

She caught sight of me and waved the cleaning crew back inside and closed the door. “There you are. I was wondering how long it would take you to show your face.”

“The orchard won’t run itself, Aunt Laverne.”

“You run off with a pretty girl on the back of your horse and think I’m not going to ask questions, Beckett Samuel?”

I winced. “C’mon, Aunt Laverne, did you have to go for the middle name?”

“Then I hear you and Kain were scrapping? What has gotten into you?”

I slipped my arm into hers. “I guess we both need to fill each other in. Got any pie in the back?”

She poked me in the ribs. “No, but I’m sure we can find something.”

I hissed out a breath. “Easy there.”

“Did your fight have anything to do with Helena?”

I ushered her down the hall toward the kitchen. “And why would you immediately think that?”

“Because that’s where I sent her.” She sighed and let me lead her to the tasting table in the kitchen. “You’re so pushy.”

“You’ve probably been on your feet all day. Jenny told me there was some wedding party here all week?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

There was only a few workers left in the kitchen, putting away the last of the clean dishes. I waved to the two I recognized. The weddings often were catered by outside companies.

I found a deli tray and some of our hard cider inside the fridge. And hot damn, a large pan of apple crisp. I made us two quick plates, zapped the apples to warm them up, and added a scoop of vanilla to two small cups. I added two bottles of The B3 hard cider to my tray to wash it all down.

When I went back to my aunt, I found her sitting with her arms crossed and her eyes shut. They instantly popped open just before I set the tray down.

“You must be exhausted,” I commented, although it was obvious.

She yawned. “Between Rachel’s wedding and the Washington party, I’m pooped.”

I set the food out for her and waited for her to pick up a fork. “Do we usually have a wedding party stay for a week?”

“No. I was trying something new. But then we had a scheduling conflict and everything went sideways.” She took half of a roast beef sandwich from the pile of food and a few apple wedges, which she ate like they were potato chips. She sighed as she bit into the sandwich. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Following suit, I hummed in the affirmative and dug in. “Then you had a bunch checking out too. Bet you haven’t sat down all day.”

She murmured a *mmm-hmm* around bites of her sandwich. “I picked here

and there, but every time I was supposed to put something in my mouth, someone needed something.”

Once she had her fill and pulled her ice cream in front of her, she aimed those shrewd blue eyes my way. “Now tell me what’s going on with Helena.”

I pushed away my empty plate and laced my fingers over my belly. “Let’s start with why she’s still here.”

“That sideways thing I mentioned? We overbooked.”

“How?”

She waved that away. “Cara made a mistake, but Helena came up with a solution and she was gracious enough to help out.”

“How long is she staying?”

Aunt Laverne narrowed her eyes. “Why do you care?”

I shrugged.

“Does it have something to do with you riding off with her on Storm perhaps? And her coming back looking like a college student in borrowed clothes?”

I felt my cheeks heat like a damn kid.

“And why you have a busted lip and a black eye?”

“Kain and I had a...misunderstanding.”

“Oh, is that what you’re calling it?” She started to push her chair back.

“Relax, Aunt Laverne. I got it.” I stood and gathered the dirty dishes. Laverne didn’t say anything, just gave me that steady stare.

“Helena didn’t want to come back to the wedding after what happened. I let her stay with me.”

“I’m aware of that part. What I want to know is what you’re going to do now.”

I frowned. “How do you know?”

“I have my ways.”

How much did Helena tell her? Then again, it didn’t much matter. Laverne really did have her ways. She’d always managed to get us to spill our guts all the way back to the days when me and my brothers were getting in trouble in high school right up until now.

I went to the sink with the dirty dishes and turned on the water. “It doesn’t matter what I want. She’ll be leaving in a few days.”

She followed me over, taking a towel off the stack on a nearby cart. “Not if you make use of the week she’ll be here. The party isn’t until Friday.”

“Matchmaking? Really?”

She pushed her glasses on top of her head. "If you people would cooperate, I wouldn't have to work so hard at it, dammit."

"It was only one night." I could feel the heat on my neck.

"Stop getting so embarrassed. How the heck do you think LeeLee came into this world?"

"Aw, Aunt Laverne. I don't want to think about you and Uncle Fred making babies."

"Beyond Lila, I had a whole life outside of this orchard before I settled down with Fred. I know what it's like to have a fling. But if it was just a fling, you wouldn't have gotten into a brawl with Kain, now would you?"

I scrubbed harder at the dish with the apple crisp remnants. She was right and my sore ribs were a stark reminder of how idiotic I'd been with Kain. But just seeing her touching him had activated some dark, long buried part of me.

The one that acted first and asked questions later.

But the possessive part was still messing me up. I didn't have any right to her. But it didn't stop me from flying fist first at a man I considered a friend.

Aunt Laverne quietly dried my finished dishes. "You never take anything for yourself, Beckett. Always worrying about the orchard, your brothers, heck, even your parents." She rubbed my shoulder. "These are great big, strong shoulders, but it doesn't mean you have to spend your life alone."

I glanced at her. "There's nothing here for her. And I can't leave."

"*You're* not enough?"

"After one day? C'mon, that's too much even for your romantic streak."

"Gives you five days to make an impression, doesn't it?" She set the clean dish on the counter. "Then you can see what's what."

I didn't really have an answer for that one. The swift kick of something that felt like hope was sidelined by the yowl of women's voices singing... Britney Spears?

Laverne shot me a look. I shut the water off and she tossed the towel at me as we both hustled out of the kitchen and into the hallway. I was drying my hands as we entered the lobby.

A half dozen women were sashaying through the lobby with pink boas and a tiara crowned one of the women wearing a veil.

Aunt Laverne laughed. "Guess one of the groups went to Lucky's."

"One of? How many weddings are booked in here?"

"Three at the moment."

I looked down at her. "During the beginning of the week?"

“We offered a discount and a surprising amount of people were willing to book for a cheaper rate. Mostly younger people, as you can see.”

I shook my head as the pack of women shimmied across the lobby in some drunken formation that only they could explain. They were using the geometric pattern in the carpet to hop around in a bastardized choreography of one of Britney’s earliest hits.

“You got me crazy!” The delirious laugh was strangely familiar.

I spotted Kira corralling Cara and...Helena? “Okay, Britney. Dance this way.”

“I want to go dance with the bride.” Cara snickered and lifted her staff shirt to show off her stomach.

Quickly, I looked away since Cara was barely twenty-two.

Helena was mouthing the words to the old Britney hit. Her ball cap from earlier was gone and her ponytail had been replaced with two intricate braids.

She watched Cara flip the bottom of her shirt into her bra to make it a crop top and tried to do the same. The shirt was too big on her and ended up slipping off her shoulder, showing off a bright pink strap that made my mouth water.

Fool, stop staring at her while she’s as drunk as a coed during Rush week.

She suddenly chased after the bachelorette party and picked up one of the discarded boas. The girls were too far in on their version of choreography to notice a missing piece of the fun.

One of the girls stopped and accepted the boa. She put a white pair of sparkly glasses on Helena’s face as a thank you, then twirled her around until she laughed.

“Everyone is Britney today!” The drunk girl flung the boa around Helena’s neck. “Shots!”

Aunt Laverne waded into the fray. “Okay, girls! I think we’ve had enough shots.”

“Boo.” The bride, whose name was Britney, of course, waved her white boa and pointed to her sash. “I’m Britney, Bitch!”

I moved to help, but Aunt Laverne waved me off. “Well, I’m your Fairy Godmother. Time for water and Tylenol before your mom comes down here.”

The bride’s eyes went big. “Shhh. Noo, no. We don’t want that. We’ll be quiet.”

Helena had her arms around the other partygoer. They were cheek to cheek with matching sunglasses. “My mom sucks too. But that’s okay. I’ll send you guys a snack board on me!”

“Snacks! Yes!”

I rolled my eyes at the swift tide of change from booze to snacks.

“Only if you come with us.” Said the girl in hot pink with an armful of my woman.

“Aww, that’s so sweet.” Helena’s face got fuzzy with happiness. “I’d love to, but I think I have to go fall down now. I had many, many, many Teassher Pets.”

“Oh, what’s that? Does it come with a stripper?”

Helena snickered. “No.” She spotted me. “He looks good with his shirt off though. Bet we could get him to strip. What do you say, Stallion?”

CHAPTER 20

BECKETT

SIN LINES & WISHFUL DRINKING

Dear God.

The pack of them turned toward me, the one in front licking her lips like I was going to be the snack instead. I backed up a step, holding up my hands. “Ladies, you don’t want to see all of this. Trust me.”

Helena blew raspberries. “He’s even got those sin line things.” She looked down at herself and pushed the shirt out of the way to make the little lines on either side of her stomach. “You know the lines, right?”

“Ohh.” Two of the women squinted down at her then grinned. The hot pink girl shot a look over her shoulder at me. “Oh, yeah. Those are the fuck me lines.”

“Okay!” Aunt Laverne clapped, and Kira jumped into action.

“Let’s get you guys upstairs.” Kira shot me a—*you’re not helping* look—then herded the drunk party toward the stairs. “How about a conga line! We can do that, right?”

“Yes!” The bride ran by Kira to the front and shook her butt. “Line up, girls.”

It was a comedy of errors, but within three minutes, there was a cha-cha line of drunk bridesmaids and friends making their way up the stairs.

Aunt Laverne followed, making sure sure no stragglers escaped. “Cara, come on with us. I’ll put you in one of the empty rooms.”

“Aww, you don’t have to do that.” Cara’s smile was wide and a step away from Sleepyville.

Aunt Laverne held out her hand. “C’mon, sweetheart.”

Before Helena could take up the caboose, I took my chance on helping out now that my clothes weren’t in imminent danger of being ripped off.

“You got her, Beck?” Kira called from the landing.

“I got her.”

Helena pouted. “No, you don’t get me.” But she was already leaning against me.

I waved at them, then swept Helena into my arms.

She yelped and linked her arms around my neck. “Put me down, Beckett Manning!”

“Nope. I’m putting you to bed.”

“You already had that pleasure, buddy. Lost privles...privles...privileges!”

I swallowed down a laugh. I certainly had, but damn if I didn’t want them back. “What floor are you on, girl?”

She pressed her lips together and made a zipping then key turn motion and tossed it over her shoulder.

“You tell me, or I put you in my truck and take you home.”

Her pressed lips went into a pout. “Fine. Third. I think.”

I sighed and went over to the desk. A wide-eyed Jenny was staring at us. “What room is she in, Jenny?”

“Um, 304.”

Helena was playing with the curls at the back of my neck, twirling them like she did when she was sleepy. The stark memory hit me in the chest like a hammer.

One night with her and I was a fucking goner.

“Do you have your key?”

Helena blew raspberries again. “Of course, I have...” She peered around me as if she was magically going to find it. Her huge golden eyes went glassy. “I lost my purse.”

“Okay, we’ll figure it out.”

Jenny was leaning on the counter with a sappy look on her face. Great, this was going to be all over the orchard by morning. “I can get another key.”

“That would be great.”

As Helena swung her legs, I shifted her tighter against me. “You can put me down.”

“Nope.”

She sighed, then she tipped her head against my shoulder. “Fine.”

“Jenny, when Kira comes downstairs, check with her and see if Helena’s purse is in her car.”

Jenny grinned. "Will do."

"Oh, can you make sure the girls get some snacks?" Helena closed her eyes. "Need snacks after that many margaritas."

"I'll take care of it." Jenny tapped something on her screen and slid a keycard across the desk toward me. "Want me to have Laverne check on her?"

"No, I'll take care of her."

Jenny's smile widened. "First a horse, now the sweeping princess carry. So romantic."

Yep, this would definitely be all over the orchard by morning.

Maybe even by tonight.

Helena's arm slid down to hang at an awkward angle. My princess was currently drooling on my shoulder. Pure romance.

I took the card with the arm tucked under her legs, then I shuffled her closer against my chest and she settled her face against my neck. She brought her arm up to curl against my chest and officially started snoring.

I sighed and headed for the stairs. For the first time, I wished we had an elevator on this side of the building. She was a tiny thing, but by the time I climbed the last stair, I was glad she'd passed out because I was panting like an old man. My bruised ribs were screaming, and I was ready for bed myself.

Her floor was quiet, so the bridal party must have been in a different part of The Lodge. What had once been a small bed and breakfast was now the sprawling hub of our orchard. Half a dozen rooms had become thirty during our last renovation.

I found her door and juggled her to get the keycard into the slot before swinging the door open and collapsing against it for a moment. The hand curled against my chest came up to pat my face.

"My hero."

I swallowed against the quick lump in my throat. I'd never been anyone's hero before. Knowing it was the alcohol talking didn't matter at that moment. I wanted to be one for her. And that was a dangerous road to think about driving down.

She was in a suite and Laverne's crew must have stopped in since it was neat as a pin. I walked through the small living room to the bedroom and set her down on the bed. I turned on the lamp as she pulled her knees up to her chest and nestled into the pillow.

I flicked off her slip-on shoes and tried to figure out a way to get her

under the covers without waking her up. I straightened and looked around the room for her suitcase. It was safely stashed on the luggage rack beside the dresser.

It was probably easier to leave her in the clothes she was wearing. I bypassed the suitcase to get her a glass of water. She'd definitely need it when she woke up. A toiletry kit sat open on the counter, and I found a travel bottle of Advil inside.

Leave it to Helena to think of everything for her trip.

I filled a glass and brought both water and meds into the bedroom. As I was setting them on the bedside table, she suddenly sat up.

"Off!" She pulled at her shirt. "Hot. Hot!" Since she'd done the girl tuck thing, she couldn't get herself untangled. Her face was bright pink, and the rest of her skin was flushed.

"Hold on."

She pushed at my hands and got the shirt up enough to cover her face. The strap that had given me a fleeting moment's pause was nothing compared to the hot pink bra thing under her shirt. Especially since the stretchy lace was riding up with the shirt.

"Get it off!"

"Let me grab a nightshirt for you or something."

"No. Nothing. It was so nice to sleep in nothing last night."

That would end me.

She sat up and finally managed to get the shirt off, tossing it at my face. She inched off the bed, tugging at the snap and zipper of her wrinkled pants. Before I could blink, she had them bunched at her ankles, leaving her in a pair of matching lace panties that hugged her ass in ways I should not be noticing.

I immediately commanded my more than interested dick to calm the fuck down and aimed my gaze at the ceiling.

"You've seen it all," she mumbled as she pulled at the bedclothes. She tossed the duvet and blankets toward the end of the mattress and crawled in, hugging one of the pillows as she settled back in the bed.

I was not prepared for any of this and needed to get the hell out of there. Because I had seen it all, touched it all, and tasted it all. And it hadn't been nearly enough.

I stumbled back a step and flipped the sheet over her.

One night and everything in me wanted to follow her into that bed and

curl around her. Nothing else. I damn well hadn't been lying this morning when I told her she'd been the first thing since nicotine to make me want something I shouldn't have.

I clicked off the lamp.

"Stay." Her voice was muffled and sleepy.

"Helena."

"Stay with me. Everything is spinning and it doesn't when you're here."

I shut my eyes. What the hell was I supposed to say to that? It was safer to leave. Not just because she was impaired, but because the urge to take care of her was taking root like that old tree downstairs. Deep and ingrained in the bedrock of this land.

That was me.

I was the old tree, strong and solitary.

Sure, I had my family. But there was a reason why I'd made sure none of my relationships could take root inside me. And what had I done? Taken her to my sanctuary on the first night with her.

Now she was here, asking me to stay. And I wanted it so damn much.

She reached out from the cool white sheets. "Stay."

"I'll stay for a while in the chair."

"No." She moved over from where she'd landed in the center of the bed. "Here."

"I should really go."

"Get in the bed, Beckett."

I huffed out a laugh. Sweet and polite Helena had a mouth on her when there was alcohol involved. I toed off my boots and peeled out of my jeans, tossing them in the club chair across from the bed. Glad I'd showered before I rode over to talk to Laverne, I rounded the bed and sat on the edge.

Her eyes were slitted in the near dark as I looked back to make sure she was still awake. The light from the living room cast a shaft of light across the bottom of the bed.

"Just sleeping. No taking advantage of me."

Helena hid a smile into her pillow. "I'll try not to."

I eased under the covers and sat against the padded headboard. I'd just stick around until she fell asleep. She wiggled next to me and laid her head against my stomach with a sigh.

I stroked down her braids lightly. "Still spinning?"

"A little." She pushed at my shirt. "Off."

I was just asking for trouble getting naked with this woman. She rolled over and pulled me with her until I really had no choice but to spoon around her. She tucked herself back against my front and I had to bite back a groan. Her silky skin and scraps of lace were going to put me into an early grave.

She drew my arm in front of her. My ribs pinched at the position, but I damn well wasn't moving for anything.

"Thanks for saving me again."

"I didn't save you from anything."

"You did," she whispered. "I'm still mad at you for fighting with Kain."

"Go to sleep, Helena."

"Doesn't make me less mad," she mumbled.

"Be mad at me tomorrow."

"I will."

I had no doubt she would, but for now I took the win and held her close. The long ass day, the bruises, and the lack of sleep from the night before caught up with me.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but her scent and warmth dragged me under. My last thought was that there were way worse places to land.

CHAPTER 21

HELENA

LET ME WOO YOU

I woke with a heavy arm around me and one hand on my breast.

Not generally how I started my morning.

It made up for the light show behind my eyes, which paired nicely with the cotton taste in my mouth. I turned my face into the pillow to kill the lights and woke up the angry demon with a jackhammer trying to find a way into my temple.

What the hell had been in those drinks?

“How are you feeling, Britney?”

I frowned. Beckett?

Who the hell was Britney? Then I froze and looked down at the hand. The familiar scarring on the knuckles was a relief. At least I hadn't brought a stranger home with me.

“I know we only spent one night together, but I'd like to think you remembered my name.”

He kissed the back of my neck with a chuffing laugh. “No part of you is forgettable, Helena. It was more for the show you put on last night with the bridal party.”

The quick roll of sweet warmth warred with the snapshots replaying behind my pulsing eyelids. A boa and a nineties' Britney Spears hit added to my fuzzy memories. Day drinking wasn't my usual MO. Not to say I hadn't done my fair share of it in college or during the occasional brunch, but Lennon definitely had a heavier hand than I was used to.

A new horror piled onto the misery. “Oh, God. I didn't sing, did I?”

“More of a lip-sync situation. But Cara has a helluva set of pipes on her.”

I groaned. “Lennon is the devil.”

He laughed and pulled me closer into the crook of his body. “I’ve called her that a time or two myself. Was she testing out drinks? Usually when she’s the most dangerous.”

I turned my face into the pillow again with a mumbled affirmative. I couldn’t even enjoy the morning cuddle that I’d been denied the day before because everything hurt.

Adding insult to injury, I wasn’t sure we’d even come up with the birthday girl drink by the end of it. Between the bourbon and shots, I’d lost track of what I’d been drinking. I just hoped Kira had the foresight to write it all down since she couldn’t drink.

“Pretty sure I drank Kira’s share of alcohol.”

He kissed my shoulder, then he swore when he noticed he was cupping my breast. “Sorry.”

The way my body missed his touch just added to the overall suffering. How could I long for his touch after just one day?

He shifted around me and it was enough to jar my body into action. An imperative need had me popping up and racing for bathroom. Luckily, it was only my bladder screaming and I wouldn’t be starting my day with my face in the toilet.

When I was done, I took a look at myself in the mirror and nearly yelped. Sometime yesterday, Cara had put my hair into fishtail braids but now they looked more like they belonged on a scarecrow in a haunted hayride.

There was no fixing any of what I had going on without a shower. I stripped off the bralette and panties, glad that I’d had the foresight to pack pretty underwear at the very least. Then I did an inward groan at the memory of my drunken strip.

I always got overheated when I drank too much.

At least I hadn’t gone all the way down to the skin. Who knows what I’d have done after that point of no return?

I gripped the counter as I remembered begging Beckett not to leave me last night. I was never drinking again.

I dug through my toiletry bag for my Advil. “Where is it?”

A rattle outside the door had me opening it a crack. Beckett stood there in his boxers with mussed hair and the blessed pill bottle. I snatched it from him and slammed the door.

His chuckle outside made me want to slam the door again for good measure. I didn’t know if I was more pissed at myself for getting into such a

state or that he was so cheerful while I was ready to die.

I heard him moving around and the homey sounds only added to my misery. None of this had worked out how I'd imagined when I said yes to Laverne yesterday. Instead, I'd begged him to stay with my drunk idiot self.

Pathetic.

I stepped into the glass shower stall and fumbled with the knobs until the water was a degree away from scalding. By the time I'd unknotted my hair from the braids, then washed it and myself, I was spent. Another ten to twelve hours might make me feel human, but it was not meant to be.

I brushed the death out of my mouth and when I opened the door, the scent of eggs and fried potatoes nearly made me weep.

I padded out of the bedroom in the guest robe as I dried my hair with a towel. Beckett sat at the table near the window in the living room in a pair of jeans with the snap still open. His hair was still sleep-mussed and his scruff was heading toward a beard. But it was his chest and arm that gave me the most pause. Not just because of his truly mouthwatering musculature, though that was enough to stall my breath, but the network of bruises slashing across his ribs and the scrapes along his shoulder dissolved the last of my anger.

He and Kain might've been idiots for fighting, but he'd carried me while being that hurt? There was no way I could stay mad at him.

I wished I could remember him carrying me. Seemed a cruel twist of fate that I'd been passed out through most of it. I remembered snatches of time from the stairs to the bed, but the overall memory was of being safe.

Safe hadn't been a large part of my life.

Held at arm's length, treated as an afterthought, or as a stand-in made up the bulk of my encounters with men. The rest of the time I spent alone, even when I was at a crowded party.

"There you are. Feel better after a shower?"

"A little."

He lifted a mug which looked as dainty as a teacup in his huge, scarred hand. "I wasn't sure exactly what you liked, but I figured eggs were a safe bet."

"A half hour ago, I'd have sworn I couldn't eat a thing, but it smells amazing."

The sun streamed over the table, showing off a bowl of strawberries and a domed plate. His plate was mostly scraped clean with cracked pepper and hot sauce remnants that reminded me of our impromptu dinner the day before.

He set the hot sauce in front of my plate with a grin. “You may not want this after last night’s abuse.”

“You’d be right.”

He lifted the dome off the plate and my stomach roared. He laughed. “The grease will soak up what’s left in your gut.”

“Know the recipe, do you?”

“A time or two.” He leaned back in the chair that was ridiculously small for his stature and wrapped both hands around his mug. “I was surprised to find out you were sticking around. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I stabbed at the garlicky potatoes and chewed thoughtfully. I paused a second to make sure there wouldn’t be a revolt, then I dug in. “It all happened so fast. I was hoping to talk to you.” I stared at my plate. “Thought maybe we could spend some time together, but then you and Kain...” I trailed off.

“Yeah, wasn’t my finest moment.” He winced and shifted in the chair. “Kain told me how you two knew each other.” He cleared his throat. “After.”

“Too bad you went with fists instead of talking first.”

“Seeing you with him like that.” He paused and drank from his mug.

I looked up. “Even if Kain and I had been previously involved, it had nothing to do with us.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “Helena, when it comes to you, I’m not exactly chill.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“I reacted badly, but all I can do is apologize and hope you don’t hate me too much for it.”

“I don’t hate you, Beckett. I just don’t understand why you’d get so upset.”

He set his mug down and stood.

I put my fork down when he moved in front of me.

“Then let me make it clear for you. I don’t want anyone touching you other than me. I don’t want any other man’s skin to be near yours other than mine.” He cupped the back of my neck and lowered his mouth to mine. “And the fact that I had literally come inside you hours before I saw you hugging him made me see red.”

I licked my lips and my heart thundered between my ears. A rush of goose bumps raised every hair on my body.

“Does that make a little more sense?”

Not at all, but nothing made sense at the moment.

He brushed my lips with his lightly before swiping his tongue along the seam of my mouth and delving deeper. He tasted of coffee and hope.

I was so afraid to wish for the hope.

I let him take me under as he kissed me deeply and thoroughly, leaving no doubts as to how much he wanted me.

When he straightened, my head was spinning as fast as my racing heart.

I opened my mouth—unsure what I’d actually say—but the shrill ring in the bedroom interrupted whatever might have happened next.

He sighed. “Damn Mondays.” Then he strode back into my bedroom. “Yeah? No.” There was a pause before he sighed. “Yeah, I’ll be right there. Give me...an hour, and I’ll meet you in the field.”

I pulled my robe closed against the reaction of my stupid nipples. The terrycloth abraded them in a way that left me restless. I busied myself with cleaning up the dishes and set the tray near the door for the maid to pick up.

He lowered his voice and I couldn’t make out what he was saying, but it sounded like some fire he probably had to put out. Being the head of an orchard meant mornings were probably busy and he’d been here looking after me.

I also had my own list of things to do. I was supposed to meet with Laverne’s new hire who would help me with the party-planning, along with Cara.

Hell, I didn’t even know where my purse was. Or my own phone, which was probably overflowing with messages.

God, I was such a damn mess.

I picked up the room phone and called down to the desk.

“Hi, this is Cara. How can I help you?”

“Oh, Cara...it’s Helena.”

The brisk, friendly voice changed to a whisper. “Oh, God. How are you doing?”

“I can’t believe you’re at the desk. I’m barely functioning.”

Then again, Cara was ten years younger than I was.

“Oh, I’m fine. Breakfast burrito and a cold brew and I was golden.”

Of course she was.

“I have your purse down here in the safe, by the way.”

“Oh, thank God. What I was calling down about.”

“Kira brought it in after we did the conga line. Gosh, that was a lot of fun yesterday.”

Parts of it definitely had been fun. My life generally revolved around very stuffy parties with lots of alone time in between. The hangover had been worth it—mostly.

“I’m jealous of how quick you bounced back, but yes, it was.”

“I’ll have one of the girls bring up your purse if you want.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be down in a few minutes. Do you have coverage for the desk to get some party-planning details ironed out?”

“Yes, Jenny is taking over at one. Laverne is doing the paperwork for Belinda if you want to come down and meet her.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Great!” Her usual chipper response made me smile. “I just wanted to thank you again for helping me out. I can’t believe what a colossal mistake I made.”

“I think it’s all going to work out.”

“I hope so. Okay, see you soon.”

We hung up, and I turned to find Beckett standing in the doorway to my bedroom. He had his hands in his pockets and was fully dressed down to the boots. He’d cleaned up in the bathroom while I was on the phone and his hair was damp, with a few curls winging out behind his ears.

Why was that so adorable?

“Evidently, both of our days are starting.”

He sighed. “Sounds like it. The drip irrigation for the seedlings are causing more problems than Justin can handle alone.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

He shrugged. “Not quite a crisis, just will take some getting dirty today. Luckily, we had all that rain so we’re not in rough shape yet. We’re expanding our pear trees and they’re touchy so we need to get it handled.”

“I won’t keep you.”

He crossed to me. “Believe me, you’re not. I want to see you tonight. If I’m not tangled up in this all night anyway.” He twisted his fingers around mine. “If that’s okay.”

“I’m only here for a few days.”

“I’ll take them all. At least the nights.” He slipped his hand into my robe and along my waist to skim his fingers up my back. He tugged on the belt until it parted and the air hit my skin. “Is this okay?”

I hissed out a breath as the back of his knuckles tripped over my belly then lightly tugged at one nipple.

He lowered his mouth to my neck, dragging his beardy chin along the skin between my neck and shoulder before he nipped my ear. “I wanted to take you back to bed.” His other hand cupped my ass, dragging me against his jeans. “I wanted to watch you come apart in the sunshine, but I’ll take you by moonlight instead.”

My breasts pressed into the warm, worn cotton of his work shirt as I went onto my toes. He slid his knee between my legs, fitting me against him. As he scraped his teeth along my neck, he plucked at my breast.

“Beckett.”

“Can you come for me? Let me hear you sigh my name in that way you do.” He sipped from the column of my neck and over my chin. “Help me get through the day, Helena.”

As if I could say no.

I wrapped an arm around his neck and the friction from his shirt had me trembling. Then his hand found me. Those long, clever fingers tunneled inside me with pinpoint accuracy. His summer sky eyes stayed focused on mine as he slowly slipped in and out of me, using the heel of his hand to rub my clit on each pass.

“This should be my cock inside you. If I didn’t have to go, I’d drop to my knees and worship you with my mouth, then I’d fill you up again. Like on my deck.” His eyes went fierce with want. The memories of yesterday shimmered and merged with the now. “Watch you go over with that sweet, soft sigh that turns into a moan ending in my name.”

I gripped his shoulder at his words. The reckless way I’d taken him without protection.

Not that there was any protection against how he made me feel. Exhilaration and fear wrapped in awe. Everything had changed in one day. Now it only continued to grow.

I gasped as his thrusts grew wilder and deeper.

“So wet for me. So hot and tight.” He turned his hand and his thumb circled my clit as he pulsed inside me with two fingers again and again.

It wasn’t enough. I wanted him inside me, not just his fingers.

But it didn’t matter. My body was already attuned to him, and as much as I wanted more, he was too adept at knowing exactly how to make me come. He covered my mouth against the moan that bubbled up as my thighs shook.

He bit my lower lip. “That’s it. That’s my girl.”

I threw my head back and he raced down my throat to latch onto one

breast then the other. Then suddenly, I was airborne and he had me on the desk. The dishes rattled behind me as he thrust his fingers inside of me. The sounds of how my body reacted to him made me flush and chase more of the pleasure.

“Wider.” He pushed my legs apart and crouched before me to add his mouth to his thrusting fingers. “Just a taste.”

My fingers speared into his hair as I pushed him and pulled him at the same time. “Beckett.” My voice was both thready and wired.

He dragged his tongue along my slit and carefully circled my clit as I trembled through one aftershock after another. He grinned up at me, then he straightened and sucked his fingers before dragging them along my bottom lip. “See how you taste?”

My eyes widened at the salty bit of me left behind.

He covered my mouth with his, and I moaned as I spasmed again. He was so earthy and intense. So different from anyone I’d ever been with.

“Fuck, you undo me.” He curled my legs around his waist and lifted me again. I wrapped my arms around him, my robe floating behind me as he walked me into the bedroom.

“How long does it take you to get out to that field?”

He laughed. “Too long. I don’t have Storm so I have to drive my truck.” He set me on the bed and stood.

I went for his jeans, but he stilled my fingers. He was hard as stone and my mouth watered to taste him.

“If I let you do that, I’ll never leave. Tonight. Come to my house tonight.” I licked my lips and he groaned, dropping a hot, brain-frying kiss on my mouth. “Tonight. I’ll feed you.”

I laughed and palmed his jeans. “Is that right?”

“Girl, you will definitely get fed that tonight too. But I’ll fire up the grill.”

“Like a date?”

The words popped out of my mouth before I could stop them. I blamed my scrambled brains from the double orgasm.

“Just like a date.” He laughed. “Let me show you I can woo you.”

“You’ve been wooing me from the first moment I met you.”

“Ain’t that some shit? I’ve never wooed anyone before. Not on purpose. But I find that’s all I want to do with you. Pamper you,” he nipped my chin, “hold you,” he flicked his tongue along the dip in my collarbone, “and fuck you.”

The last word was a rumble. The mix of sweetness and roughness made my body tingle all over again.

He straightened and cupped my cheek. "Tonight."

I nodded. I wasn't really capable of words right then.

Then he pressed a gentle kiss to my temple before he stepped away.

I was completely undone.

He stopped at the threshold of the doorway to the living room and turned back with a grin, then he was gone.

I flopped back on the bed and couldn't stop the smile.

CHAPTER 22

HELENA

DRIVING MISS JUDY

As much as I'd rather moon over the idea of a date with Beckett later that night, I had a few hundred details to nail down before the end of the week. While I didn't want to think about the actual end date of Friday, it would truly be here before I knew it.

I also needed to go clothes shopping. I'd only brought enough with me for the few days I'd originally planned to be in Turnbull. And almost all of the days included dressier clothing than the business casual style of the orchard.

For now, a cotton skirt and soft shirt I generally used for travel days would have to do. Maybe I could convince someone to let me borrow a car for a quick trip to a clothing store. I wanted to find something low-key and sexy for tonight.

A date.

My heart sped up as I picked up my pace going down the hall to the stairs. Definitely not what I'd been expecting him to say. Even if I'd tossed the definition at him like an idiot.

Not that he ever made me feel that way in the least.

I quickly made my way to the lower level where the bridal party from the night before was currently taking over the lobby. They were all wearing matching daytime wear. This time, hot pink T-shirts over black shorts, save for the bride who wore a white tennis-style outfit with a short, flirty skirt and pristine white kicks.

Laverne and Cara were directing traffic. From what I overheard, they were meeting at the café for coffee, then heading out to a picnic in the orchard.

I stayed out of the way until Laverne noticed me. She waved me over where I spotted a stunning redhead chatting with Jenny at the desk. She wore a jade green wrap dress with a large graphic cream floral pattern that showed off mile-long legs with nude four-inch heels.

“Helena, I’d like you to meet Belinda Grayson.”

“Hi.” I smiled brightly at her and held out my hand. I suddenly felt very under-dressed and dowdy.

Also very short. She had to be almost six-feet with her heels on.

“Hi.” She shook my hand. “You can call me Bells. Belinda sounds far more posh than I am.” Her voice was husky and clipped at the same time. Not exactly chilly, but it definitely leaned toward no-nonsense.

“Helena Danbury.”

“Now *you* sound posh.” She grinned and a dimple dented her left cheek. “Looks like we’ll be working together.”

“I’ve got a clipboard of ideas, but we’re both open to new ones, aren’t we, Cara?”

Cara nodded and hugged her tablet against her chest. “I’m here to learn.”

Laverne beamed. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with. I gave Cara the details on the budget and guest list.” She handed me my usual pink tablet and one to Bells. “This is yours. There’s a temporary log in on that sticky note. Then you can change it to your own password and profile. We check the tablets in and out at the beginning and end of shift. There’s battery banks available at the desk if you need them. Damn fool things don’t ever hold a charge that long.”

Bells took the teal-covered tablet. “Perfect.”

Laverne glanced at me. “I’ve got a week long wedding extravaganza that will keep me hopping, and I’ll probably have to steal Cara here and there to fill in some holes. Otherwise, the three of you will be on this party exclusively.” She turned to Bells. “Trial by fire, hope you’re okay with that. Kinda how we do things around here.”

Belinda’s eyes sparkled. “I’m ready to jump in. We’ll figure it out.”

“I have every confidence. I checked with your references, and your previous employers said you were awesome with thinking on your feet.”

“Small town life means you never quite know what’s going to get thrown at you.” Bells tucked her hair around her ear. “Never boring, right?”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Laverne’s laughter was musical. Then her face slid into a serious expression. “Pardon me while I go head bridezilla off at the

pass,” she said under her breath.

I followed Laverne’s eye line and turned to the side to avoid being recognized. “Okay, let’s get out of here.”

Bells eyebrow arched. “Know her?”

“Unfortunately. And I’d rather she didn’t see me.”

Cara handed me my purse. “We can sneak behind the desk. There’s a narrow hallway that cuts into the hallway next to the atrium.”

“Thank God.”

The three of us hustled around Jenny who waved at me with a comically large smile. God, she’d probably been on the desk last night.

Kill me now.

“So, how do you know bridezilla?” Bells asked me under her breath.

“Our families know one another.”

And her mother made mine look positively passive aggressive. I’d rather not run into her when I still hadn’t returned a single one of my mother’s messages except for a brief text to let her know I was extending my stay.

“Oh boy. Is she local?”

“No. She’s from the city.” Cara filled her in on the truly obscene schedule Daphne Washington was putting the orchard through.

I would be avoiding her at all costs.

The hallway took us to the gardens and Bells gasped. “This is where the party is going to be held?”

“Yes.” I looked around and tried to see what she saw. Me? I saw all the options, but there was a lot of work to be done.

Bells kicked off her heels and quickly walked around. “It’s amazing. Needs a bit of cleaning up though.”

Thankfully, the police tape had been taken down and two boxes of lights were sitting under one of the tables that had been delivered sometime this morning from the taproom.

Cara was still hugging her tablet. “We might need to steal a few guys from the orchard to hack at the overgrown bushes.”

“Good plan.” Bells dug around the gear that Kira’s people had left and hummed as she seemed to be counting in her head. “What’s the count on the party?”

Cara looked down at her screen and tapped around. “It’s a fortieth birthday with eighty guests give or take some who don’t show up.”

Bells whistled. “That’s a fair bit of people.”

“Yes, but I was thinking a few stations of food and conversation areas would keep the group from getting overwhelming.”

Bells glanced at me. “That’s a good idea. Maybe use that big rectangular table to make a gifts area?”

Cara quickly started typing on her screen.

I nodded. “I didn’t think of that. A gifts table and maybe something to match the birthday drink?”

“Oh.” Bells’ dark eyes sparkled “There’s a drink?”

Cara nodded. “We have a taproom on the north side of the orchard. Over where the concerts are. We’re going to borrow a few bartenders and waitstaff from Kira’s place since the taproom isn’t open for the season yet.”

“Interesting. And classy. Do we have a color theme or anything?”

Another thing I didn’t think of. “No, but that’s a very good idea.” I opened my tablet to see if we had a contact number for the person hosting the party.

It was going to be a very busy morning.

Three hours later, I collapsed into a chair with a bottle of water. “Who knew a garden party would need this much work?”

Bells sat across from me with her own water. “Girl. That to-do list was clutch, but it seems to be multiplying like bunnies.”

Cara had been pulled away for a shift at the desk and we’d both been poring over lists, calling in for catering, and booze. We’d gotten a hold of the birthday girl’s sisters who were paying for the party and nailed down the colors.

The birthday girl, Brandy, was an elementary school teacher, but her sisters wanted to give her a Bridgerton-esque garden party minus the big gowns since it was heading for summer. But it gave us a jumping off place.

Since there were two other large weddings going on at the same time, we had to outsource the confectionary items. We had an appointment with a nearby bakery in Crescent Cove.

I pointed at her with my bottle. “You keep coming up with things to add.”

Bells held her bottle against her neck. The temperatures had soared since noon. The garden gave us a lot of shade, but the humidity had left us both a wrinkled mess. “I dressed to impress since it’s my first day, but I need to change out of this damn dress.”

“I actually need to do some shopping as well. Maybe I can find a shop in Crescent Cove.”

She sipped from her bottle. “So you actually live in the city?”

We’d gotten to know each other a little during the morning. I didn’t really want to go into the wedding debacle, but Cara had shared that in her chattering way. I couldn’t fault her. I was the one who’d run off to jump on a horse instead of dealing with my problems.

Heck, I’d volunteered to plan a party for a stranger instead of going home to face the music with my mother. If that didn’t scream, “I have issues,” I don’t know what did.

“Almost all my life.”

Bells leaned forward. “What part?”

I played with the cap on the table. “Manhattan.”

“Oh, money New York.”

“Parents’ money.”

“What’s that like?” Bells propped her elbows on the table. “I just have my dad, and his money always went to beer and cards.”

I glanced up, expecting a sneer, but she seemed to be honestly curious. “Lots of parties I wished I could RSVP no to. I tend to take care of the party planning my mother would rather ignore.”

“So this is old hat for you.”

“I actually like this better. The seating chart is way easier,” I said with a grin.

“Oooh.” Her dark eyes sparkled. “Society drama?”

“More who’s sleeping with who. Mistresses, lovers, messy divorces. Then add in some politics and overall new rich versus old rich. It’s exhausting.”

“Oh, *Real Housewives* style drama.”

I relaxed back in my chair. “I’ve never watched an episode.”

“Probably because you live it.”

She wasn’t wrong. “Anyway, after the Reid thing, I’m not looking forward to going home any time soon.”

“Reid is the guy who got decked at the wedding, right?”

I laughed. “Yes.”

“Did he break your heart?”

I thought about it for a moment. “No. More a slap to my pride.” I knew Reid had been a mistake the moment I’d accepted a date with him after the Clay embarrassment.

Was I simply reacting and moving on from one drama to the next?

“Hey.” Bells covered my hand that had been picking at the cap. “Men are a pain in the ass. Generally, when you add money into the mix it just makes them worse.”

“Thanks. You’re not wrong.”

“Believe me, I’ve had nothing but trouble with men on either side. The rich ones are usually way more trouble than they’re worth—literally.”

I finished my water. “Have some experience there?”

“More on the negative balances unfortunately, but I’ve had a run in or two of the Daddy Warbucks level.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh. “Haven’t heard that term in a hot minute.”

She tugged on a wilted red curl. “The red hair left me with some scars.”

I toyed with the end of my ponytail. “I get Barbie minus the breasts.”

Bells hefted her more than a handful breasts. “The big ones aren’t anything to long for. Especially with the boob sweat going on today.”

“How about we get into some air conditioning?”

“Now you’re speaking my language. I’ll drive.”

“Good thing, I don’t have a car.” I stood up and tossed the bottle into the box of recycling we had going.

“Then you can buy lunch. I’m freaking starving.”

“Deal.”

We checked in at the desk and told Cara we’d be back in a few hours. With purse in hand, I checked my messages with a wince as we headed to the parking lot.

“Something good?” Bells was digging into her astonishingly large bag.

“Just my mother’s increasing meltdowns. I’ve hit the voicemail portion.” Luckily, I could see the transcript and didn’t have to actually listen. It was bad enough to see it in hardcopy.

A charity dinner was coming up next week, and she wasn’t thrilled with the fact that I wasn’t there to field calls.

But there was one message I was happy to see. Beckett had found a way to get my phone number.

UNKNOWN

Hey, it’s Beckett. I hope it’s okay I got your number from Laverne. Sprinkler thing is taking longer than I thought. Late dinner, ok? 8?

“What’s got you grinning so big?”

I pressed the phone to my chest. “Nothing.”

“Mmm-hmm. That’s a guy text smile.”

My face heated and I couldn’t stop the smile. “Beckett.”

“Oh, horse dude. Actually, owner dude, right?” She jangled her astonishingly huge keychain.

I wasn’t sure I would even call it a keychain. It had over a dozen charms, tassels, sparkles, and a stuffed shark hanging from the tangled mess.

“That’s me.” She pointed to a jade green car that looked like it belonged in the last century.

“Wow.”

“I know. Judy treats me right.” She stopped at the passenger side and unlocked it, opening it with a mighty creak. “Hop in.”

I was so surprised at the sheer breadth of the door that I stared for a second.

“Well, go on. It won’t bite.” I slid inside and was surprised to see how pristine it was. It had a tan leather interior and an updated instrument panel that was definitely not original to the car. It smelled like the beach with something earthy and spicy underneath.

She slammed the door before rounding the huge front of the car.

I quickly replied to Beckett that 8 o’clock was fine and shoved my phone in my bag. It took a few tries to get the seatbelt low enough that it wasn’t strangling me.

She hopped in the driver’s side, and I quickly realized why she liked the bigger car. Bells was tall and curvaceous, and the retro car suited her on every level. She flipped her deep red, almost burgundy hair over her shoulder as she twisted to physically look out her back window to back out of the parking spot.

“So what did you tell the horse guy?”

“How do you know I told him anything?”

“Because your foot is tapping.” She gunned the jet fighter plane engine, and we took off like a shot out of the parking lot and onto the winding road that led out of the orchard.

I gripped my knee. That was a new thing. I’d never been fidgety before. Then again, I didn’t generally start my day with a man in my bed. Or hungover.

“You’re very observant.”

She grinned and the dimple instantly turned her from bombshell sexy to

approachable for some reason. “People are fascinating. How they tick, why they do the things they do. It’s fun to figure it out.”

I relaxed my fingers in my lap. I’d probably regret asking, but maybe it would be interesting to know what a relative stranger thought about me. “Okay, what’s your first impression of me?”

She paused at the stop sign at the mouth of the orchard. “Sure you want a free session with Dr. Grayson?”

“Probably not, but I’m interested anyway.”

“You asked for it. First, do I go left or right?”

I pulled out my phone where I had the bakery plugged into my maps app. “Left.”

“And off we go.”

I set my phone in the slot in the console to let the app continue to give directions.

“First of all, you’re wound super tight.” She flipped down the visor for a pair of oversized sunglasses against the late day sun. “Says probably a killer parental figure or ex-husband-slash-boyfriend.”

“Point one. Mother.”

She snapped her fingers. “Right. The texts and messages. Probably overbearing sort. Dad kinda a non-entity.”

I cleared my throat and resisted the urge to sink in my seat. I definitely shouldn’t have asked. “Second point.”

“I’m not keeping score, mind you. Just observations. My bestie’s mom is one of those over-involved kinds. Hers is mostly out of love, but it does make Kenz super independent. Like her husband wants to shake her kind of independent.”

I relaxed a little. “Because he wants to help, I hope?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s super grumpy, but he’s very helpful around their B&B. I’ve been known to pinch hit when they’re jammed. I found out I really liked parts of it.”

“Then why didn’t you just work for them?”

“I thought about it. But I’ve always been itchy to get out of my little town.”

“And come to another one?”

She laughed. “Fair point. I thought about trying a bigger city, but I tripped over Laverne’s job offer on a few postings. When it came up for the third time, I figured it was a sign. And here I am.”

“Just like that?” The thought of just picking up and moving for a job was so foreign to me. “That’s really brave.”

“Nah. I mean, I miss Kenz, but she’s so busy with her kids.” She tapped her long fingers on the steering wheel. The first time I saw a tell other than the carefree Bells she’d portrayed since I met her.

I was good at reading people as well, due to a lifetime of trying to avoid the wrath of my mother when she was upset.

“Anyway, I needed a change. I hopped in my car to interview with Laverne and fell in love with The Lodge from the minute I saw it.”

“I can see that. There’s something about the orchard.”

It was a rare place that could relax me so completely except my suite at my parents’ penthouse. Mostly because it had always been my solace in the chaos of the city and my mother’s never-ending entertaining.

“Now back to you.”

“Do we have to?”

She laughed. “Not if you don’t want to. It’s only a game.”

“Go on.”

Her dimple popped again as she steered onto the road that said Crescent Cove was ten miles away. “You’re hardcore polite. The kind that comes with ice in your veins when necessary, I’d wager.”

I usually felt more like I was stuck behind glass than ice. Not that she was far off.

“But then there’s this guy. And you’re not quite sure what to do about him or the hot sex you’re probably having.”

My head whipped to face her.

“That was mostly a guess. But you do have some interesting beard burn on your neck, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch.”

My hand slapped my neck on the side where Beckett generally ended up kissing or nibbling.

“It’s cool. Sex is the good stuff. We should all have as much of it as possible if you ask me. And I’ve been in a drought. Another reason I moved here actually. I was tired of tripping over the same guys in Winchester Falls.”

The town sounded vaguely familiar. Quaint and adorable town names seemed to be the norm the more north you traveled from the city.

“Yes, well, the city isn’t much better.”

“Looks like we both traveled to find a little something new.” She rolled her window down and her thick waves fluttered in the warm air.

The scent of water mixed with her beachy spice scent, and I found myself relaxing in my seat. “Did you find a place to stay yet?”

“Laverne let me have a room for two weeks to get a jump on finding a rental. Most of what I’ve looked at are dingy apartments that look like they haven’t been updated since the mullet was in fashion.”

I wrinkled my nose.

“My sentiments exactly.”

I sat up straighter as the lake view shifted to a small, bustling town. The buildings were much different than what I’d seen of Turnbull where the orchard was located. They were tall and narrow, like a lot of older buildings in Upstate New York, but these were well cared for with fresh paint and crisp trim.

The street was tidy with cheerful painted pots bursting with pansies, geraniums, and daisies. And some other flowers I didn’t recognize. There were benches between the businesses for sitting and visiting as well as dog stations with fresh water bowls. Foot traffic was plentiful even in the middle of the afternoon.

“Oh, we should definitely walk around. Look at all the shops!” Bells craned her neck, taking it all in as well.

“If you’re good with that, I really need to get some clothes for this week.”

“Perfect. I love shopping. Especially with other people’s money.”

I couldn’t remember when I’d had a nicer day. It had been a long time since I’d spent time with someone who didn’t care who I was or what family I came from.

I was going to have a hard leaving after the party for more than one reason.

CHAPTER 23

HELENA

FRIENDS IN COVE PLACES

We had to fight a bit of traffic, but finally, a sign appeared for public parking. I grabbed my phone and stuffed it into my bag. “There’s a café that looks like it has parking in the back. Sound good?”

“The coffee part sounds very good.”

We parked and ducked into the busy Brewed Awakening coffee shop. It wasn’t quite what I was expecting. The front of the building was in line with the rest of the town save for the skeleton propped on a beach chair beside a collection of branded coffee in the window. Inside was a mixture of slick industrial metals and warm wood with a side of kitschy horror meets cute. Bats in sunglasses and swimsuits were tucked between painted pumpkins on the abundance of shelves scattered all through the café. Books were set up like a community library with covers facing out and covered every subject imaginable.

The brunt of the café included tables and chairs to eat and drink, but the side wall was filled with comfortable couches and a scatter of larger tables for people to use as a workspace.

But oh, the scent of the coffee and baked goods sold me regardless of the aesthetic. Though I did find it oddly charming. On the far side of the room there were branded mugs, T-shirts, and more horror-themed memorabilia.

“This place is great.” Bells twirled around, her green dress floating around her curvy hips. Without even trying, she drew the eye from most of the males in the room. Her dark gaze bounced from corner to corner as mine had. Suddenly, she focused on something, and her grin widened. “And *that* ain’t bad either.” She tipped her sunglasses down to look at a very tall man with long blond hair.

I pressed my lips together against a grin when he turned with a little girl strapped to his chest. “So is the kid.”

“Huh. Actually, the child doesn’t detract.” Bells pushed her sunglasses back up her nose with a snicker.

The man came back our way with a cake pop in hand for himself and for his little one, both dusted in pink glitter. He had one arm firmly around the strapped-in girl with the ACDC T-shirt and adorable blond pigtails. “Ladies.”

The little girl grinned around the pink icing wreathing her lips. “Hi!”

“Well, hello.” Bells shoved her sunglasses up on her head. “What kind of cake?” she asked in a stage whisper.

“Chocolate, of course.”

“Of course.” Bells nodded sagely. “Is there any other kind?”

“Her mama would say snickerdoodle, but we can’t resist the cake pops that Miss Vee makes, right, Bella?”

Bells held up her hand in a high five. “That’s close to my name!”

The little girl slapped her hand with a giggle. “My full name is Arabella.”

“Well, I’m Belinda, but my friends call me Bells.”

“Can I be your friend?” The girl’s eyes were huge and dark.

“I think we have to be with our names being so close.”

The man rubbed his chin over the top of the girl’s head, with a sappy smile. “Have a good afternoon, ladies.”

Bells turned to watch him walk through the door. “No problem from the front or the back with that one.”

“He’s very attractive. Huge. Is there something in the water around here?” Between the orchard and some of the men I saw on the street as we drove through town, there was no shortage of strapping men around here.

“There’s something in the water here, but it doesn’t have anything to do with the hotness factor of the men.” The woman behind the counter’s voice was as smooth as the dark brew that scented the air. “What can I get you?”

I scanned the menu then paused and glanced at the woman. “Should I worry about the coffee?”

“Not my brew. I filter the water.” She winked. “And only if you live in the Cove, though there have been some instances of cross-contamination from what I’ve heard.”

Bells crowded next to me at the counter. “Does it come with the hot guys?”

“Mostly nine months of gestation. Side benefit tends to be a startling

number of marriages in this town. The guys tend to stick.”

Bells straightened up. “Nope. I’ll take the double-filtered water. Americana with two pumps of maple for me.”

The dark-haired woman had a choppy shag cut with peek-a-boo garnet strips in her hair, and she was nearly as tall as Bells in her heels. She threw her head back with a laugh. “I said the same for a long time too, sister. It’s a running joke in town. Mostly not based in fact. At least we’re pretty sure.” She moved to the espresso machine with blue flames welded to the side that faced the café and started tamping fragrant grounds inside the portafilter. “Here or to go?”

“Here is good?” I glanced at Bells who nodded.

Another woman came to stand beside her, obviously mid-gestation. “Are you scaring the customers again?”

“You’re just proving my point.” The lanky woman tucked the filter into the machine with practiced ease.

The blond patted her stomach. “We practiced and practiced for this one.”

I laughed because the two were obviously friends.

The blond was beautiful and softly curved from her advanced pregnancy. She had on overalls with a rainbow shirt telling people to have a cupcake. “Crescent Cove is just having a lovely baby boom.”

The dark-haired woman snorted.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s got two of her own.” She wiped her hands on the towel tucked in her pocket. “Can I get you anything to eat?”

I turned to Bells. “Hungry?”

“I could eat.” She tapped her short, ruby nails on the countertop where a menu was taped. “I’ll have the chef salad with an extra hard-boiled egg.”

“I’ll take the chicken Caesar salad and a caramel latte.”

“I got the latte, Vee.” The dark-haired woman started building my drink. Her movements were effortless and graceful as she took her time to make the coffees and added a pinch of something to my latte.

She pushed the drinks toward me and rang us up. “We’ll bring out the food.”

I looked down at my massive mug. There was a leaf shape in the foam with a few green flecks. “It’s beautiful.”

“Coffee is my thing.” She winked. “Don’t mind us back here. We just like to mess with people. We’ve had a few extra people come in since there was an article in a local magazine about the Cove water.”

I'd have to look for the article.

"Well, this place is amazing. I can see why they'd come in anyway."

"Thanks. It's my place. I'm Macy."

I handed over my credit card. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Helena and this is Bells. We work over at the Brothers Three Orchard."

"Oh, we love the orchard. The taproom has been stealing some of my customers from The Haunt."

"I love that place. I follow it on Instagram." Bells shrugged when I glanced at her. "I was researching the area when I was interviewing."

"My social media maven will be glad to hear it. She's forever driving me crazy with videos."

"Well, tell her to keep it up. It's one of my favorite accounts."

"I'll be sure to mention it. Handily, my kids love the haunted hayride out your way for Halloween. They also love to run around in the orchard when it's picking time."

I could only imagine how beautiful the orchard was in full season. Too bad I wouldn't be there.

Bells took her equally massive mug. "Come to mama."

Macy smirked. "I hear the bakery makes good coffee at the orchard, but nothing beats mine."

Bells took a sip with a groan. "She's not wrong." She swung her purse in front of her and I waved her off. "Aww, you didn't have to get it."

"No problem." I took the receipt from Macy with a smile and tucked a bill into the tip jar. "Thanks so much."

"Hope to see you again." Macy waved the next customer up to the counter.

We found a seat by the front windows. The friendly murmur of conversation and the moody music was exactly what I needed after a day full of paperwork and phone calls.

Bells sat across from me with the mug cupped in her hands as she basked in the steaming fragrance. "Imma marry this coffee."

I laughed and lifted mine for a sip. The warm blend of caramel and coffee and milk was perfect. Almost smoky in flavor. I had a weakness for sweets. "Wow."

"I know." She took a long sip. "I'll be getting one to go too."

I just might be doing the same.

Lunch came quickly and we chatted about a few of the stores we wanted

to stop into on our way to the bakery.

I itched to go to the up-cycled thrift store across the street, but I knew we had a time crunch. The bakery was only open for a few more hours.

And I desperately needed clothes. As well as time to get myself date night ready.

Date.

I still couldn't believe I'd called it that, or even more, that he'd agreed with me.

"Earth to Helena."

I blinked out of my thoughts. "Sorry."

"Thinking about tonight?"

I flushed. "I can't remember when I've actually been on an actual date."

Her auburn eyebrow arched. "I find that hard to believe."

"Seriously. My dates are usually boring dinners masked as business engagements or galas."

"Oh, galas. The horror." Bells leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs.

"When you've been going to them since you were sixteen, they lose their luster."

"I can't imagine that."

"Boring and stuffy with people one upping each other about vacations or stock portfolios."

Bells wrinkled her nose. "Sounds pretentious as hell."

"Accurate. And I don't miss it." My purse buzzed and I checked my phone to make sure it wasn't Beckett.

Instead, it was my mother ranting about the fact that the seating chart wasn't up to her standards.

I tucked my phone back into the inner pocket without replying. Let *her* actually do some work for a change.

"Everything good?"

"Nothing that needs my attention. Ready to hit the bakery."

She slid her hand across her middle. "That salad was huge. Probably a good thing we ate first so I don't buy one of everything. You know, for science."

I laughed. "Of course. Taste testing, right?"

"Exactly."

"Want another coffee to go?"

“I do. But I’m too full. Maybe on the way back out.”

“Deal.”

We gathered our things and dumped our dishes in the buckets on top of the trash bins on our way out the door. The foot traffic had lightened a little and the breeze felt nice as we hung a left out of the café and headed up Main Street.

Cheerful flags flew from the buildings in rainbow prints as well as a few informational ones about the history of Crescent Cove.

“Reminds me of home. This is a little more lake town and touristy than Winchester Falls but it has that neat as a pin deal going. You know that they actually care about their town.”

“It is really pretty.” And there were a startling number of strollers and children running around. Maybe there was something to that water business Macy had mentioned.

We stopped in at Sugar Rush first. It was bustling with a line to the door. There was a trio of young women running around, filling orders while a pint-sized woman in a paint-streaked smock barked orders.

“Grab a number or you’ll get left behind. It’s a busy one today,” the short and very pregnant woman said.

“We have an appointment,” Bells said.

“Oh, the orchard? One sec.” She held up a hand and backed into a door. “Tab!”

“I’ve got my hands full.” Came a voice from the back.

“The chick from hot brothers’ orchard is here.”

I hid a smile behind my hand.

“Brothers Three Orchard,” the woman said out of the side of her mouth as she passed the pregnant woman. “Sorry about my sister. She has no filter.” She was drying her hands on a towel and wore a pink baker’s smock with her strawberry-blond hair scraped back in a ponytail and secured in a net.

“No problem.” I smiled and held out my hand to her. “I’m Helena and this is Belinda.”

She tugged off her apron, then she realized she still had on her hair net and snatched it off her head. “It’s been a crazy one. I’m Tabitha.” She shook my hand, then Bells’. “C’mon back. It’s a little quieter.”

Tabitha grabbed a binder on her way by the bakery case and led us through a short hallway to a small room painted in pink and lemon yellow. A round table painted in huge daisies held a glass domed cake pedestal with a

few items inside. “I pulled a few things from the bakery case to try, and I can alter anything to fit your theme.”

We sat down and went over some of the specifics for the Bridgerton-flavored birthday party we had in mind.

Tabitha scribbled something in the binder. “So finger-food sized. We can definitely do that.” She flipped through pages and turned the book toward us. “Maybe like this?”

There were half a dozen small cakes pictured that were a perfect bite size. She had photos from previous clients, as well as some that had been staged for their social media.

Bells scooted next to me so she could see. “Oh, this is cute. Does it come with that hot duke dude from the show?”

Tabitha grinned. “Don’t we wish? I could probably convince my brother-in-law to wear something.”

“Don’t tease me.” Bells tapped her nail on the lemon and strawberry cake as well as a lemon bar. “I talked to the sister of the birthday girl today. Evidently, she’s big on lemon and chocolate.”

I pulled my tablet out of my purse. “Do you have a chocolate fountain for fruit maybe? I was going to use the one we have but it’s being used for a wedding on the same night.”

“Sure. We have one.”

“Great.”

“What’s the guest size?”

“Eighty,” I said with a wince.

Tabitha looked up from her binder. “Well then.”

“We have a decent budget and can add on twenty percent for the short notice.”

Bells gave me a side-eye full of questions.

Tabitha flipped a page. “All right. That covers the extra people I’ll have to call in to cover the large order. So you need it for Friday early afternoon?”

I nodded. “It’s an evening party.”

“I’ll need every extra minute. I’ll work out a figure within your budget and email you with the details.” She pulled the dome off the cake plate. “Now for the best part.”

Bells groaned. “Good thing I wore a loose dress today.”

Tabitha laughed. “Let’s see exactly what you guys like, shall we?”

By the time we walked out of there, we were both riding a sugar high.

Tabitha sent us on our way with bottled water to flush out some of the sugar and a bill that made us both a little queasy.

“You sure about the twenty percent?” Bells asked as we left the bakery.

“Not really, but I’ll make it work. Unfortunately, since the overbooking was technically our error, there will need to be some wiggle room there. I think Laverne will agree with me.”

“True. Want to walk off some of that cake?”

“Definitely.”

We both sipped our bottles of water as we meandered our way up Main Street. We stopped into a few of the shops, but mostly just window shopped our way across town as we got to know one another.

I found myself opening up to Bells far easier than I should have for someone I’d just met. But she was easy to talk to and her thoughtful approach to topics made it easy to relax.

She snagged a flyer for a new apartment complex being built a few streets away from the main bustle of businesses. Waterfront properties were definitely out of her budget, but the apartments were affordable from what I could tell.

“Want to try this place?” she asked.

The beachy driftwood sign said Vintage December. The window had a few dress forms wearing flowing summer dresses as well as a rack of funky, colorful halter tops. There was also a trunk full of long sweaters spilling out of the top as if someone had just dug through looking for something.

The window scene was charming and inviting yet I felt almost voyeuristic at the same time. As if I was looking into someone’s bedroom closet.

As soon as we opened the door, the scent of the beach enveloped us. I could almost smell the salt air. A sultry, crooning voice was piped in through the speakers to pair with the soft lights and creative zones for shopping.

Racks of jeans and fun shoes were closest to the door. Some were cutoff shorts, some were embroidered, and others were obviously vintage as the sign suggested.

Bells pushed me right to the shorts. “You definitely need a few pairs of shorts. I was checking the weather for this week, and we’re gonna melt.” The hangers snicked down the pole as she dug in for a pair of startlingly short ones as well as a few that were less heart attack worthy. “You’re what? A four? Possibly a two?”

“Usually a four or six.”

“Hiding some hips and ass under that skirt, huh? Good. You’re damn tiny.” She shoved five pairs at me as well as two pairs of jeans.

“I only need clothes for a week.”

“I have a feeling based on your outfit, that would be a lie. But we’ll fix you up.”

I frowned. “What’s wrong with my outfit?”

“Nothing if you are trying to blend into a beige wall.”

I was too gobsmacked to answer her. Good thing, I needed my strength for the pile of clothes she was tossing at me.

“Can I help you ladies?” An older woman in a caftan came around the desk.

“No—well, actually, yes. We’ll need a dressing room if you have one.”

“Of course.” The woman smiled and floated off with Chanel No. 5 in her wake if I was correct.

“Okay, I definitely don’t need all this.” My arms were shaking under the twenty pounds of material she’d thrown at me.

Bells turned and her shocked face had her running back toward me. “Sorry!” She took half the pile and urged me toward the back of the shop. Then she darted to the left and added three dresses to the pile.

I staggered toward the seats near the dressing rooms. There was a small staging area with what looked to be an area for alterations.

The woman came floating through the dressing area. “I’m Dee. If you need anything just let me know.”

“Thanks.” Bells bustled into the room with an armful of clothes and then dragged me behind her. “I want to see it all. Even if you hate it.” She smiled winningly and backed out the door. “Don’t make me stand guard.”

I sighed. I supposed this was going to be a bit more intense than I’d thought.

I fingered the teal dress she’d grabbed at the end, then set my pile down. But it would be worth it.

And I wanted to find something special for tonight. My heart tripped at the thought of just what tonight would mean with Beckett.

I didn’t want to get ahead of myself, but maybe it would be okay to dream a little.

CHAPTER 24

BECKETT

HERS

“You don’t have to go up that far.”

Justin wiggled up another half dozen branches with the long string of golden lights. “Relax, Beck. I’m just making sure you impress your girl tonight.”

My knee jerk reaction was to say she wasn’t my girl, but in truth, I wanted her to be. And that might be a stack of fool’s gold right about now, but it didn’t change facts. I liked her with me. Liked her smell on me, liked the way she felt under me and over me, and most of all, I liked hearing her laugh.

I had a feeling I was beyond fucked at this point and I just didn’t care. Maybe that made me an idiot, but I was willing to play the idiot tonight.

For her.

“Well, if you’re up there...”

Justin peered down at me. “Yeah, what now?”

I held up the package of paper lantern lights I’d bought.

“Man, you really do like this girl.”

“Shut up.” But I grabbed the pole I’d been ineffectually using to put the lights up before he arrived.

I wasn’t as young and nimble as my acrobatic daredevil younger brother was. Quickly, I unwound the string and fastened them to the hook at the end of the pole to hoist them up to where he could reach.

He grabbed the end then draped the awkward string over his shoulder so he could tack one end against the bark with his thumb. “Here?”

“Well, if you’re playing monkey...you could go up a bit.”

“Oh, can I?”

“You could.” My voice was deadpan and got the desired results. Justin snorted, but he climbed up a few more branches and plugged it into the larger string lights. It was a softer light but added a nice bit of red and orange color. Then he hooked the lantern lights to bow across the center of the old Ash tree across from my balcony deck off my bedroom.

I climbed the steps to make sure it made a good impression from the table I’d set up and gave him a thumbs up. We’d wrapped the tree and porch railings with tiny twinkle lights leftover from Christmas decorations I’d found in my shed. I wasn’t much for decorating, but I usually hosted our White Elephant family Christmas party, so I had some simple gear.

Then I’d bought a bunch of flameless candles to give some ambiance to my balcony and bedroom.

The sprinkler system had taken longer than I’d bargained for which meant I’d had to SOS my brother for some help. I was entirely sure I’d never hear the end of it.

But Helena was worth it.

“I’m taking the big steak as payment,” he shouted to me.

“Deal.”

“And a baked potato.”

“Fine.” I checked the smaller grill that I’d tossed a few foil-wrapped potatoes and ears of corn on to cook while we were setting up. I had a small fridge tucked in a corner on the second level deck for condiments. I’d made up a street corn mixture to baste the corn since I knew my girl liked some spice.

I skinned the ears of corn for easier eating and flavored them up before dumping some into a bowl with two potatoes for my brother. I grabbed one of the butcher paper wrapped steaks and tossed both into a small cooler for Justin to take with him.

The wide beams of a car’s headlights I didn’t recognize rolled up my drive. It was a vintage Oldsmobile in a deep hunter green. Helena slid out of the passenger side.

“Justin! Time to scram.”

“Just a minute!”

I moved to the edge of the second floor deck and my breath backed up into my lungs. She leaned down to talk to someone in the car before slamming the huge door shut with a wave. The lights blinked and then the car backed up to do a three-point-turn in my large drive.

The breeze came up, fluttering the ends of her hair around her face. She wore it down in a cascade of curls that made me long to wrap them around my hand. Memories of her long neck with her head tipped back as she took my cock in her mouth hit me like a fist.

She stepped gingerly on the gravel drive in shoes that were definitely not made for my property. I squinted to see more. Her dress was some dark color that wasn't blue or green with large roses that looked like they'd been dipped in tea. And she glittered from neck to ankle in delicate gold chains.

Fuck, she was so goddamn beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes.

She stopped at the stable first and gave Storm a sweet stroke along his broad nose. I could hear her musical laugh on the breeze. Then she noticed the tree. Her head tipped back and her mouth dropped open with surprise.

Then my idiot brother dropped to the grass in front of her and ruined the moment.

Typical.

"You idiot," I shouted down from the deck.

Justin grinned. "Sorry." He turned his attention to Helena. "Damn, girl. You look beautiful."

Helena's gaze dropped to the ground and she fiddled with her purse. "Thanks."

I hurried down the stairs to meet her on the lawn, small cooler in hand. "I thought I'd get him out of here before you arrived."

Justin wiped his hands down his grimy jeans. "Probably take credit for all my hard work too."

I shoved the cooler at him. "I sure would have."

Helena laughed as Justin took the cooler with an *oof*.

"This is the thanks I get?"

"Bigger steak, potatoes and corn—as promised."

Justin started to flip the lid and I gave him a hard look.

"Right. Perfect. I'm sure it's all there." He shoved his hand into his hair and gave her a charming smile, the one that he used on townies and guests alike.

The one that shouldn't be on his face when it came to Helena.

"If you get sick of this idiot, I'd be happy to take you out."

I slid my hand into hers and dragged her into my side. "Scram."

"Just sayin'." Justin put two fingers to his forehead in a salute. "Scramming." He loped down the slight incline in the lawn and found Casey

running around the gardens. He whistled and the dog followed him to his truck.

Probably in hopes of sharing the steak.

But that also meant I didn't have to share my bed with anyone other than Helena. If she'd have me.

"You look incredible."

She smiled up at me. "Like my new dress?"

"I do. You could be wearing one of my T-shirts and I'd think you were equally beautiful, but I love all of this." I lightly twirled her out from where I'd caught her close.

She gave me a delighted laugh as the ruffle of her dress floated around her and my chest tightened at the length of leg it showed from a slit I'd missed during my first perusal.

"Bells dressed me, to be honest."

"Bells?"

"My new...friend. Laverne hired her to help with the party planning at The Lodge."

"Oh, that's right. Grayson?"

She nodded. "Belinda, but she goes by Bells. I like her. She's staggeringly beautiful, but she's also very smart. I think Laverne found something special in hiring her."

"Is that so?" I drew her hand up to my shoulder and slid my hand along the silky material that hugged her curves. "Maybe she's just playing off what makes you special. Thought about that?"

"Oh, no. I'm just helping out."

"I think you're doing a bit more than that." As always, the way she melted into me unlocked something I hadn't realized was missing for so long. "Laverne said Cara has been much more confident since she started working with you."

"She just needed a little boost."

I tipped up her chin to meet her gaze. "Don't downplay what you're doing for my family. It may have started as a mistake, but you've opened up a whole new corner of The Lodge for Laverne's staff."

"She would have figured it out. It was just waiting for them to realize the garden was perfect for parties. Weather permitting." She crossed her fingers.

"May it cooperate with us or we're in real trouble."

"Lucky for you we have access to a bunch of tents if need be. We've

done a few outdoor weddings in the field where Rachel's new boozy bus was parked." I drew her in tighter against me, so our thighs rubbed together. "And you might just have someone who would help set that up."

She stared at my lips before her gaze rose to meet mine. "And who might that be?"

I lowered my mouth until we were a few inches apart. "Maybe my idiot brothers. Definitely me."

Her breath whispered along my bottom lip as we swayed into a slow box step. I'd turned on music upstairs in my room and the song was a distant hum. The air between us went beyond music and seemed to vibrate with so much more. "I love that you all help one another here. I'm not used to that. The people I know are usually out for number one, no matter who gets hurt."

"Maybe those aren't the people you should be around."

I swallowed down the need to drag her even closer. To bring her tight into my protective forcefield. With every moment she was in my life, it felt like she belonged here. As if she was meant to be at the orchard.

Meant for me.

I wasn't a fanciful man, but she made me want to believe in it.

Believe in someone other than my family.

"Maybe I shouldn't." Her voice was quiet. Almost as if she was afraid to say what she wanted too loud. Her hands slid up along my shoulders to link behind my neck. "Did you do all this for me?"

I brushed my nose along hers. "With a little help."

"You shouldn't—"

"If you say I shouldn't have gone to the trouble, you can just be quiet now. You deserve to be wooed."

The smile that spread across her face made me feel like I'd just unlocked the perfect hybrid of apple. Sweet, tart, strong, and bold. All the things I wished for in a harvest were right here in front of me. She was incandescent in the soft golden lights that glowed as the sun disappeared into twilight—the gold at her throat and ears, that echoed in her hair that tumbled over my forearm and swung down her back, and the warmth of her eyes.

That I could give her this bit of happiness humbled me in ways I hadn't felt before. The fact that I wanted to keep making her happy beyond Friday should have made me run for the back half of the orchard. And here I was wondering how I could continue to make it happen.

How could I keep her here?

The words were on the tip of my tongue. *How do I make you mine?*
Instead of voicing them, I brushed my lips over hers until she sighed into me.

On the patio of my garden of the house I'd built over time, in the orchard that I'd struggled to build with the help of my family, I felt something building between us. Something that I didn't understand but needed to hold onto.

"Hungry?" I asked against her mouth.

"For you? Always."

I groaned and buried my face in her sweet-smelling hair. "Food first. I haven't eaten all day." I stepped back, lacing our fingers together once more. "C'mon."

I led her up the stairs to the second level deck. More of the paper lanterns framed the dark wood and I'd set out real dishes. They weren't the china she was probably used to, but the Fiestaware was solid and serviceable just like me. I'd decanted a bottle of my better wine, remembering she liked a bold red.

Handily, it went with steak.

I held out a chair for her, settling her in with a kiss on her shoulder as I poured a glass of wine for her. "I'm assuming you're staying with me since Bells dropped you off?"

She looked up at me, a tiny spark of shock in her eyes. "That was presumptuous of me."

"Presume away, girl. I'm not letting you out of my sight tonight."

Her face flushed as she lifted the glass to taste. Pleasure slipped over her face as she took a longer sip. "That's lovely."

"Local winery. Thought you'd like it."

"I do."

"Now the important question...you like steak, right?"

She laughed lightly. "Definitely."

"Good."

I busied myself with the steak and made sure the rest of the food was still hot enough to eat while the grill got back up to temperature.

She filled me in on the party, that she'd been introduced to the nearby lake town of Crescent Cove, and that Bells had helped her spend a bundle of money at a boutique there.

I tried to concentrate on not burning the steak since my eye kept slipping

down the surprising vee of her dress where her tangle of chains draped. I imagined her sparkling in my bed tonight and couldn't wait to see just how she glowed without that dress on.

She seemed to know exactly what she was doing to me, since she toyed with the damn chains as I cooked for her.

I pushed my iPad toward her and unlocked it. "Find some music, the food will be ready in a minute."

"What you have is fine."

"It'll keep you busy."

She sipped her wine. "I'm enjoying the company."

"Helena, if you keep dipping your fingers between your breasts, I'm going to go insane. Have mercy."

She bit her lower lip. "It wasn't intentional."

"You sure about that?" I groaned as her nipples beaded at the mention. The silk of her dress left little to the imagination and the cut didn't allow a bra that I could see. I certainly hadn't felt one when I'd been dancing with her.

My fingers tightened on the knife as I breathed out slowly, so I didn't butcher the cuts.

The memory of how her nipples puckered under my tongue was still fresh. Just this morning, and still, I wanted to watch the thin little strap slide down her shoulder.

There'd be plenty of time for that. The wooing didn't just mean sex, dammit. Cooking for her, taking care of her, getting to know her—those things were just as important.

I shifted my stance wider to give my dick a bit of breathing room because that fucker sure as hell didn't give a damn about the romance of dinner.

She was quiet as she scrolled through my music app and I realized my mistake. She wasn't going to make it any easier on me with her choices. The watery tones of Lana Del Ray floated out of my bedroom speakers. The gentle beat layered with a sad piano only intensified the tension between us.

Lana's voice was full of longing and sensual delight.

I set the orange plate in front of her and refilled her wine.

"Smells amazing."

"I can manage a few dishes, thanks to Laverne. My mother wasn't exactly gifted in the kitchen. I think we all came knocking on her door on Wednesdays though. She can make a mean fajita."

Helena laughed. "I'm not sure my mother knows where the kitchen is in our penthouse."

I lifted my fork, not sure what to say to that one. It was so easy to forget how different we were.

She frowned. "Way to ruin the mood."

"No, it's okay. We do come from different worlds. That's not a bad thing. Unless you're looking for a gourmet meal. Then we might be in trouble."

She lifted her fork to stab one of the street corn ribs. "Gourmet or not, it smells wonderful. I don't think I've ever seen corn served like this."

"Street corn ribs. A little spicy since you seem to like burning your tongue off."

Probably a bit pedestrian for her palate, but the pure pleasure in her eyes released some of the tension that had snuck up my spine. She fought with her fork a few times before she finally dropped it and picked up the rib to nibble on it.

Her gaze drifted to me as she was licking butter off the pad of her thumb. "What? Am I doing it wrong?"

"Not at all."

"Stop staring at me then."

"Can't. You're too adorable."

She wrinkled her nose at me.

I laughed and leaned back with my glass resting on the arm of my chair.

She wiped her mouth and fingers then finished her glass. The wine put a flush in her cheeks and a hazy softness to her golden eyes. She stood and started gathering the dishes.

Before I could tell her I'd take care of it, she put the pile aside so she could stand in front of me. I swallowed as she pressed her knee between my leg and arm of the chair. The slit in her dress showed off the golden tone of her leg. She straddled me, tucking her other knee between my hip and the chair so she was above me.

She took my glass and finished it off as well, setting it on the table behind her.

Liquid courage?

She gripped the back of my chair with one hand and my gaze locked on the series of chains that slipped between her breasts. She cupped my jaw, her thumb slipping across my bearded chin. I should have shaved for her, but I'd run out of time.

“I want to feel this between my thighs again.”

Then again, one couldn't fault divine timing.

My hand slid over her ass, tucking her closer against my zipper. “I think that can be arranged. I haven't had my dessert yet.”

An almost smile flitted across her lips. The one that she couldn't quite keep under lock and key when she was trying to concentrate on me. And then her hips slowly undulated against me, the ethereal music her guide.

Sweet hell, she was going to kill me.

Her lips coasted over my jaw then to the crest of my cheekbone as she rocked along the zipper of my jeans, getting bolder with each stroke. With each inch I grew in reaction to her honeyed lavender scent. She'd added something to her usual floral perfume. It was warmer and headier, making my head spin.

It clung to her skin, her hair, even her dress. A shimmer to her flesh offset by the glowing lights behind me on the railing.

I gripped her hip to follow her lead with the soft rise and fall against my jeans. Her arm slid around my neck, her fingers tunneling through the curling ends of my hair along the nape of my neck. I'd never been so glad to be late for a haircut.

Each stroke of her nails along my scalp coincided with roll of her hips. She'd shifted lower with each cruise against me until our lips lined up. The tips of her breasts buzzed along my chest. Her other hand moved to splay across my torso, her nimble fingers making short work of the buttons of my chambray shirt.

The silk of her dress set fire to my skin.

My other hand moved between us to get between her legs, but she shook her head.

“Let me touch you first.” She nipped my ear. “Put your hand back on the arm of the chair.”

Liquid courage indeed.

Interested to see where she'd go, I did as she requested.

She rolled against me again, her chest teasing my skin. The slithering gold of her chains were warm against me as she guided my head to between her breasts. “Taste?”

I followed the deep vee of her dress, and the shimmer of her skin was warm on my tongue. Her chains slid along my cheek as I trailed my way up to her collar bone.

“Other hand on the chair, Beckett.”

I groaned a little, but I obeyed, my grip tightening on the flat wooden arm.

She widened her thighs to cup my cock through my jeans.

“Fuck.”

Her lids lowered to slits and there was more of the coppery tone there. Something smoky on her lids feathered along her lash line to make her golden eyes flash. Her breath hitched as her dress shifted and my jeans came into contact with the rasp of lace.

I lifted my hips for more contact, but she shook her head. “Patience.”

She was curled over me, shifting the dress so it gaped a little, showing a shadow of nipple. I turned my face to tease the slice of flesh and she groaned.

Her nails dug into my chest, and I hissed. The bite of pain cleared my head a little and I took advantage, nosing the silk aside for the satin of her breast. The flat of my tongue glided along the curve to the tight tip.

She palmed the back of my head, leading me deeper into the darkness of her dress. Her skin tasted slick, and my tongue buzzed in reaction.

“What are you wearing?”

“Bells gave it to me. It’s a fragrance oil. She said it warmed on contact.” Her head tipped back as she groaned. “Like honey.”

“Pull the strap down. I need more.”

She rocked against me. “What if I want to wait?”

“Is that really what you want?”

The gold behind the slits of her lashes was a little blurry. Soft and unfocused enough that it gave me a momentary pause.

She was so damn tiny. Maybe she’d had too much wine. Then I saw her jaw go slack as she rocked harder.

“Fuck, are you close?”

She licked her lips. “Everything feels warm.”

“Damn, you are close. Strap, now.”

She fumbled with one side and her tight little breast swayed with its freedom. I ached to grip her waist. To drag her closer to the edge she was teetering on.

But she seemed to want to run the show. And I’d let her.

For now.

I opened my mouth to take as much of her as I could, sucking strongly on her nipple until it popped from my mouth.

“Beckett.”

“Are you going to come on my jeans? Just from this? From your little dance for me?”

She shuddered. “I might.”

My arms shook as I gripped the chair. A chain reaction of muscles locked with each stroke against my dick.

My lower spine heated with the need to shift against her. To help push her over.

I used my teeth to tug down the other strap and she pushed them off, the dress bunching at her waist.

She threw her head back. “That breeze. God, more of that. I’m so hot.”

So there was a bit of the wine involved. I’d learned that when she was buzzed, her internal temperature spiked.

I tipped my hips up, so she arched into the night breeze. Goose bumps raced over her water soft breasts, heightened the raspberry hue of her nipples until they were so tight, I couldn’t resist a taste.

She gripped my shoulders and rode me, lost to the moment and the onslaught of her first orgasm.

“That’s it. Come for me. Come on me.”

She rocked harder, faster as she used me to get off. The friction made me grit my teeth. The pleasure and pain coalesced into heat, and still, I let her go.

Her fingers fumbled with my belt, and I tried to dissuade her. This was enough for me, but she was too far gone. I couldn’t deny her anything she needed.

She rose onto her knees, pushing at the fabric of the dress, her underwear.

“Let me touch you.”

“No. Take me like this.” Her eyes were tiger wild as she scooped me out of my boxers and gripped my shaft.

“Helena.” My muscles tightened as she dragged the head of my cock against her soaked pussy. Then she tucked me along the seam of her and covered me.

The glide of her softness parting for me, accepting me even as she bore down on me—all of it left me barely hanging on to a ragged sliver of control.

I had no defenses against her.

And then she squeezed every inch of me on the way down and I bit back a shout. Pleasure-soaked Helena wrapped around me like a gift.

Her arms circled my shoulders, her knees hugged my sides, her breasts

flattened against my chest. There was no air between us, only the rasp of clothes and skin as she fucked me into oblivion.

She shook around me and finally, I couldn't resist the urge to fold around her. To hold her tight against me as she shattered.

My hand slid down her back to cup her ass, controlling the tempo of my thrusts inside of her. My other arm strapped along her back and gripped her shoulder.

The chair rattled.

My bones shuddered.

And something unlocked inside of me. The loneliness and the responsibilities that kept everyone at arm's length dissolved under the onslaught of bliss that I found between us.

I caught her mouth with mine and trapped every part of her inside of me. It was mine now.

Every cry and shudder transferred into my skin.

Every breath and sigh shifted and rearranged me until I was simply hers.

CHAPTER 25

HELENA

TO BE WOOED

Beckett's idea of wooing was far more than I'd expected.

I'd been expecting dinner and wine, but not all the trouble he'd gone to make the night special. From the soft glow of twinkle lights on the deck, to the flickering battery-operated candles scattered on every surface imaginable, and then there was the big tree across from us decked out in even more lights. Simple touches, but oh, so thoughtful.

For all the millions Clay and Reid had, they'd never made me feel so wanted or special.

So much so that I'd hopped into his lap to say thank you in ways I'd never have done before that day.

I leaned back, and there was something in his eyes. Warmth and... affection?

More?

He cupped my face and pressed a light kiss on my mouth. "You leave me so damn unbalanced."

I covered his hand on my cheek. "Handy, because you do the same to me."

His eyes skimmed down my naked top half to where we'd hurriedly shifted clothes to get him inside me. "I was supposed to be doing the wooing, remember?"

"Oh, you did. Very well, actually. I couldn't resist you."

"And you know this wasn't..."

I pressed a finger to his lips. "I just wanted you. Wanted this. I never felt free enough to be the one to ask for what I needed. Being close to you without having to worry about how it looks or if I am being too needy. None

of that even occurred to me.”

“It damn well shouldn’t.” His eyes flashed with outrage. “I don’t want you to ever question yourself like that. I never want feelings like that between us.”

I leaned forward to kiss his firm lips. “I don’t. It’s kind of a revelation. I think I might want to continue said revelations upstairs. This chair is pretty hard.” He was still frowning as I linked my arms around his neck. “Beckett, everything between us is a good thing. It’s just different.”

“I don’t like that anyone made you feel like that. *Ever.*”

I brushed my nose against his before I teased his top lip. “Upstairs.”

Suddenly, he stood. I yelped, hanging onto his shoulders. “This time, you’ll be at my mercy.”

I shivered. That sounded like a very good plan.

The trip up the spiral staircase that linked the second-floor deck and his bedroom balcony was a bit fraught, but he didn’t take his gaze off me. The normally serene blue-sky color of his eyes was more intense. As if he was afraid to break the connection between us.

On the balcony, there were even more candles than I’d noticed from downstairs. They flickered and flashed in every spare corner, on every table, and along the railings leading us into his bedroom. The door was open, letting in the cool breeze of the night.

The fireplace was lit with an abundance of tiny tea-lights scattered over the mantle and on the small bedside tables, creating a soft, dreamy space.

He let me slide down his body to stand before him. My breath caught when he found the zipper at my hip and my dress fluttered down around my ankles. He drew me out of the pool of silk until our chests touched.

I reached for the tails of his shirt, but he stilled my hands, settling them against his chest. My fingers tunneled into the light fur on his pecs as I pushed the opened shirt off his shoulders until it hit the floor.

He pulled my hands up to link around the back of his neck as we swayed gently to the music playing. It should have felt weird since I was just in a pair of panties and heels, but the easy way he held me made it perfect.

The whiskey-rough singing voice that cocooned us in the moment mixed with his gentle touches at my hips and along my spine. The earlier hunger seemed just out of reach of the bubble around us.

There was no timetable, no need to rush, no expectations.

It was just us and this night.

He urged me closer until my belly brushed against his buckle and our thighs slid along each other. His worn jeans mixed with the flex of his roughhewn body, leaving a buzz along my skin. His fingers slid lower to cup my hips, then around to the fullness of my ass as the hazy pleasure slipped into a molasses-slow longing for more.

He lowered his mouth to my neck and over to my shoulder with barely there touches until my nipples tightened to aching points. Still, we swayed as if stopping would break the moment. His lips softly promised more with each pass.

One hand slid over my hip to my lower stomach, teasing the edges of my ivory silk panties before trailing up over my navel to catch the end of the first chain dripping between my breasts. He pulled the longest one across the tip of my breast, his eyes glittering in the low light as he stroked first one then the other before swiping his calloused thumb along the underside of my breast.

My eyelids slid lower, but I couldn't stop watching even as I wanted to lose myself in his drugging touch. He cupped me, letting the chain fall back between my breasts to sway.

"You're like spun gold tonight." He lowered his mouth to gently brush his lips against mine.

His touch continued to be slow and easy. From breast to hip, then a trip along my spine to draw my hair over my shoulder to drape over my breasts. The curls felt heavier tonight. Like a warm cloak that I was tired of hiding behind.

But as he parted the strands to reveal my tight nipples, it made me feel beautiful. The way he looked at me like I was precious unwound something deep inside of me that I'd pushed down. The glass shell melting away under his touch.

He dragged his fingertips along the cleft of my ass and up the dip of my spine again and again until I was strung tight. Until I felt like I was the one flickering like the firelight around us.

His patience was infinite even as I was losing my mind. Until he finally urged me back a few steps to his bed and lifted me to lay me out on the duvet. He drew my panties down, kissing his way down my calf and ankle before he tossed them over his shoulder. Flashing a dubious grin, he propped my heel against his chest as he wrestled with the straps of first one shoe then the other.

When he finally got them off, he kissed my instep and set my foot on the bed. He kicked off his boots and remaining clothes, nudging my knees apart as he covered me.

Surrounded me.

Made me feel safer than anyone else on this Earth ever had.

Liquid pleasure bloomed across my skin at the contact. His weight, the way he fit me, all of it seemed too perfect to bear sometimes. When he reached for the drawer, I shook my head. "I just want you. It might be stupid, but it's true." I slipped my fingers around his hard length.

He pressed his forehead to my shoulder. "Dangerous games."

"I'm protected."

He leaned back. "It's not that. Every time I touch you like this, with no barriers... There's a part of me that you take."

I was selfish to want it, but I did. And I just didn't care at that moment. The connection between us was too much to deny. I wanted more of it. Longed to own as much of him as he owned me for as long as I could.

"There's been no one like you, Beckett. No one has ever known me like you do." I drew him closer until he fit where he belonged. I wrapped my legs and my arms around him as I took him deep, shifting my hips to accept the entire length of him in one thrust.

My name was a murmured sigh as one delicious stroke became another and another until we were lost in each other. In the greedy pulls of our bodies, and the flickering golden glow of our safe space.

Until the easy strokes became harder, until he demanded more. More of me.

His huge hands splayed over my hip to roll me to the side to surround me from the back. Taking me so much deeper, his fingers digging into my thigh as he pushed my knee up to fill me with his hammering strokes.

Lost to the needs we found between us, I took each thrust and cried out for more. I reached back, looking for an anchor.

I was spinning out. Adrift. Desperate.

His hands found mine, lacing our fingers together as he pinned them to the mattress while he drove me up, past any of my boundaries. He demanded absolute control of my body, and I relinquished it, knowing he would take me to the edge and hold me while I fell.

His teeth grazed my shoulder before he buried his face in my neck and chanted my name.

The golden room shimmered and pulsed as I came. As my body locked him inside me in the only way I knew how by clamping tight around him.

He swore behind me as his smooth thrusts became frenzied before he released one of my hands to curl his arm around me as he filled me. His body clenched with tension until he melted around me, shifting us both onto our sides and tucking his chin into the curve of my neck and shoulder.

I reached behind me to cup the back of his head as I turned my mouth to find his, the kiss more of a sigh than a meeting of mouths.

The next thing I knew, Beckett was sitting beside me with a soft cool cloth, wiping down my back in long, slow strokes. I smiled into the blanket. "I keep finding myself melted into beds with you."

He rolled me over and licked my nipple lightly before pressing the cloth between my legs. "And that's a bad thing?"

I hissed out a sigh as he cleaned me up. "You are always taking care of me."

"Not a hardship. Especially when you're in my bed." He kissed my temple before settling me under the blankets, then he climbed in to curl around me again. He shifted me until we were both comfortable. "And this is also a bonus."

"I should get up and put something on."

"For me to just take it off of you? Hardly."

I smiled into the pillow. "We didn't clean up after our dinner."

"*Shh*. It'll still be there in the morning. Or a raccoon will enjoy the scraps of our dinner."

I laughed and snuggled down in his arms. "Well, if it helps the raccoons."

"Sleep." His voice was a rumble.

"Okay."

And again, the spinning of my emotions and thoughts eased in his arms. I'd take it for a little while longer.

CHAPTER 26

BECKETT

BROTHERS

“Shit.” I stumbled out of bed, tripping on my boot.

My phone was bleating somewhere across the room. Where the hell was it?

Hell, my eyes weren't even focusing yet. What I did notice was that there was far too much sunlight in my room.

“Shit, shit, shit.” I shoved over a stack of books on my bookcase to get to my phone which was still docked on my ancient stereo setup. The face lit up with the phone call from Justin with a half dozen text messages I'd missed.

I snatched it off the dock. “Yeah.”

“What's going on? You should have been down here an hour ago.”

“Sorry. I was...” I swiped my hand over my face to wake myself up.

Not much sleep had been had last night. Either it was me or Helena who had kept waking up for another round. Then a midnight snack because we'd both worked off our dinners.

I wasn't a midnight guy. I was a damn farmer for all intents and purposes and was usually up with the dawn.

Which was at least two hours ago.

“Fuck.”

“Hey, it's okay. You're the boss. Only one who's gonna yell at you is you.”

“Obviously since you're calling me...”

“Right.” Justin cleared his throat. “Well, we have that meeting with old man Brennan about the tractor.”

“Fuck.” I covered my eyes. “I forgot.”

“A certain blond can easily make a man forget about an old tractor.”

“Yeah.” I collapsed onto the bench at the end of my bed and bowed my head. My whole focus had been on planning the night for her. Not the busy Tuesday that I should have been worried about.

“Hey, man. Don’t sweat it. I’ll just grab Mike and we’ll take care of it.”

“It’s not your damn job.”

“Well, maybe it should be.”

My shoulders tensed. “Jus—”

“No, hear me out. This is minor shit for sure. I can take care of it. I *should* be taking care of it.”

I gritted my teeth. “It’s a big purchase.”

“It is. But who else on this orchard knows more about what we need in a tractor?”

I couldn’t say anything to that one. Justin was our version of a tech guy. He fixed all the machines, kept them running. Truly, he was central to the orchard. I could work my ass off all day and night, but I didn’t have a knack when it came to maintaining more than an oil change on my truck.

“I’ll be right down.”

Justin sighed through the phone. “All right. See ya in a few.” And he hung up.

I tossed my phone at my jeans, which were still in a pile on the damn floor. “Fuck.” I glanced over my shoulder to see Helena curled in my bed, her face still soft in sleep.

My responsibilities to the orchard were bigger than this. That damn tractor was needed for harvest since ours had finally died. Brennan had transitioned into using bigger tree shakers for his fields, but I still felt there was too much waste that way.

Too many bruised apples and the only way Brothers Three would stand out from all the apple orchards in this part of New York was our superior product.

Me and my team had worked damn hard to prove that and we wouldn’t be stopping now.

I slipped into the bathroom and took a quick shower. My muscles were sore and tense from Kain and a lack of sleep. I definitely hadn’t given my body a chance to recharge the night before. In fact, curling my body around Helena had screwed up my natural sleeping patterns in more ways than one.

A weekend here and there with a woman was much different than having someone in my space. Hell, someone in my head all the time.

I tipped my head back and let a blast of cold water jolt me the rest of the way awake.

I needed to keep my eye on the orchard and my family. It came first.

Not the fairytale lying in my bed.

I dried off and got dressed before she stirred. The swath of blond hair tumbled across my pillows gilded in sunlight didn't help my mood. I should have been gone and in the fields hours ago and I kept forgetting that because I wanted to get my dick wet?

I fisted my hands even at the thought.

Because...no. No, it wasn't just sex and I couldn't even pretend it was. Sex I understood. Sex was easy. I could walk away from easy.

She was hard.

She was hope.

And she was made for a future.

I sat on the edge of the bed. "Hey."

Her big dark eyes opened, fuzzy with sleep. Her soft smile cracked my chest open. Walking away from her was getting harder every day.

She reached out and cupped my cheek. "Why so intense so early?"

"Because it's not early."

She sat up suddenly. "What time is it?"

"Late."

"What's late for you? Six?"

"Try almost nine."

"What?" She shoved the sheets aside and picked up her phone on the side table. "No way."

I swallowed a groan as I caught sight of all the marks I'd given her last night. Bruises the size of my thumbs at her waist from where I'd gripped her and powered into her.

She'd taken every part of me without complaint. With a groan of response and acceptance. She was so damn small, but she fit me so perfectly. I slipped her hair over her shoulder to see the bite on her shoulder.

When I'd lost it in the deep dark of last night, spreading her out over me until she'd screamed. Until I'd felt her shatter again and again.

She glanced over her shoulder at me, then she covered my hand when she saw what I was looking at. "Those marks mean more to me than you know."

I frowned.

She took my hand and settled it against her chest. "I've always been

treated like the breakable one. Like I was too fragile to be worthy of passion. You don't do that."

I slid my hand up to bury my fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck. She closed her eyes in that way she had. Where it was part purr and part sigh. "You deserve gentle."

Her eyes opened. "You are. I like both parts." She curled her arm around me and pressed her lips to mine. "Besides, I was pretty sure you made it your mission to have me scream that skylight down last night."

"Maybe." I couldn't stop the smile against her lips. "Maybe so."

"Let me get dressed and you can drop me off at The Lodge."

"Okay." She slipped away and grabbed her dress from the floor. She spotted my phone and tossed it at me. "Don't forget that."

I caught it against my chest. "How could I?"

My email notifications were in the double digits and texts were heading the same way. I quickly replied to the easy ones and pushed off a few of the distribution ones on Hayes and Ronan. By the time Helena came back out, I'd gotten a little work done.

Stupid crap that I knew I needed to start pushing off on my foreman. Just because he wasn't Kira didn't mean he wasn't a good employee. But we'd always had short speak and now I needed to train someone else.

Kira taking over the taproom had been exactly what she needed even if it felt like I was missing an arm some days.

"Everything okay?"

I slipped an arm around Helena's shoulders and pulled her to me. "Fine."

She frowned up at me, but she didn't say anything.

The trip into the main part of the orchard was quiet. My mind was spinning with all the things I was behind on. On the list of things I should have checked off before my meeting with Brennan. On the fact that I felt like things were slipping already.

Because I was selfish.

I pulled up to the front of The Lodge. "I'm not sure what time I'll be done tonight."

"It's okay." Her hands rested in her lap and her shoulders rolled forward.

It wasn't her fault I was fucking up. Not even close.

I flicked her seatbelt open and pulled her across to kiss her hard and deep. "I'll find you later."

She cupped my face and stared at me for a moment before she nodded

and gave me a bright smile. “Okay.”

As I pulled away, I watched her standing at the double doors. Each time I glanced in the rearview mirror, she was still there.

I stepped on the gas as I hit the side road that would cut across the orchard to where Justin’s workshop was. When I pulled up, my brother’s head was in the guts of Jolene, our mini tractor that took a drink in the spring, and his music was blasting.

Gravel popped against my undercarriage, warning him of my arrival. He straightened with a rag and socket wrench in his hand. He calmly sipped from his ever-present can of Monster. It wasn’t my preferred dosage of caffeine, but it would have to do.

“Got an extra one of those?” I asked through the open window.

His eyebrow spiked and he shrugged, moving to the mini fridge under his work bench. The bench was covered in what I could only imagine were the guts of Jolene’s innards that needed to be cleaned and greased.

Justin rounded my truck and got in, holding out the extra can. “I only have the extra wired ones.”

“All good.” I popped the tab and took a drink, hiding a wince. Christ, that was sweet. “I need the boost.”

“You know I can handle this meeting.”

“I just want to make sure the paperwork is done.”

“Not my first rodeo.” Justin rolled down his window and flicked on the radio.

I supposed that was that.

I glanced at the clock on the dash and took a larger swig from my can. Over ninety minutes late.

Guess it was past time to be off.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, my mind on the books I hadn’t done last night as I should have.

I knew there was enough funds in the accounts for the sale, but I usually pored over the books at the beginning of the week.

The only thing I’d studied last night was Helena’s shimmering skin.

Justin turned down the music. “I take it the romance was romancing last night?”

My fingers squeaked on the wheel. “Yeah.”

“Look, man. I’m not pissed that you were late. I’m pissed that you keep thinking I’m fifteen.”

“I know you’re not.”

“No. I’m almost fuckin’ thirty.”

I braked at the lone red light on the back road between the orchard and Brennan’s vast property. “I know it.”

“You don’t have to do everything yourself. Mike thinks you’re gonna fire him, for fuck’s sake.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re always micromanaging, man. As if he hasn’t worked here for eight years. He knows the fields better than you probably do.”

“No one knows those fields like me.”

“Oh, yeah? Did you know there were three collapses in the Paula Red zone? Or that the slow drip sprinklers have to be replaced in the greenhouse too? How about that we’re overdue on our inspection for the bottler?”

A horn blared behind me, letting me know the light had changed.

I gunned ahead and almost missed Brennan’s turn because I was seeing red.

“I’m not saying this to bust your balls, Beck. I’m just saying you can’t do it all. It’s not like when you took over for Dad.”

I stopped at the base of the road that led to Brennan’s offices.

When I’d seen the books from when our dad was running the orchard, I’d been gobsmacked with how behind we were on everything.

I swore that would never happen again. That I’d make sure my family was protected.

“Between the taproom, and the distribution deals, and harvest coming—”

“I’m aware!” I pushed out of my door. I needed to walk.

Justin stalked around the front of my truck. “I don’t think you are. Brothers Three is the three of us. Not the Beckett show.”

I fisted my hands at my sides.

“Want to take a swing at me? Go ahead.”

“It was only one day. I only fucked up once.”

“You didn’t fuck up at all.” Justin clamped a hand on my shoulder. “You’re supposed to have a life beyond the orchard.”

“Not with her.”

“Why not with her?” Justin’s blue eyes blazed from his tanned face. “She’s amazing.”

“Yes, she’s amazing. But she’s from the goddamn city. What’s she supposed to do here? Wait around for me to come home? When I’m dusty

and dirty from the fields and fall down every night during harvest?”

I shoved my hands through my hair and stalked away from him. “How can I expect her to stay? How can I ask that of her? And hell, I’ve only known her a few days, Jus.”

“Sometimes you just know. But even if things don’t work out with Helena—”

I whirled around and Justin put his hands up in surrender.

“Look, dude, even just saying it has you ready to lunge.”

“It’s reckless to be even thinking this way.”

“Maybe it’s time you get a little reckless again.” Justin shoved his hands into his pockets. “There was a time where you were nothing but wild. It’s been good to see that part of you again.”

“Wild doesn’t pay the bills.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, we’re paying our bills just fine. We’ve expanded so much in the last few years that it’s too much for one person to handle.”

“I can handle it.” My teeth were gritted so hard, my temple started throbbing.

“You don’t have to handle it. You have us. Hayes is eager to do the paperwork with the distilleries. You hate doing that shit. He’s good at it and he’s itching to work with Ronan.”

I turned away from him and got back into the truck, slamming my door.

Justin slapped the hood as he walked by and got in after me. “You know I’m right.”

I stomped on the gas and fishtailed once in the dirt before the tires gripped and we took off up the lane to Jack Brennan’s office.

Justin gripped the handle near the window with a shake of his head.

I was saved from more of that conversation by Jack waiting outside the door as we pulled up. I slid out and held my hand out to Jack. “Sorry about being late. My morning got away from me.”

“No problem, son. I know how it goes. Why I’m trying to automate as much as possible up here.”

I swallowed down the acid that was burning up my throat. Someone else trying to tell me how to do things. Just what I needed.

“Well, I’m happy to take that big ol’ Farmall off your hands.”

Jack slapped my arm. “I’ve got a Deere too. If you’re shopping for more than one.”

“Well, let’s take a look and see what’s what.”

Not looking at my books was coming back to haunt me. I could feel my brother's gaze on the back of my neck.

One more screw up today and I hadn't even had my damn coffee.

CHAPTER 27

HELENA

INTO THE DIRT

“Helena, get over here and eat something. You’ve been digging around in the garden for hours.”

“Just another minute.” I dragged another of the oak barrels to the conversation area I was making at the edge of the garden.

It would be a quieter area for some of the older people that would be coming to the party. I’d pored over the guest list with Bells earlier that morning. Most of the party would be around the same age group with a few at the top and bottom of the age ranges.

The grandmother and matriarch of the family was eighty-two and used a walker. I wanted to make sure she had an easy place to settle yet she’d still be able to get around to all the stations if she had a mind to.

The flagstone path was slightly overgrown due to the rain. With the staff being eaten up by the three weddings this week, I’d jumped in and gotten my hands dirty.

I glanced down at my ragged nails. My mother would be horrified. Me? I actually found I liked getting into the dirt. I’d even offered to replant a few of the stone urns that had gotten broken in the craziness with Willow.

I twisted the half barrel and picked a few deadheads off of the sweet-smelling purple flowers. They had dainty petals with little candlestick-looking things that needed to be pruned off. I snapped a few more off as a shadow fell over me.

“Ma’am.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not hungry.”

“Girl, you need water and a sandwich, pronto.” Bells put her hands on her hips. “We need to go up to the taproom, anyway. Kira found a few more

barrels for you.”

“Fine.” I sat back on my heels. “I suppose I could use one of Kain’s pork tacos.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Have you met Kain yet?”

“No. Cara’s been fielding all the taproom stuff so I could get this tablet thing down.” She waggled the purple one in her hand. “I think I finally managed to get all my logins working for ordering food. Sugar Rush is taking the brunt of the desserts, thankfully. I’ve made some calls and found two places who could do the food. We can check them out on the way back.”

I stood and wiped my hands on the apron I’d borrowed from the catering closet. “Sounds good to me. Just let me get cleaned up.”

Bells glanced down at my dirty knees. “You’re really getting in there.”

I shrugged. “I never really planted anything this big before. Mostly just the little container garden I have on my balcony at home.”

“Not much difference. Just a bigger pot.”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “I like it.”

“All right, let’s get you cleaned up.” Bells linked her arm with mine. “If I’d known you were willing to do all the dirty work, I would have left all the garden stuff to you.”

“Haven’t you though?” I teased back.

“Okay, truth. I really don’t like getting dirty. But I did pack a pair of shorts in my bag for when we get back. I’ll help you finish up the barrels.”

“Finally, she does some work.”

Bells bumped my hip with hers. “Shut up.”

We headed into the hallway that led to the atrium. I heard laughter and a familiar voice. I quickly dragged Bells toward the bathrooms.

“Where’s the fire?”

I leaned back to see Jessica Washington and her legion of bridesmaids having a brunch around the stately tree. They were doing a photoshoot for something. I had no idea what—the fact that she needed to do a week’s worth of events for her wedding was ludicrous in my opinion.

Bells ducked her head around the corner, crowding into me. “Who are we on the lookout for? Or from?”

“See that dark-haired woman wearing white?”

“Bride-to-be?”

“Yes. Our mothers know each other.”

“Oh. So?”

I was a thirty-three-year-old idiot who was afraid of my mom figuring out where and what I was doing.

But that sounded stupid to say. Not to mention pathetic.

“Ashamed to be seen at the orchard, Helena?”

I whirled around at Beckett’s voice. “Would you keep your voice down?”

He folded his arms. A racing stripe of something black and sticky crisscrossed his shirt and shoulder.

“I’m not ashamed. I just don’t want to answer questions.”

Bells glanced from me to Beckett and pressed her lips tightly together. I wasn’t sure if she was going to laugh or make a smart remark. I never knew with her.

“Or be seen as a commoner?” He glanced down at my dirty legs and hands.

“Common—what?” The hurt was sharp and blinding.

Bells’s eyebrows shot up and she backed through the swinging door of the ladies’ room.

How could he think that? But I still looked over my shoulder at the group of women, hoping they didn’t hear him. Not wanting to answer questions was a lot different than being ashamed of what I was doing.

He peered over my shoulder. “One of your city friends?”

“No. Not a friend of mine.”

He flipped his baseball hat around to the back, showing off his dirty face to full effect. He’d obviously been doing some sort of manual labor close by. “But someone you know. Don’t want to go and say hello?”

“What has gotten into you?”

“Just a question.”

“No, you’re being deliberately...” I trailed off.

“What? C’mon, say it.”

“An asshole,” I whispered furiously. Things had been a little strained when he’d dropped me off today but nothing that would warrant this.

“This is the real me, Helena. Half the time I’m dirty and sometimes even bleeding.”

“And I don’t care about that.”

“Unless someone is around that you might know?”

“Evidently, you have some sort of hangup or you’re spoiling for a fight. Not me.”

“I’m not the one hiding in the hallway.” He advanced on me, edging me into the mouth of the atrium. “What if I kissed you right here?”

“Right now, I don’t want you to kiss me. I don’t even want to be next to you when you’re being like this. I don’t know what happened between this morning and now, but maybe you should go soak your head.”

“And maybe you should head back to the city.”

I lifted my chin. “Is that what you want—for me to go? Are you sick of me, now that you got what you wanted?”

Was he really just like every other man I’d known? Was I just lust drunk ever thinking he was different?

“Maybe we’re just staving off the inevitable.”

I swallowed against a lump in my throat. I would not cry in front of him. I wouldn’t cry in front of any man again.

Or *about* a man for that matter.

This wasn’t the same man who’d loved me all night long. There was no way I could call it anything else. Sex was one thing, but the way he’d owned and cherished me was something more. Or at least I’d thought it was.

Maybe I really was naïve.

“Then I’ll keep out of your way until I’m done with this party. Because whether you like it or not, I don’t shirk my responsibilities.”

He flinched as if I’d slapped him, then he backed up a step and turned on his heel. A moment later, I heard the door to the garden bounce open and slam closed.

I closed my eyes and sagged against the wall. Then I heard voices again and I rushed into the bathroom.

“What the hell was that?” Bells was right inside the door and stumbled back as I came in.

“Listening?”

“Of course, I was listening!”

I laughed, well aware it sounded a little manic. I went to the sink to run the water over my wrists again. Dammit, I needed to just calm down for a second. I filled my hand with soap and lathered and scrubbed at the dirt under my nails, then I lowered my face to splash off the streak of dirt I had on my cheek as well.

Bells stood next to me with towels.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” She leaned a hip on the counter. “Care to share what that was all

about?”

“I don’t know.”

She tipped her head and her ponytail slid over her shoulder. “Sure about that?”

“I really don’t.” I dried my hands.

“Didn’t have anything to do with that bridal party?”

I tugged out my messy bun, redoing it so my hair was on top of my head and off my neck. “Our mothers are...friendly.”

My mother didn’t actually have real friendships. Just power plays.

“So what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is I’m a failure—again.”

Bells turned me to look at her, her hands gripping my upper arms. “Okay, first of all, no talk like that around me. You’re obviously not a failure.”

“From my mother’s point of view, I’ve just screwed up again. First Clay, then Reid. And now I’m hiding out at an orchard. So maybe Beckett was right.”

“I’m not sure who the first two dudes are, but you know, your life is about more than just getting the right guy, right?”

My eyes burned. “You’re right. I am worth more than just what a man can do for me.” I sniffed. “I’ve forgotten that over the years.”

“Getting a good fucking is all good and fun, but they aren’t allowed to treat you like shit. Period.”

The laugh burst out of me, surprising both of us.

“Was the fucking part too much?”

“Maybe. But you’re not wrong. Good sex isn’t everything.” My neck and cheeks flushed. “But it really was good.” Part of me hated thinking that it was the end of us. Not like *this*. “And I don’t know why he is being an asshole.”

“He’s probably scared. It’s usually when they get grouchy or pull a stupid stunt.”

“He really did. But again, here I am just whining over a man. You’d think I’d learn by now.”

“It’s the good fucking part. Messes us all up. Especially when the orgasms make us forget anything else matters. And then the guy talks and ruins the bliss.”

Beckett wasn’t like that. Or he hadn’t been until just now.

“You’re not wrong.”

“Now I’m officially jealous.” Bells laughed and pushed me out the door.

“C’mon. Let’s get some food and then maybe we’ll do some retail therapy.”

“I could go for some of that.” I tugged at my hair. “Maybe we could go somewhere to do something crazy with my hair.”

“Oh, now we’re talking. Makeovers are my very favorite thing.”

“Think we could stop at my room so I can change?”

“Even better idea.”

We snuck back down the hall and took the elevator to the third floor. Quickly, I changed into one of the sundresses we’d picked up at Vintage December. Feeling a bit more put together helped even me out the rest of the way.

The trip to the Brothers Three Taproom was quick, especially with Bells’ driving. We discussed the things we’d checked off our list for the party and things that still needed to be covered. Namely the main dish which was giving me some mild anxiety.

Finding someone to make that kind of food at the last minute was going to be tricky.

Annette was behind the bar when we walked in. The chairs and tables were stacked in the corner and a monstrous buffer was sitting in the middle of the floor. Annette was angrily flipping pages in what looked like a manual.

“What’s going on?” I hopped up on a chair at the bar.

“I think I broke it. And I’m trying to figure out how to fix it before Kira gets back from a keg run.”

Bells looked around. “Wow. This place is amazing.”

“It’ll be even more amazing when I can finish polishing the damn floors before we open this weekend.” Annette pulled out her phone. “When in doubt, check YouTube.”

“Always works for me.” Bells climbed on a stool beside me.

“Annette, Belinda Grayson. She’s the new entertainment coordinator at The Lodge.”

“Call me Bells.” She nudged me. “This one always using my full name.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s cool. I appreciate it. Maybe I should use Belinda more often for my professional stuff.”

“Or you can always go with She Devil. Fits you better.” Kain’s voice came from the doorway.

Bells’ chin hiked up. “What the hell are you doing here?” She slid off her stool and stalked over toward the kitchen.

“Nice to see you too, *kaimoni*.” He crossed his arms over his massive chest. “What is it about this orchard?”

“What the hell are you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be in some high rise in Hawaii?”

“Keep your damn voice down.” He towered over her, but she didn’t flinch.

I slipped off my stool at their lowered voices. How the heck did Kain know Bells? Not that I should be surprised, since that man knew people all over the place.

And Bells was just the type of woman to make him sit up and take notice.

“What are you going to do about it?” She stabbed him in the chest with her nail.

“I know one way to shut you up.”

My eyebrows shot up as I paused a few steps away from them. Maybe they did know one another well.

“You know how to run, that’s what you do. No exceedingly excellent kiss can make up for that.”

His scarred eyebrow hiked. “Exceedingly excellent, huh?”

“Oh, that’s what you take away from this? Ugh. This is why we never should have kissed that night.”

“The fact that you’re still thinking about it this many years later says something doesn’t it, *kaimoni*?”

“Stop calling me that. Don’t think I didn’t look that up.”

His smile was sly, and I felt the force of it even back here. *Jeez*.

His lashes lowered as he glanced at her lips before licking his own.

Yeah, I should just turn around now.

“Don’t go darting off, *Haleigha*.” He glanced over her head and zeroed in on me.

I twisted my fingers together. “Sorry. Umm, how do you know each other?”

Bells turned around and elbowed Kain in the stomach. “This idiot is best friends with Kenz’s husband.”

“Your best friend?”

“Yeah, Kendall Justice.”

“Wow.” I tucked my hands into the pockets of my dress as I glanced back at Kain. We knew each other pretty well, but not well enough that I knew all the family dynamics going on between them.

Kain leaned against the doorway to the kitchen, his chef's jacket open to show a black tank top. Bells stood in front of him and Kain couldn't stop scanning her body. His body language said he was relaxed, but I knew a few of his tells.

Like when he tried to look super relaxed, it usually meant he was ready to crawl out of his skin. Or he was about to drop a bombshell. I'd seen him do it in the boardroom of the Children's Hospital when they'd tried to take advantage of his generosity.

"Ronan and Shane are my *ohana*. And now Kendall and their babies are too. Bells just doesn't like to share. Last time I saw you, we were in a church." He lowered his face to brush along Bells' ear. "Standing in front of a priest. Somehow the ground didn't shake that day. At least to everyone else in the room. It did for me."

Bells stalked toward me and hooked her arm through mine, dragging me along.

Kain's booming laugh filled the empty taproom before he disappeared back into the kitchen.

"What the heck was that about?" I asked as I stumbled after her.

"Never mind."

"Oh, no, you have to tell me."

Annette's eyes were huge. "Hey, I want to know too," she yelled after us.

"We're leaving." Bells practically dragged me out the front door to the parking lot.

"Okay, slow down. You're like almost nine inches taller than me, remember?"

"Sorry." She let me go, but she didn't stop hustling toward her car.

I scrambled into the passenger seat since I wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't leave without me. "What the heck was that about?"

"That was a very large—*huge*—mistake I made years ago." She gunned her engine and squealed out of the parking lot.

"Bells!" I grasped the dashboard and fumbled with my seatbelt.

"I can't believe he's here. I left freaking Winchester Falls to start over and he's *here*? How?" She growled and the car caught air as she flew down the pitted gravel roads outside of the taproom.

"Um, we should have turned right."

"Ugh."

She braked hard and I grabbed the handle above the window. Since we

were momentarily stationary, I managed to get my seatbelt on. “Maybe we should calm down a minute before we drive.”

“I just need to go fast.”

“And we don’t need to get pulled over.”

“By whom? The apple police?”

I snickered. I couldn’t help it.

She stared at me and the anger that had filled the car dissolved into laughter.

“Apple police?” I managed on a wheeze.

Bells collapsed back against her seat. “Shit. I just can’t believe it’s him.”

“What the heck happened between you two?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem.” She sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it. Is that okay?”

I held up my hands. “I get not wanting to talk about your past more than anyone.”

“We just rub each other wrong whenever we’re in the room together.”

“Maybe you need to rub each other the right way instead?”

She rolled her eyes. “Definitely not. That ship has sailed and I’m not getting back on it.”

I didn’t quite believe her, but as I’d been ready to rip into Beckett less than an hour ago, I understood how men could make us crazy.

“How about I email Kira and ask her to have one of the guys drop the barrels off and we go into Crescent Cove and try that hairdresser, To Dye For?”

“Yes!” Bells put the car back into drive.

“We’ll stop at Ralph’s Restaurant on the way. I have a good feeling about Ralph. And his carbonara.”

I laughed. “I’m always down for some carbonara. I think our teacher will be too.”

“Done.”

I held on for dear life as Bells turned around and headed to the right instead. I really needed to find my own vehicle soon.

Not that I’d need it since I’d be leaving soon. But the fact that permanence was my first thought and not leaving made my chest ache.

Beckett was being the smarter one, but I was so damn tired of being smart.

And safe.

And temporary.

“What do you think about me going darker with my hair?”

Bells stomped on the brake again.

“Would you stop that?”

“Sorry!” Her dark eyes sparkled. “Yes! With that fair skin of yours and those golden eyes...caramel lowlights, maybe?”

“I’ve never colored my hair.”

“Then we’re definitely doing it.” She rolled down her window and the early summer warm breeze whooshed through the car. “Me too.”

“Your hair is gorgeous.”

“So is yours. But a little darker tone on it, maybe? Just a little shake up.”

“A shake up. That’s exactly what I need.”

“What we *both* need, babe.”

She turned on the radio and a newer Miley Cyrus song came on. She sang about being a wildcard. Maybe that’s what we both needed.

At least I did.

I was pretty sure Bells didn’t have any trouble in that department. But the time had come for me to channel some of that *take no prisoners* attitude myself.

CHAPTER 28

BECKETT

IN FRONT OF MY FACE

I needed a good long ride.

On Storm.

Not with her. And certainly not *on* her.

Though my body tightened at the mere thought of Helena under me, never mind the sharp pang of guilt that throbbed in the center of my back like a thorn I couldn't reach.

The look on her face when I'd accused her of slumming it had wrecked me. I'd been so out of line I still didn't know what the hell my problem was.

Or I didn't want to, more accurately.

Seeing her scramble back from being seen by that society bride who had been an absolute terror all day had been the last straw on an already shit day.

Between Justin's very correct assessment that I was fucking up because I had too many balls in the air, my chaotic feelings for Helena, and the changes I needed to make at the orchard, I was running on empty. Those concerns were warring with my need to keep everything locked down and under my control.

The orchard had been my sole focus for so long, I didn't know how to balance it with a relationship.

And there *was* no actual relationship. I'd just met this woman a few days ago. It made zero sense that she was shaking up my entire life already.

And she was leaving in a few short days.

Hell, I'd *pushed* her away.

I wrapped my hands around the axe and swung it against the collapsed tree that was barely more than a pile of kindling. I should be using the mulcher to tear it apart, but I needed to beat on something and the poor

diseased tree was bearing the brunt of it.

I'd found three more trees that were in just as dire straits as the three Justin had mentioned earlier. They were some of the oldest trees in the orchard. The one I was destroying had been among the ones I'd planted when I'd first starting learning the ropes from my dad.

When he'd taught me about caring for the seedlings and making sure they took root.

My dad had always been more farmer than businessman. Even in retirement, he worried more about his gardens and bees than he did about actually relaxing. He'd never been happier since I took over.

My arms swung as I took another wack at the rotted roots. The tree had already been in rough shape and had probably been missed in all the preparation we'd been doing for the pears.

I sat down on the stump and pulled out my phone to call Mike.

"What's up, Boss?"

"I need a team to go through the Paulas. I've got four trees with rot and I don't want it to spread. I think it's centralized to just this copse, but I think we should do a fungal treatment to make sure everything is safe."

"Want them out there today?"

I glanced out at the skyline. The sun was quickly sinking, telling me I'd been out there longer than I'd thought. "First thing tomorrow is good. I don't want someone missing something with the floodlights."

"Will do."

"Anything else come up lately that I've missed?"

Mike cleared his throat. "We've been stretched pretty thin with the off-season crew. Think we could bring in some of our regular guys early this season?"

"If you think we need it, I'll sign off on it."

Mike's sigh of relief made me feel even more like a dick. That he was hesitant to ask meant we definitely needed to have a conversation. Evidently, I was fucking up on every level lately—personal and otherwise.

"Why don't we have a meeting after this rot thing is cleared up? Harvest is coming fast, and I think we'll be changing up a few things this year."

"Yeah?" Mike's voice was hesitant. "I have a few ideas I wanted to talk to you about."

"Good. What I like to hear. With the addition of the rental properties this fall, I don't want things to fall through the cracks. Might mean you'll have

some additional duties. Have a problem with working with Justin more often?”

“Not at all. And I’m ready, Boss.”

“I know you are. I’ll leave the Paulas in your capable hands tomorrow.”

“I’m on it. I’ll make sure we have the supplies for the treatments.”

“Great. Thanks, Mike.”

“Have a good night, Beck.”

“You too.”

I shoved my phone into my pocket and started cleaning up. Even this late in the day, it was still hot. By the time I was done, I was drenched in sweat and covered in dirt.

I pressed a hand to the fallen tree. I wasn’t quite as sensitive to the trees like my father, but it saddened me that I’d let down this particular part of the orchard. All I could do was try to do better from here.

By the time I drove the tractor back to the barn and locked up, it was twilight. My whole body hurt, down to my bones. I still had to go back to The Lodge to get my truck and find my damn dog. He’d been spending more time with Justin lately than me.

Then again, I’d been a little focused on a certain blond.

I dug out my phone and texted my brother.

Do you have my dog?

A photo of a very happy Casey sprawled on Justin’s porch came through as a reply.

JUSTIN

Did you get your head out of your ass yet?

Watch it.

JUSTIN

Fair question.

I’m figuring it out.

JUSTIN

Figure it out faster. I like her. If you don’t ask her to stay, I might.

Don’t make me crack your head open. I was just talking to Mike about the changes I want to do with the orchard.

JUSTIN

Does that mean what I think it does?

It's as close to a 'you were right' as you're getting.

JUSTIN

<cheering gif>

asshole. Thanks for taking care of Casey.

JUSTIN

You got it.

I was tempted to pass out on the cot we kept stashed in the barn, but the thought of waking in these mud-caked clothes was enough to keep my ass moving.

Quickly, I found my way to the walking trails behind the barn. Even in the semi-dark, I knew every tree root and twist in the path.

The stars were drilling holes in the sky, reminding me just what I was working for. This place, the people, the dream that had started with my mother and my aunt Laverne. The families that had lived and loved here on this orchard.

More families that would thrive here, thanks to the changes we were making.

In the distance, The Lodge glowed brightly with the solar lights we'd put in around the property. String lights crisscrossed the patio above the hand-carved benches that sat alongside a handful of our famous Honeycrisp trees. They'd become a staple of our orchard and the craggy branches had always been beautiful to me. We'd planted Pink Ladies at The Lodge to cross-pollinate them and they had created a beautiful copse around the gardens.

As I got closer, I decided to cut along the back to see what Helena, Cara, and our new hire, Bells, had been up to. It was hard to believe the violence the night before Clay and Rachel's wedding had happened in the same spot.

My cousin, Willow, had dealt with an online stalker who'd decided a cyber obsession wasn't enough for him. He'd scared a few years off of us, but thankfully, he'd been taken into custody with minimal issues except for the blight he left on the gardens.

The memory of the cops and the ambulances had been enough to make

quite a few of our staff avoid the gardens.

I slowed to a stop as I got to the flagstone path. The busted pots had been replaced with barrels from the taproom and a few from barn storage. A mix of Happy Acres and Brothers Three logos were showcased with ornamental solar lights and freshly potted plants.

A few of the trees had been decked out in more of the solar string lights to cast a warm glow on the whole area.

Even a few of the seedlings from the greenhouse had been brought over to show the new and the old in such a thoughtful way. Adirondack chairs and benches were grouped in conversation pieces similar to the style of the taproom.

Warm.

Welcoming.

A mix of the new and the traditional charm of The Lodge.

I wandered closer, brushing my finger over a bright pansy petal among the cluster of flowers planted in a full-sized barrel. Beside it, there was a wrought iron table that would probably be a showcase of something fancy for the party. Right now, it was empty, but gleaming with a fresh coat of oil to bring back the luster of the metal.

A tarped cart of chairs stood under the overhang, with tables stacked in front. It was only midweek and too early to set up for the party. The fact that the gardens had been overhauled to this extent when anyone else would have just worried about the party left me speechless.

Helena had thought beyond the moment and instead left behind her own stamp on my orchard. The fact that she'd cared enough to help us was kind enough, but this showed a deeper love I hadn't counted on.

I should have.

She was sensitive to everyone around her. From helping out Rachel with the wedding to her history with Clay and their difficult families, she put people first and usually herself last.

And I'd accused her of slumming.

When she'd treated me and mine so thoughtfully.

I tipped my head back. God, I was such an ass.

Just because I couldn't deal with our differences like a goddamn adult.

I didn't want to face the changes coming at me like a summer storm. And just like that storm, she'd blown in and thrown everything into disarray. Showing some of my roots weren't as strong as I'd originally thought.

That they'd grow stronger with her.

Because of her.

If I just gave us a chance.

For the first time the idea of my own family—one beyond my parents, my brothers, and those who made up the orchard—wasn't far off for someday.

It was in front of my goddamn face.

"Wait until you see what Helena did." Cara's excited voice carried through the gardens.

"I didn't do that much. And I had a lot of help." Helena's softer voice came from a farther distance.

"She's been here working all day. Don't let her tell you otherwise," Cara said.

"I'm sure it's gorgeous." Laverne sounded tired and harried.

The Washington wedding party had been running everyone ragged. Justin had been dragged away from the orchard this afternoon to haul our hayride carts out of storage because the bride had pitched a fit.

It hadn't been part of her extensive package, but I knew Laverne didn't want to piss her off. She had many friends and her review of the orchard could make or break the wedding arm of Happy Acres and Brothers Three.

I'd been fielding complaints from half my staff. The other half were enamored by the beautiful wedding party. To me, it just showed how different moneyed people could be.

I backed up into the trees surrounding the garden and shifted out of sight as the three women came into view.

"Oh, my." Laverne's gasp echoed my own thoughts about the new and improved space. "How did you do all this in such a short time?"

I could only make out a bit of Helena from where I was, but I saw her twisting her fingers together as she typically did when she was nervous and trying not to be noticed. And she damn well should be noticed for all this work.

"Bells helped too. She took care of a lot of the phone calls and ordering so I could concentrate on getting the space ready. And I couldn't have done it without Diego and Pete from Beckett's crew. They were a huge help."

I'd just bet they had been. Both of them were extra helpful when a pretty woman was involved. She'd probably had them wrapped around her finger.

"I keep meaning to get back here, but we've been focusing on keeping our heads above water with all the weddings. And now you've given us

another space to use.”

I heard Helena’s surprised *oof* as Laverne hugged her.

“I’m so glad I could help.”

“*Help?* You saved my bacon,” Cara said with a tremble in her voice. “Now it’s even better than what I could do.”

“Oh, no. I’m sure you could have done this.” Helena stepped onto the path and went for the same barrel I’d just been in front of. I frowned as a waterfall of warm honey and caramel-colored hair tumbled down her back.

Quickly, I glanced at the other two women to make sure I hadn’t been mistaken.

But that was Helena’s back and most definitely her ass.

“What the hell did you do to your hair?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Helena turned around and her once gorgeously golden hair was now dark, giving her a regal edge that hit me in the chest like a punch. Especially when she lifted her chin and gave me a cool glare. “It’s none of your business what I did with my hair. You made that quite clear this afternoon.”

Laverne’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you doing back there, Beckett?”

“I was cutting over here from the barn to get my truck.”

“And sneaking around?”

“Not sneaking,” I muttered. “I was just admiring the new space. I can walk where I want on my own damn property.”

Helena gave me a withering look before turning back to Laverne. “We still have a lot of work to do, but I’m glad you like it.”

“You’ve exceeded expectations. You and Bells have been amazing together. I’d hire you in a minute.”

Helena’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, Laverne...I—”

Laverne touched her arm. “Just a thought.” She pulled her in gently and hugged her tight. “Regardless, I’m very thankful for what you’ve done for us.” She glanced at me. “For all of us.” She stepped back. “Okay, Cara. Let’s go back in. Poor Jenny hasn’t had a break all evening. You can help me with the receipts.”

“But we already...” Cara glanced from me to Helena and back. “Oh, right. Yes, receipts. We have a whole stack to go through.”

Helena gave me a wary glance before she turned toward Laverne. “I can help.”

“No. You’ve been at it all day. We’ve got it.”

“I could use a shower.” Helena smoothed her hand over her hair, lifting the ends to look down at them.

“You do that, sweetheart.” Laverne gave me a hard look then she bustled off with Cara nearly sprinting to keep up with her.

“Would a shower help with that hair?”

She whirled on me. “What’s wrong with my hair? I like it.”

“It’s not you.” My hands fisted at my sides. It was still her. Just not the her I’d fallen in love with, dammit.

Love.

In days.

It didn’t make sense, but there was no way it could be anything else. Why else would I ache just staring at her, knowing I’d hurt her earlier. Her mouth was still pinched and her shoulders hunched before suddenly, she shot them back.

Her perfect handful breasts pushed at the rust-colored dress she was wearing. The dresses that were forever driving me crazy. And the memories of slipping under them to find her warm and wet for me.

I wanted a lifetime of that.

A lifetime of her. Darker hair or not.

“Well, you don’t know me very well, do you? It could be me. A *new* me.”

“I don’t care.”

She stormed over to me on the edges of the garden. “You don’t care! Is that what you have to say after this afternoon?” She tipped her head back and the earthy scents of my orchard mixed with her shampoo and soothing lavender perfume made me more than a little dizzy. “I didn’t deserve any of that crap you laid on me today.”

She stabbed me in the chest. For once, we both had soil on our hands.

Even in her finery and with her new hair, she’d been playing in the dirt. *My* dirt. My land and my gardens. That she obviously loved it just as much as I did.

I backed up with each poke.

“I’m certainly not ashamed to be a part of this orchard and your family.”

Her eyes shone bright. “Even if it’s just a few days, they’ve been the best days of my life. And you can’t ruin it.”

“I can’t?”

“No. I don’t know what the hell got into you earlier. In fact, until you said that, I would have said you’re one of the best men I know. And now you’re

just like all the rest.”

I grabbed her finger and flattened her hand against my chest. “I’m not like the rest.” I spun her around and crowded her into one of the tall Honeycrisp trees. The light pink blossoms that had blown off in the last storm littered around us.

Her huge golden eyes were shiny in the dim light from a nearby tree.

“I’m an idiot.”

She opened her mouth, then she quietly shut it.

I lowered my head and the brim of my hat bumped against her. I whipped it off and tossed it aside. “I’m sorry. I was angry and you didn’t deserve it.” I gripped the trunk of the tree to cage her in. “I don’t have an excuse. Everything is slipping and sliding away from me.”

She gripped my arm. “Beckett—”

“Because I’m holding too tightly. Because ever since you got on my horse, I’ve seen where the cracks are.”

She searched my face. “I don’t want to cause you pain.”

“You woke me up. Big difference. And right before I saw you today, my little brother lit into me, letting me know how much I was fucking up.”

“How? This place is so successful. Everywhere I look, I can see what you’ve done to improve the orchard. And the people here obviously love working here. Believe me, I’ve seen firsthand how rare that is.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and simply breathed her in. “I appreciate that. But we’re expanding and I’m still treating this place like it’s a small operation. And I’m drowning. Then you walk in and I see that I’ve been nothing but work for so long.”

She frowned and grasped my shirt. The anchor I hadn’t realized I needed so much.

I lowered my mouth to hers. “It makes no sense,” I said against her mouth. “A handful of days and you changed everything.”

Slowly, I sipped from her. Long, drugging kisses that hopefully told her exactly what I couldn’t seem to convey with words.

She sighed into me for a moment and the kiss grew deeper. My blood hummed and everything else righted inside of me. My locked muscles eased and smoothed out as her small hand slid up to curl around my neck, but then she pushed me back.

“Beckett, I can’t just be this—not anymore. It was fun at first, but now it hurts too much. Wanting you isn’t enough.”

I lifted her up and hooked her legs around my waist as I pinned her to the tree so that we could see eye to eye. “You don’t understand.” My body instantly reacted to her, which didn’t help my case. “Okay, one part of me is always on track when it comes to you, but that’s not the only one.”

Her brow furrowed. “We know how to do this part.”

I fit my dick into the heat of her. Even with the clothes between us, there was no denying this part of us. But I gripped the tree with one hand and the other dug into her thigh. “If it was just sex, I wouldn’t be so damn twisted up.”

She huffed out an annoyed breath. “This isn’t exactly pleading your case, Beckett Manning. Especially when you’re hard.”

A laugh escaped as I held her tighter. “I can’t help it, girl. I get your scent in my head and I’m hard. I don’t think that’s ever going to change. Not today, tomorrow, or fifty years from now when we’re rocking on the porch together.”

Her breath caught. “Beckett.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Probably not well, and you probably don’t want me this close to you since I’m dirty as hell. But I’m not going anywhere. We’ll have to figure out what happens after Friday, because I’m not letting you go.”

Her nails dug into my shoulder. “What?”

“I can’t let you go. That’s why I’ve been a shithead all day. The thought of letting you go has been splitting me in two since the first night.”

Her big golden eyes filled. “Don’t say that. Don’t say it unless you mean it.”

“I love you, Helena. I mean it. Three days is nothing. You had me in three hours. If it takes you some time to catch up with me, I—”

She covered my mouth with hers. “This is crazy,” she said against my mouth. Her arms went around my neck. “We’re both crazy.”

“Love is crazy, right?” I laughed and put my lips to her neck, her lavender scent grounding me. The lights sparkled and swayed around us as a light breeze came up, reminding me we were outside.

Anyone could come by.

Not that my very happy cock cared. Especially since she was wiggling against me.

“Helena, if you want me to be able to think, you need to stop rocking against me.”

“No more thinking.” She gripped my shoulder. “More doing.”

“Honey, we’re outside.”

“Our first time was outside. Well, almost first time. Make it happen now, Beckett. Make love to me here in your orchard. Love me, right here.”

“Anyone could come by.”

“Then hurry up.” She shifted against me. “You started this. Did you really think it wouldn’t end up like this?”

“I wasn’t really thinking. I don’t seem to know how to do that around you. I just rush headlong and hope for the best.” She drove me crazy, but the thirty-ton boulder that had been sitting on my chest was gone.

Loving her so fast didn’t make sense yet it made all the sense in the world at the same time.

My instincts hadn’t steered me wrong so far. Helena was the piece I’d been missing all this time.

She hiked her knee up a little higher and rubbed against my zipper. “Do you want to go deeper into the trees?”

“No. I want you here. We should go upstairs to your room, but fuck.” I groaned. “You gotta stop moving like that.”

“Like what? Like I know exactly what you need?” She slid a hand between us and flicked my buckle open. “Bare.” She bit my ear. “Sliding inside me. Skin to skin. I don’t want to wait.”

“I’m dirty...”

“You smell like the orchard.”

“That’s being kind.” I laughed as she got to my zipper. “Jesus, Helena.” She nipped at my jaw as I had to juggle her higher against me to flip her skirt up. Then I paused as her new, darker hair got in my way.

“Just tell me one thing. Is the hair staying?”

“Beckett!”

“I’m sorry. I just gotta know.”

“And if it is?”

I gritted my teeth. “I’ll get used to it.”

She laughed. “It’s a rinse.”

“Oh, thank God.”

She fisted her hand around me. “Obviously, not all of you hates the hair.”

“I don’t hate it. I just love you the way you are.”

“Now that’s just...” Her gaze locked on mine. “Beckett, you undo me.”

“Think you’re the one that’s undoing me at the moment.” I groaned as

she stroked me. I tried to move her panties out of the way, but between the angle and not wanting to drop her, I was having a helluva time.

I searched out the seam high on her hip and ripped.

She dragged in a quick breath. “Another new one.”

I gave her a devilish grin. “Never had anyone rip the panties off you, Helena?”

“Lots of firsts tonight.” She looked down between us.

I angled her higher. “Look at me.”

She fit me against her as if we were made for this. I tried to stop, but she felt so perfect. Clasp heat, her scent, the slick perfection of her.

“Helena, look at me.”

Her gaze lifted as I slid inside of her. She held onto my shoulders as we slowly met again and again. The air between us warmed and all the night sounds faded until it was only us.

Her breath mixed with mine as I covered her mouth when a moan vibrated between us. Her chest vibrated against my chest and my heartbeat raged in my head as we went from slow and steady to rocking faster and harder.

I never broke contact.

She shuddered and accepted all of me. This sweaty farmer who didn't deserve her, but I'd never let her go.

A whisper grew between us. Her lips moving as she got closer and closer. Pulsing around me, her breath labored as the whisper grew stronger.

“I love you, Beckett.”

I smiled against her mouth and ground harder against her as her back arched and her thighs quivered. As she went over for me, my name was on her lips like a promise.

A promise I'd earn every damn day.

CHAPTER 29

HELENA

GO LEFT

I was pretty sure I floated up the stairs to my room in The Lodge.

Well, I hoped that I didn't really float because I was sans underwear after our little garden moment. And Beckett didn't stop trying to sneak his hand under my skirt the entire way up the stairs.

After a much needed a shower for both of us, we fell into bed.

A long, emotional day had made a left turn I hadn't expected.

I laid in the dark with Beckett behind me, his muscular arm firmly wrapped around me with his warm breath on my neck.

He loved me.

I could scarcely believe it.

I wrapped my fingers around his forearm, holding onto him just as tightly as he was holding me.

"Sleep, Helena," he murmured against my neck. "I have a feeling I'll be reminding you to turn off that active brain of yours for the rest of our lives."

My heart turned over in my chest at those words. Not just love, but forever.

Was it too much to hope for?

"I know one way to do that." He coasted his lips up my neck to my ear as his other hand slid over my hip and between my legs.

I turned my face to meet his mouth and let him love me once more.

I let him silence the *what ifs* for a little while until we were both too exhausted to do anything other than drift off. The comfort of his warm body and the syrupy pleasure finally pulled me under.

Dawn came too soon, but a welcome coffee tray made that a little easier to bear.

I wasn't sure if Beckett ordered it up or if Laverne had with the sneaky smile I'd caught on her face on our way up the stairs last night.

I sat at the breakfast table by the window as Beckett took a shower.

My much-ignored phone stared at me as I slathered my English muffin with jelly. Hiding at the orchard would only last so long. I had responsibilities in the city that I needed to see to, whether I wanted to or not.

I saw another message from my mother and skimmed the transcript version from my iPhone. More threats for me to come back and fall back into line. To deal with my parents' annual Memorial Day party because no one could do it quite like I did.

More like my mother didn't want to organize the catering and invitations.

I tapped my phone with a tattered nail.

"Got some coffee for me?"

I glanced up at Beckett as he came in, shirtless with his jeans unbuttoned. My heart skipped a beat and the rest of me just hummed. He leaned down and kissed me, tasting of mint. "I suppose I'll allow you to have some of the carafe."

"Gee, thanks."

I poured him a mug and ripped open a packet of raw sugar, dumping it into the dark brew before pushing it his way.

"Already know my coffee order? Not many know I like sugar."

"I've seen you pick through a dish of sugar packets, and you seem to only like the raw kind."

"Has a molasses kick that regular sugar doesn't have, but most don't notice."

I shrugged. "You remembered I like red wine. When it's important, you notice."

He sat across from me. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." I topped off my coffee and stirred in more cream.

"Well, you tapped your phone and now you've got this little worry thing going on." He reached over to smooth out the line between my eyes. "So what's up?"

"I need to deal with my mother."

"You still haven't talked to her?"

I shook my head. "She's already disappointed about the wedding, though she's freezing me out about that one. Now she just wants her secretary back."

His eyebrows shot up as he took a long swallow from his mug. "You're

her daughter.”

“I’m her social liaison.”

He stood and dragged me out of my chair, wrapping his arms around me. “You’re her daughter, first.”

I laid my head on his chest with a sigh. He was still damp and warm from the shower. “You don’t talk much about your mother either, you know.”

“My mother is...complicated. She’s more comfortable with her orchids than with people these days, but she’s still my mom. You make it sound like yours is your boss.”

“You’re not far off.”

He settled his chin on top of my head. “Maybe it’s time to quit?”

I tipped my head back. “Maybe it is.”

He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Party planning today?”

I nodded. “My to-do list has to-do lists.”

“Speaking of the garden, I didn’t get to tell you last night how amazing it looked.” He gave me a wry smile. “I was a little distracted by this.” He picked up the tail of my braid.

“Not back to the hair again.” I slapped at his hand until he dropped it. “I happen to love it. I’ve never dyed my hair before.”

“Even in college?”

“Especially not in college. Pink hair was frowned upon at Vassar.”

He laced his fingers at my lower back. “Pink?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I thought about doing pink. My hair is so blond I wouldn’t have had to bleach it like my friends.”

“But you didn’t do pink now?”

I pushed at him. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Only a little. Pink,” he said on a laugh. “My punk princess.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Jerk.”

“The hairdresser did a good job. I’m assuming it was a hairdresser?”

I nodded. “A place in Crescent Cove. The girls went crazy in there. ‘Virgin hair’ they kept saying as they mixed half a dozen colors. Originally, I just thought I’d get a few fun strips of honey, but then they got me so excited.”

And I’d felt beautiful and part of something. Ever since I’d stepped foot on the orchard, I’d felt the change. Rachel had included me, yes, as much as she could with our weird dynamic. But working with Cara and Bells had unlocked something I hadn’t known I needed.

Beckett showing me how much he loved his land and his life, the orchard and the taproom—and the pride he took in all of it? I wanted that for myself.

“Should I expect more surprises with Bells as the instigator?”

I laughed. “Maybe.”

“Anyway, I was trying to tell you how amazing the garden is. I think that was the exact moment that firmly made me fall in love with you.” He cupped my face. “You loving the orchard is like loving me.”

My eyes stung. “Oh, Beckett. I really do love you.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “All the things I’ve learned over the years led me right here. To you.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have trade one kind of secretarial job for another. It seems ridiculous to even mention it when you live in Manhattan.”

“But it’s not a job here. I feel like I’m part of something. In the city, I’m just a snow globe waiting to be put on a different shelf.”

He frowned down at me. “You’re so much more than that. You have to know that.”

I placed my hand over his on my cheek. “I’m starting to believe that.”

“I’ll just keep telling you until you believe me.” He kissed me gently until as usual between us, the gentle flared to heat and steam.

Until his phone went off in his pocket.

He groaned against my mouth and let me go. “Freaking Justin.” He pulled out the phone and checked the screen then replied with a quick text.

“Gotta go?”

“We had some trouble in one of the Paula Red zones and it looks like it might be a bigger deal than we thought.”

“Go. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yes. Tonight. My place instead. That bed was not big enough for both of us.”

“It was plenty big for me.”

“Because you’re a bitty thing.” He slid down his hand to cup my ass, dragging me close for one more kiss. “I have a sudden hankering for caramel. I wonder why?”

I pushed him away as he laughed and disappeared back into the bedroom for the rest of his clothes and boots. When he came back out, he had his ever-present Yankees cap on.

I sort of missed the cowboy hat.

I followed him to the door. “Think we could take Storm out later?”

“Now that sounds like a very good idea.” He lowered to give me a lingering kiss. “It’s a date.”

My stomach flipped. “A date.”

Doing things backward seemed to be our thing.

I checked in with Bells and got dressed. Friday was coming quickly and we still had plenty of things that needed to be done. Since we didn’t have any off-site errands to run, I went with a pair of denim shorts and one of the cropped cotton shirts in a soft jade that made my new hair look decidedly fall-inspired though it was late spring.

I met her in the lobby where we checked out our tablets. Bells would be splitting her time with another smaller event going on that day. Finalizing the garden potting to fill in a few holes for conversation was on my agenda. I found that getting my hands in the soil soothed me more than I’d expected.

A few hours passed as I dragged the barrels cut lengthwise around to the areas I wanted to make pretty. One beside a table that would hold the chocolate fountain, another that would be the bartending station.

Lennon was sending over two of her best flair bartenders for a little entertainment and I wanted them to be showcased.

I even found a large mason jar in the storage room that would be perfect for a tip jar.

Tapping my chin, I wondered if I could get some of the etching liquid I saw at a craft shop to make another jug. I dug out my phone to open up my Pinterest app. I’d seen something for a wedding, but it could also be perfect for a 40th birthday celebration.

Especially one with a Bridgerton bent. Lady Whistledown loved her gossip. I sat down cross-legged on the patio and made a few notes. I’d need some paper and maybe a few fancy pens. People could write up their favorite memories with the birthday girl.

I made a list for the craft shop and ran into Cara while I slipped into the back through the secret hallway since I definitely wasn’t fit to be seen in the lobby.

Dirt streaked my arms and legs from kneeling in the grass.

“There you are.”

I smiled. “How’s it going? Did the caterer call back about adding the fancier plates to our order?”

“No. At least not that I’ve seen. I’ve been running around with project

Wah.”

I pressed my lips against the nickname Jessica Washington had been given through the week. “What does she want now?”

“The garden.”

I ducked down to grab a water out of the mini fridge behind the desk and almost fell over. “Excuse me?”

“She was walking around with her MOH and saw what you were doing.”

“Saw me?” My voice was nearly a squeak.

“Yeah, she said it was so beautiful, she wanted to do their brunch there today.”

“But it’s not set up. I mean, I have a few tables, but...”

Laverne rushed behind the desk. “Oh, there you are. Thank goodness.”

“Jessica wants to use the garden?”

“Do you think it would be okay to use it for a dry run today? We can see where the changes would be needed for Friday.”

“I...”

“She can’t stop talking about it.” Laverne sagged into the chair. “I wouldn’t ask, but the woman has been a pure terror. She has a catering team who will do all the work, I just need to put her somewhere.”

“I mean, it’s mostly ready.”

“I’m definitely overcharging her for the cleaning after. This woman wants to make my life hell, so I’m charging her for every-damn-thing.”

Cara hid a smile behind her hand.

“Honestly, you should up your fee anyway. That’s why she’s taking advantage.” I hated saying that, but The Lodge should be charging nearly double what they did for weddings.

Laverne winced. “Oh, honey. We couldn’t do that. Making things affordable is how we have grown so much.”

“And with growth comes cost.” I grabbed my water when I saw Jessica and Trina coming into the lobby. “Think about it.”

Laverne sighed. “I will.”

“Do you think I could borrow a car? I need a few things for my event.”

Cara dug into a drawer under the keyboard at the desk. “Here, take mine.”

“Thanks.” I took my purse and tablet, then I checked out the credit card that was used for expenses. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Do you need anything?”

“Duct tape and a rope?”

I laughed. “Jess is a sucker for cheap Mexican food. It’s a weakness. So if you send her up tacos after the brunch, she’ll probably sleep away half the afternoon. God knows she won’t actually eat in front of people.”

“You goddess.” Laverne rushed forward and kissed me. “I’ll do that. Now if we could only do the same for her mother.”

“Daphne likes champagne cocktails. Keep filling her glass with Bellinis and you’ll find her much easier to deal with.”

“How do you know all this?” Laverne scribbled something on a tiny notepad she kept in her pocket.

“Years of parties. Her mother and mine are friends,” I said absently. I kept my eye on Jessica and her best friend.

“Oh. I didn’t even think of that. I just assumed you were good at the covert listening. That’s how I figure out things.” Laverne noticed how distracted I was. “Sweetie, is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course.” I gave her a tight smile.

The lobby started filling with older women in sundresses that probably cost as much as my entire new wardrobe from Vintage December. My new hair might have inadvertently disguised me earlier, but I couldn’t avoid that many people without being recognized.

“I’ll be back soon. If I see duct tape at the craft store, I’ll grab some,” I said lightly.

I escaped out the employee entrance near the Dumpsters and cut back off the path to the employee parking tucked out of the way. When I drove down the familiar roads that took me out of the orchard, I finally relaxed.

The knee-jerk reaction to hide made me feel awful, but I wasn’t ready to answer questions about Rachel’s wedding and to have everyone look at me with pity.

Helena Danbury, the runaway bridesmaid.

I’d seen some of the comments on the video that had been posted. Most had been of the romanticized tone. The cowboy who whisked me away on his horse—the ultimate fantasy.

But then the others. The passive aggressive comments from people who knew me. Knew my family. Poor Helena, the one no one wanted.

My fingers tightened on the steering wheel of Cara’s old Toyota. I almost wanted to thank Reid, because I’d found so much more when I’d run to Beckett and Storm at the wedding. I thought I’d just been running away from my problems, but now I knew I’d been running to my future.

But that meant I also had to face my past.

I pulled into the lot of the nearby big box craft store and parked. I pulled out my phone and finally called back my mother. The line went right to voicemail. She was probably still pissed at me.

“Hello Mother, please give me a call when you get this. We have a few things to talk about.”

There.

Not much I could do besides face the fire, but for now I’d deal with my current responsibilities.

I found what I needed and a few more things that I definitely did not. But the papers and Regency era-looking frames would be a nice addition to the tables. I grabbed a few paint pens for good measure.

Maybe Cara’s junk journaling talents would come in handy. Some wine and maybe we could personalize the tables a little.

Happy with my purchases, I drove back to the orchard and even treated myself to an extra large coffee along the way. I noticed Beckett’s truck along the side of the building. Maybe I’d be able to steal him away for a few minutes.

I wove my way along the paths. The hum of conversation and laughter had me quickening my pace to get inside The Lodge.

“Helena?”

My shoulders went up. I gripped the bags more firmly.

“Helena Danbury?”

Shit.

I turned. “Hi, Jessica.”

Her gaze dropped to my shorts and T-shirt then up to my hair, which was in a braid that felt lopsided and frayed at this point. My fine hair never stayed neat without a ton of product.

Jessica looked much like her former model mother. Gleaming dark hair smoothed straight save for a few curled strands. She wore a white maxi dress that showed off her tall, trim form and held a champagne glass with a perfect strawberry floating inside.

“I heard about your...unfortunate situation at the Winslow wedding, but dear God. You’re still here?”

I lifted my chin. “Yes.”

“Have you been playing in the dirt?” She peered at my bags and quickly moved back. “Did you pick up a hobby after Reid dumped you?”

“Jessica, dear. You are ignoring your... Oh.” Daphne Washington came around the bend in the path. She wore a tailored pant suit in a soft yellow that suited her coloring and stature as queen—err, mother of the bride. “Helena? What’s going on here?”

Before I could open my mouth, my heart sunk. “Hello, Mother.”

Diana Danbury stood just behind Daphne in a slim, moss green spring dress with a glass of wine in her hand. She was fair like me, but she kept her icy blond hair short in a severe wedge cut that showed off her long neck. However, there was nothing fragile about her. Even if she barely weighed one hundred pounds.

“I had a feeling I’d find you hiding here, but...like this? And what are you wearing?” She didn’t bother to hide the sneer.

I heard footfalls behind me. “Helena, there you are! Bells has been looking all over for you. The caterer needs a final...” Cara trailed off. “I’m sorry! I didn’t realize you were talking with someone.”

Suddenly, my mother’s face contorted to reflect outrage. “Are you working here? Working in the dirt?”

My hands shook with the tight grip I had on my bags.

The murmur of conversation quieted as my mother’s voice rose. She pushed her wine glass at Cara, who took it with a startled glance at me. “Helena?”

“It’s fine, Cara. I’ll be inside in a minute. Let Bells know I’ll handle it.”

“You most certainly will not. You’ll go upstairs and change into something suitable right now.” My mother’s voice was whip sharp. “I’m sorry, Daphne.” Her face flushed as she stole a look at Jessica. She was smiling behind her glass as she took a leisurely sip as if she was watching an entertaining movie.

“I hope you enjoy Jessica’s luncheon.” My voice was stiff. “But I have work to do. We’ll chat later.”

“*Work?* You can’t work here.”

I swallowed as people started moving forward to see what the commotion was. “I most certainly can and will be.” I straightened my shoulders and looked directly at my mother, ignoring the rest of the whispers. “I’ll be moving here within the month actually.”

“No Danbury is going to work at a dumpy orchard.”

I set my bags lightly on the flagstone and stepped toward her. “First of all, no part of this orchard is dumpy as the Washingtons can attest since their

daughter's wedding will be here."

My mother's face shifted into a shocked expression as she glanced at Daphne, who'd stiffened at the insult as well. "What I mean is that it's not suitable for someone of our family name to work at."

"Oh, and why is that? Beyond the fact that this place is stunning and becoming the favored destination wedding for many people from Manhattan? Or that I love working here. That I love the people here who have made me feel more like family than my own ever has? Or is it that I actually want to do something I love and have a sense of accomplishment at the end of my day?"

"Accomplishment comes with dirt on your knees like some day laborer?" My mother's voice was shrill. I could see her looking around, embarrassment tinging her cheeks like red flags.

"It often does, Mrs. Danbury. A little dirt under your nails is a small price to pay for the pride of having a business we love."

Beckett's deep voice came from behind me.

I held my hand out behind me and he laced his calloused, perfect fingers in mine. He came up to stand with me.

"Now it all makes sense." My mother's face smoothed into serene lines and she straightened her dress. "I can't say I wasn't disappointed that things didn't work out with Reid."

"Didn't work out? It wasn't reality. I know he seems like the perfect man in your eyes, but he was never the right person for me."

Her gaze flicked to Beckett. "So you're just going to hop to the next man then? I suppose it's not surprising you moved on to a more earthy sort. We all have at least one, don't we, ladies?"

No one laughed around us.

As Beckett stiffened next to me, it wasn't accurate to say I saw red. More like virulent purple.

I stepped toward my mother. "You will *not* talk about him like that. Not now, not ever."

"You just met him." My mother sipped her wine. "Don't be ridiculous. But don't think that you can just come home when this...*dalliance* blows over."

"She won't be coming home, Mrs. Danbury. Not that I would want her to go home to you at this point. She's ours now. She belongs on the orchard with me. You know, I always thought I wasn't good enough for her, but I see that honor actually belongs to you."

Daphne and Jessica couldn't hide their shock. The crowd of women behind them got very quiet.

Part of me wanted to slide right through the stones on the path and into the ground. But then I stepped back to look up at Beckett in awe as I squeezed his hand.

He kissed my knuckles, his summer sky-blue eyes direct and unwavering on mine. "She's everything to me."

My mother's hand shook as anger and indignation poured out of her. "You don't even know her." Her blazing gaze landed on me. "Can't you see he's using you? He probably just wants your family money." She pointed at him with her glass. "She comes with nothing. I'll be sure of that."

I closed my eyes against the sharp pain of her words. The fact that my mother never understood anything other than the transactional value of me and what I could do for her and my father socially was even more apparent right now.

Beckett wrapped his arm around me and faced my mother. He smelled of sunshine and leather and citrus. All the things that made me feel safe and whole. "The fact that you thought of money as the first thing I'd want from her shows just how cold and empty you are. I'm not sure how you ended up with such a warm and caring daughter, but I'll thank God and the universe for her every day of my life."

I gripped his shirt and turned into him.

"I love her. *We* love her here and she'll never wonder if she belongs ever again. And I'll be sure to remind her how much we appreciate her every day. You know what? She became mine the first moment I saved her from people like you at that wedding. And the wild thing is she's the one that ended up saving *me*."

"Beckett." My voice was little more than a whisper.

He gazed down at me. "It's true. I'm going to make you believe it every damn day." He gathered me close into his chest then stared down at my mother. "And *you* can get off my land."

I could feel him swallow as he started to lead me away. "Excuse us, ladies. I'm sorry to have disturbed your luncheon."

"That's quite all right." Daphne's voice was warmer this time. "I'm happy for you, Helena. You deserve a man who will cherish you. Come now, Jessica."

She walked away with her daughter, leaving my mother to stand there

alone.

Not a single person from the party came to check on her.

I was sorry for it. Sorry that my mother couldn't see exactly what she was missing. That she'd never realize what she was missing—not truly.

When she stalked toward the exit of the garden path, all I felt was relief. I was sure the sensation of loss would come someday soon. For now, all I saw was Beckett.

And our future.

He drew me toward the sunshine and the trees at the edge of the garden, never letting my hand go as we got away from the party and the people.

We finally stopped in the clearing and I tipped my head up to let the warmth of the sun wash over me. Let it burn away some of the sadness because there was no room for it. Not when a man like Beckett chose *me*.

I was his first choice in every way.

“Are you okay?” He moved in front of me, holding both of my hands.

“I am now.” Opening my eyes, I released one of his hands and pushed off his hat to see his curls in the sunshine. I slipped my fingers through his hair and around his ear to lightly draw my fingers along his jaw.

This would be the face I saw every day and every night.

I went on my toes and wrapped my arms around his strong shoulders. Shoulders that I knew would always be there for me to cry on, rest on, and rely on.

“I meant every word you know.” His voice was rough with emotion.

“I know it.”

“My whole world changed the morning after I met you. Standing on my deck with you in my bed...” He swallowed hard. “I was so twisted up because I'd never known peace until you were in my arms. I want that every day, Helena.”

“Me too.”

“Good, because you're coming with me to my house tonight. I want you to make it a home with me.”

My eyes stung. “I want that too.”

He searched my gaze. “A family with me.”

This time, my eyes flowed over with tears. Happy ones. “I want that too.”

He swung me around in the sunshine with the apple blossoms of his orchard all around us. And the laughter replaced the tears as he settled me on my feet and kissed me.

My forever man in my forever place.
I couldn't wait to see what happened next for us.

EPILOGUE

BECKETT & HELENA

July

I tugged at the cuffs of my shirt. Nerves sizzled up my spine.

The room was almost as familiar as my own house. I'd help build it from the ground up. From the old barn, to its new incarnation of dark stain and wrought iron, the Brothers Three Taproom was the start of a new legacy with my brothers.

Tonight it was swathed in pure gold with extra lights strung from the rafters and stars dripping from the fans and wrought iron scrollwork that held our decorative oak barrels high above the main part of the taproom.

Even the stairs leading to the back patio were decorated with twinkle lights and chunkier stars that glowed with promise.

Everything sparkled. Including the guests seated outside.

A new pergola had been built overlooking the orchard. I had the bruises and sore muscles to attest to how damn sturdy it was. Me, Kain, and Ronan had built it for today and for the promise of more parties and events in the future.

But today it was for her.

“Ready to do this?”

I turned and my throat thickened. “Damn, Key.”

“I know.”

Her dark curls were pinned back at the crown with a golden hair clip that

her mother-in-law-to-be had made for her. Tiny blue chips were interspersed with the gold chains she wore around her neck. With a slight nod to tradition, she'd added a light, star-studded veil that trailed behind her and she carried a golden and sterling blue roses bouquet.

"I feel like a princess."

"And you look like one too."

She shoved me over a step. "Shut up."

Same Kira, even under the glam. I laughed as she shook out her fluffy white dress decked out in an echo of the stars all over her place.

Because it was her place as much as it was mine now.

It was only right that she'd marry Ronan here. Since it was exactly where they started. Where they'd fallen in love at the speed of a freight train, same as me.

"You're beautiful and glowing."

Kira pressed a hand to the slight swell of her middle. "Probably because of this guy."

"He?"

"Don't get excited, we still don't know. And I'm not sure I want to know. Viking doesn't exactly feel the same."

"I've got twenty on it being a girl."

She groaned. "Already betting on it?"

"We haven't picked the date yet, just the sex. That will be a whole different pool."

She shook her head. "Let me know which has the best odds."

I laughed and leaned down to kiss her cheek, then I turned and crooked my arm out for hers. "You know, I wouldn't give you away to just anyone."

"He's a good man, Beckett."

"And that's the only reason why I'm in this monkey suit."

"Until you're doing the same with Helena, pal."

My chest tightened as I instinctively patted the pocket of my jacket. Hopefully, I'd be doing the same very soon. And for Helena, I'd wear a three-piece suit whenever she asked me to.

Okay, within reason.

"You'll stand up with me, right?"

Kira's eyes shone. "Don't you get me crying before I even get out there, you jerk."

I laughed. "But you will? I mean, my brothers have to share the best man

duties, but I want you up there too.”

“Of course I will.”

“Good.” I patted her arm. “Now let’s get you married.”

“I’m so ready to marry that crazy man of mine.”

We walked through the taproom and waited just out of sight to let Lennon and Annette precede us down the stairs. The sun was low over the orchard, leaving a molten glow in the distance. Our friends and family were seated on either side of the aisle of gold flameless candles leading to Ronan, Kain, and Shane Justice under the pergola.

Ronan’s pack of brothers and sisters were fine with the arrangement since Kira wanted to keep the wedding small. She’d have to get used to the big boisterous family being her norm now. I was glad that she wasn’t going to be alone anymore.

She’d always had me, but she’d blossomed since she fell in love with Ronan.

The song changed. Not at all traditional, but it suited the both of them in every way. The raspy voice of Dermot Kennedy singing, “One Life” filled the patio.

When we got to the stairs, Kira laughed out a little sob.

Ronan was bent at the waist, his hands over his mouth. Tears streamed down his face. Kain came forward to clap him on the shoulder to make sure he was okay. Ronan straightened up and dashed away his tears with a nod.

“God, I love that man.” Kira’s voice was thick with tears but she was hanging on. Her smile was as blinding as the late day sun streaming through the trees.

Once I got Kira down the stairs safely, I found Helena on the bride’s side. She was back to blond, mostly because she’d been tired of doing the touchups. Especially since I gave her shit about it each time. I liked waking up to that swath of sunshine across my pillows every morning and she knew it. So much so that she’d worn a sunny yellow dress to the wedding. Her eyes were wet and one of my red rags I’d pressed in her hand before I left her was crumpled in her lap.

I gave my best friend away to the only man who was worthy of her, then went to sit with the love of my life to listen to them make their promises.

Helena sat with Bells on one side and me the other. The two women held hands as Helena sniffled and leaned against my chest.

I had a feeling I’d be just as gone as Ronan when I stood up there waiting

on Helena.

And I couldn't wait.

When the officiant announced they were married, we all stood and cheered.

Now I just had to wait for the right time to whisk Helena away and ask her to be mine.

HELENA

I'd never danced so much in my life. I swore I'd been passed from one giant to another. Ronan's entire family, as well as his best friends, were all ridiculously super-sized.

Every time I tried to find Beckett, I was dragged back to the dance floor.

Food and hard cider had been imbibed and everyone was in an exceptional mood.

Laverne and Kain had taken over the music, and I had a feeling we'd all have sore feet by the end of the night.

"Have another dance with me, darlin'."

I waved off Niall, Ronan's brother who had a touch of Ireland to his voice thanks to living there for the last half dozen years. "I need a break."

He held a hand to his chest. "You wound me."

"Not likely." I pushed him toward Bells and Cara. "I know they wouldn't mind a dance."

"Fine, fine." His smile was dangerous and I worried after Cara a little. She'd had stars in her eyes since meeting all of Ronan's brothers at the rehearsal dinner.

I escaped down the stairs and outside for a little air. The days were long and the air was humid. Summer was going by so fast. I'd settled into working with Laverne and her team and I couldn't have been happier.

With the additions of the rental properties and wedding season, we'd been busier than ever. Beckett was getting ready for harvest, and the orchard was buzzing with people. Seasonal employees were starting up again as well as

the workers helping out with adding on to The Lodge.

I was tired by the end of every day, but in the very best way possible.

I wandered over to the pergola and looked down at the orchard. A familiar whinny came from the edge of the patio. I turned my head and my breath caught.

Beckett was on Storm with his black cowboy hat. He'd stripped down to a vest with his dress shirt rolled up at the forearms.

I didn't even think about it. Or hesitate.

I ran to him and the smile he gave me stole the last of my breath. He reached down and pulled me up to sit in front of him on the saddle he'd had made for us. At first, Beckett wanted to get me a horse so we could ride together, but I preferred to ride on Storm. And having Beckett's arms around me was never a bad thing.

"Ride with me?"

Always and forever. Whenever he asked.

"Should we really leave the wedding?"

"Just for a little while." He tipped his head down and brushed his lips over mine. "I need some alone time with you."

My cheeks flamed. "Like I could say no."

He slid his arm around me to pick up the reins. I caught Laverne standing on the stairs and she waved at us before melting back into the party.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

I was learning to enjoy the ride when it came to Beckett's surprises. Storm picked his way down the path from the taproom and we galloped our way across the field as the sun dipped lower in the sky.

The breeze felt nice after the heavy heat of the afternoon. Beckett's familiar scent and the speed of Storm's powerful stride inched up the exhilaration of the day. I was laughing by the time we made it to the maze of trails on the outskirts of the orchard.

I was beginning to learn where the heck I was on the vast property, but I knew this path best.

Where he took me that first day and so many days after.

When Storm climbed up the last path leading to the spring, my mouth dried up.

The old oak tree was strung with lights and a cove had been built out from the spring, creating an intimate space.

“Oh, Beckett.”

“It’s our place, I wanted to make it a little more special.”

“It’s beautiful.”

He swung a leg off Storm and dropped to the ground then reached up for me.

I curled my arms around his shoulders and let him slide me down his body. “Is this why you made sure my dress had plenty of room?”

“I’m always ready to get under your skirt, girl.” He held me tightly, my feet dangling as he kissed me sweetly. “But yes, that’s why.”

“You did this for me?”

He nodded and set me down. “For us, but yes.” He dropped the reins by the edge of the clearing for Storm to eat his fill, then slipped his hand in mine and led me up the wide stones to the oak tree.

There was a fire pit and an area to eat, but he drew me toward the tree.

“Beckett, what’s...”

He pulled me in front of him and went down on one knee.

“Oh, God.” My hands went to my mouth.

“It only seemed right to do this where we started. Where we *really* started. When I brought you here, I thought it would just be a little something to impress a pretty girl.”

I laughed and couldn’t stop the tears from filling my eyes.

“And while it might have started out that way, the moment I touched you here I knew we were different. That I wasn’t ever going to be the same. I didn’t know quite how much, but I felt the shift even then.” He slipped his hand into his pocket and came out with a black box.

Nerves jangled in my chest and came out with only his name.

He flipped it open and a round diamond in a simple bezeled setting winked up at me. The sides were slightly flared with delicate scrollwork that flowed into a thin band. “I love you. I knew it right away, but it’s only gotten stronger with every day. Marry me?”

My hand shook as I held it out. “Yes. A thousand times yes.”

He slid the ring over my left ring finger. It fit. Of course it did. Every part of me had been built to fit him. Somewhere down deep, I’d known it since the very first day.

He scooped me up and kissed me under the old oak tree.

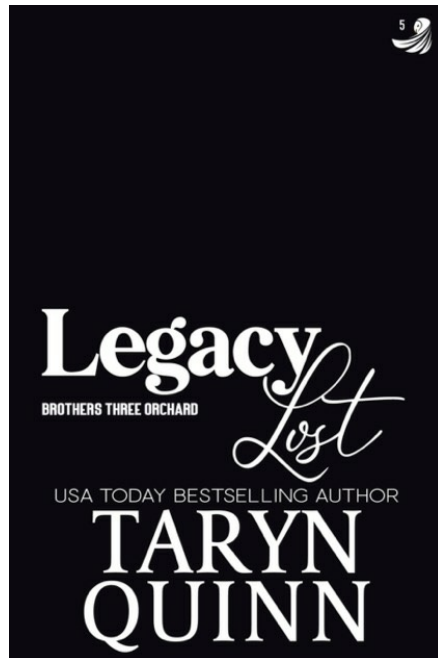
“I just have one question,” I said breathlessly as we finally pulled apart.

His brows furrowed. “Anything.”

“Can we get married here too? It doesn’t have to *here* here, but on the property—“

He kissed the rest of the words out of my mouth.

I guessed that was a yes.



Next up is Kain & Bells's story!

New Year's Eve.

It's supposed to be a night of new beginnings. But for us it closed a chapter. One I never thought I'd have the chance to reopen. It's time to get back to living again, and I'm going to start with her.

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HAVE MY BABY

CRESCENT COVE BOOK #1

SETH

Almost five years ago

The guy in the suit in the mirror wasn't me. He couldn't be. I wasn't ready to pack it all in yet.

I'd only graduated college a couple of years ago. Marriage? A baby on the way? Fuck, middle-aged guys did that stuff. Me? I was still young and fancy free.

But I wasn't. Not anymore. Not since the morning Marjorie Maplewood had walked into my office at Hamilton Realty, waving around a white stick that didn't belong to a popsicle.

This kid is yours, Hamilton. Don't try to pretend it isn't. What are you going to do about it?

It had never occurred to me that the child wasn't mine, but I'd probably stared at her for two full minutes before finding my voice. Marj hadn't appreciated that, and she'd burst into such loud sobs that my loyal assistant, Shelly, ran in from the reception area with a handkerchief, a mint, and plenty of judgment.

An hour later, we'd been engaged and planning a wedding. Okay, maybe two hours.

Now I was facing my reflection in a spotted mirror in a back room at Our Lady of Peace Church, and the ticking minutes might as well have been a

time bomb that wouldn't be kind enough to kill me.

Jesus, you're an asshole. She's the mother of your child.

And I was marrying her. I knew my duty. It wasn't our child's fault. Truth was, I already wanted that baby. I had as soon as I'd stopped panicking.

Hell, I was still panicking, but I was moving forward anyway.

A soft knock came at the door and I turned, expecting my father. He was one of the few pleased as could be about this union. Marjorie's family wasn't as well-to-do as ours, but they had good social positioning. My father sold property for a living—as did I now—and was always negotiating deals and searching for angles. My mom leaving the family when I was a kid, certainly hadn't softened him. If anything, he'd become harder and more inflexible.

Everything has a price, Seth. Even people. Especially people.

But it wasn't my father. The woman standing in the doorway, her dark hair wreathed in a crown of tiny wildflowers, would never worry about social standings or brokering deals. She called me on my shit and made me laugh while doing it.

“Hey, you,” Ally said, and I smiled for the first time since I'd walked into this narrow, stuffy room.

What that said, I didn't want to analyze.

She took a step forward and for a moment, light surrounded her, making her pale blue dress seem even paler. Almost...white. And if I tilted my head, that crown of flowers on her head could be attached to a veil.

Almost immediately, the tightness in my chest eased and I could breathe again. I wasn't going to run out of oxygen before I even walked down the goddamn aisle.

“Ally Cat,” I said, my voice sounding scratchy even to my own ears. I moved forward and gripped her shoulders, drawing her back enough that I could search her eyes. Then she slugged me in the gut and the spell was broken.

I wasn't marrying Ally. That wasn't what we were about. We were buddies.

We'd met in Mrs. Danforth's third period English class in tenth grade on the second day of school. Ally had been absent the first day, and I was a transfer from the godawful prep school my father had sent me to in Connecticut. I'd lasted a year there, which was three years fewer than my twin, Oliver. Then I'd landed in public school in our small town, still unsure if I was making a colossal mistake—sure, prep school had sucked, but school

was never fun—and I'd been half as interested in starting *Of Mice and Men* as I was at looking down Marcie Culpepper's V-neck top.

Then Ally had hurried into the classroom, her hair done up with crazy sticks, her arms full of books, and dropped into the empty seat beside me. She'd taken one glance at the way I was hunched over my desk to ogle Marcie's boobs and smirked.

Between that and the fact that I'd assumed she'd ditched the first day of class, I'd figured she was totally badass. I found out later her mom was sick and she'd stayed home with her to keep her company. But my badass opinion of Ally had remained all these years.

This badass chick was my best male friend...who just happened to have a pair of tits.

Sure, occasionally, I noticed more about her than a friend should. Like how her hair always smelled like fucking sunshine, or that her legs seemed six miles long. I always shut that crap down immediately. She'd been dealing with her mother's illness all along, and with every passing year, her mom grew frailer. I was Ally's support system. The only certainty she had in her life.

Just as she was mine.

"Seth? Hey, wise ass, you okay?"

I flexed my hands on her shoulders, not quite ready to let go. Normally, I didn't grab hold of her as if she was my only lifeline, but it sure as hell felt as if I was facing an abyss.

One of my own making.

"What's going on?" She reached up to lay her hands over mine, and the softness of her skin made me swallow hard.

I had to haul myself back. To remember who I was marrying.

"Nothing. Last minute jitters, I guess." I smiled and let her go, tucking my itchy hands into my pockets.

Ally smiled, relaxing finally. "Understandable. It's not every day that Scorer Seth gets put on lockdown."

See, she was glad I wasn't going there too. She'd even mentioned my old stupid high school nickname. Scorer Seth, the guy who never missed when he set his mind on a woman. Now I was engaged, and of course, Ally wouldn't want me going there. But she never had.

Our entire friendship, we'd kept each other firmly in the friend zone. It was safer. Didn't make sense to risk screwing up a good thing, not when we

had so few others we could count on.

We were it for each other. And we always would be.

“Scorer Seth never learned.” Giving in to the urge to touch her one more time, I reached up to adjust her flower crown, and she immediately followed my hand to adjust it herself. That was my girl, always double-checking my work.

I grinned and moved back to the mirror to work some more on my tie. My eternal downfall. Knowing that, she let out a sigh and walked over to fix it for me, accomplishing the task in two seconds flat. When she started to move back, I grasped her wrist and her gaze flew up to mine.

“Promise me this won’t change,” I said urgently.

“What?” She let out a nervous little laugh, the kind I rarely heard from her. No matter what, Ally had her shit together. “You want me to promise to always fix your ties? Okay, I can do that—”

“No. I want you to promise we’ll still be this way together. That just because I have a wife now, we’ll still be like...this.” I gestured between us with my free hand. “That you won’t pull away.”

She laughed again, averting her gaze. Telling me without words she’d intended to do exactly that.

“We’ll always be friends. But your wife will be your best friend now. As she should be. If you’re worrying about me, don’t. I’m good.” She tried to shake off my hold, but when that didn’t happen, she shook back her hair instead. “I’ve got it all handled.”

“What if I don’t? I don’t want this to change. Fuck, Al, you’re my best friend.”

Gently, she pulled away. “We’ll always be friends,” she repeated. “I better get to my seat. It’s almost time. Break a leg, Hamilton.” She flashed a weak smile. “Or whatever you say in times like this.” She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. “I’m so happy for you.”

She was gone before I could reply.

I reached up to cup my cheek. My skin was still tingling from her lips.

She hadn’t promised me. The only promises I could count on now were my own. The ones I’d already made to my unborn child, and soon, to my wife.

I would do what was right.

CHAPTER ONE

ALLY

I hopped back a good three feet, but it was way too late. “Aww, come on.”

I stared down at the puddle of coffee dripping from the worn Formica tabletop to the red vinyl booth. The cracked pot in my hand held a jagged edge that could be a prop in a Quentin Tarantino movie. Right down to the coffee-stained orange lip.

If I had to sacrifice my last pair of white Converse sneakers to the coffee gods, at least it should've been goddamn full octane coffee, not decaf.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Diggs. Don’t move, okay?”

Mrs. Diggs, one of the diner’s regulars, shuffled to the end of her booth and cupped her mug in her manicured hands. She picked up her feet—clad in bright orange and white sneakers—as the coffee raced toward the wall of windows.

I winced. Dammit, the baseboards needed a scrub again. Maybe I could convince Mitch to let me stay late or come in early one day. I’d been picking up as many shifts as he’d allow me to, but at least if I did this it wouldn’t require talking to people.

I was pretty much talked out.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Fine. I just don’t want you to get cut, okay? Give me a quick second and I’ll brew you a fresh pot.” Disgusted, I dropped my threadbare towel over the glass and scraped the shards into a pile as I shimmied my way out from under the table. “Sage, can you grab me another towel?” I hollered over my shoulder.

My best friend’s head popped out from around the corner. I gave her a rueful smile as I lost the battle against the river of coffee.

Sage rushed over with a pile of towels and crouched beside me. She blew a honey blond curl out of her face. No matter how many pins Sage Evans jammed into her twisting pile of curls, one invariably escaped. Luckily it only enhanced her heart-shaped face and huge green eyes.

“What happened?” She started mopping up the escaping coffee.

“Careful.” I grabbed her hand just before a hook-shaped shard of glass

took a chunk out of her palm.

“Jeez, what did you do?”

I set what was left of the pot on the table. “One too many times left on the burner while empty is my guess. I barely tapped the side of the table and pop-crash.”

“Coffee.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Full pot no less.” I managed not to let the growl or the string of swear words free as I reached back under the booth and mopped up the coffee under Mrs. Diggs’ feet. “Okay, you’re set.”

The woman put her feet down as I crawled back out from under the booth. A pair of dark jeans and black boots stopped two inches from my coffee-splattered khakis.

I knew those boots.

My gaze skipped up to the way his jeans molded to strong thighs and a bulge behind his zipper that had caused me way too many sleepless nights.

My best friend since high school tucked his thumb into his pocket and drummed his fingers lightly against his leg. “Is this a new customer service thing?”

My mouth tipped up at one corner. If he only knew what kind of service I wanted to offer.

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USA Today bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

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