

UNDERWOOD FARMS BOOK 1



Out
of
place

D . C . K I L E

Out of Place

D.C. KILE

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For the girlies who like it a little dirty

CHAPTER 1

Olivia

The vodka should burn as it trails down my throat, but I'm already too numb to feel it.

The room is spinning when I finally open my eyes, either from the multi-colored lights flashing in this club or the copious amount of alcohol I've consumed tonight. Either way, it makes my stomach churn, but I swallow it down.

My best friend, Serena, lets out a loud "Whoop!" as she slams her shot glass down on the bar.

The group of people surrounding us plays off her energy and chants for us to do one more. And we've never turned down a challenge, so I smile at the bartender and mouth, "One more."

He shakes his head, probably worried that we're going to throw up on his bar, but still slides us two more shots of vodka across the sticky bar.

Serena and I grab a glass, smile at each other, and clink them together before throwing them back. It slides down easy.

Another round of cheers from the random people around us.

We stumble away from the bar, leaning on each other for support. We're both sticky and sweaty, and I'm sure my mascara looks just as bad as hers. Her formerly styled, bleach-

blonde hair is now matted to her head. I pulled my hair back into a tight ponytail to avoid that. I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen to me.

A guy I was talking to earlier—Brad? Bailey? Bartholomew?—wraps his arm around my waist.

“Are you guys celebrating something tonight?” he yells into my ear. The music from the club is pounding in my head. It feels like it gets louder as the night goes on.

“Celebrating?” I ask, confused. “No. Why?”

His eyes widen. “Oh. That was just a lot of shots...” He trails off.

I close one eye and squint the other to get him to stop spinning. “What's your name again?”

“Mason.” Mason? Huh. That doesn't sound familiar at all. I could've sworn it was Brad. He looks like a Brad. Mid. And probably boring as hell. I can't imagine he'd be any fun in bed, either.

“Well, Mason,” I draw his name out, still not sure if I believe it's his real name. “Are you here to judge me on my drinking habits or dance with me?”

He smiles. I think. Everything is blurry.

“Dance. Definitely dance.”

He takes my hand and pulls me out to the dance floor. Serena has already wandered off with whatever guy she's had her eye on. Her only type is male and breathing, and I can't say I'm much better.

Brad-Mason puts his hands on my hips and helps me sway to the music. I have no idea what song it is. It's all just loud and pounding. We stay like that for several songs, I think. Or

maybe it's only one. Time is irrelevant at this point of the night.

"Do you need to sit down?" Brad- Mason asks.

"No. 'M fine." The night is young. It's not time to sit down yet.

"You're just looking a little pale. And your eyes are closed," he informs me.

"I'm just moving. Being one with the music, Brad." Geez, why is he so judgy? If he plans on being a buzzkill all night, he can leave me alone. Thank you very much.

"My name is Mason." Oh, right.

"Nother drink," I tell him, grabbing his hand and pulling him back toward the bar. I always feel naked without a drink in my hand while I'm partying.

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" he asks, condescension lacing his tone.

I groan. "Dunno. Does it matter?" We started drinking at Serena's place while we got ready. We were going to stop for pizza on our way to the club, but the line at our favorite place was too long, so we agreed to a liquid-only diet tonight. We did two shots when we got here, and then at least three people bought me a drink. I did a few more shots. Another drink. It was a cycle that brought me right here to Daddy Brad-Mason telling me I've drunk too much.

"Who are you here with? Can they get you home?" Jesus Christ, this man is killing my vibe.

I look around for Serena and find her making out with some guy on the dance floor a few feet away.

I smile. “There she is.” I point in her direction and then yell, “Get it, girl!”

She shoots me a middle finger, and my head tips back in laughter.

“Well, I think you’ve had enough,” Brad-Mason informs me.

I laugh. “Scuse me? Who do you think you are? If you don’t wanna get a drink with me, leave.”

He puts his hands up in defense and takes a few steps away before he turns and blends back into the crowd.

“Pussy,” I whisper to no one in particular.

I stumble back to the bar and lean on top of it to get the bartender’s attention.

“Bartender!” I yell. The guy looks at me and shakes his head. “Come on.”

“You’ve had enough,” he shouts across the bar.

“You’re turning down my money? Do you know who I am?” I shout. Several people look in my direction. I’m sure they know who I am since they take out their phones to take pictures of me yelling at a bartender. If they don’t know who I am now, the internet will probably tell them when they post the pictures they just took.

“I don’t need to know who you are. I don’t want anyone vomiting on my bar,” Mr. Bartender explains.

“Fuck you!” I shout back.

I lower my head to the bar, not caring how disgusting it is.

Maybe I just need to close my eyes for a minute so the room will stop spinning.



Someone yanks on my arm, and my head flies up.

“Let’s go, Olivia,” a stern voice says in my ear.

It takes me a second to realize where I am. Bar. Drinks. Nap.

That’s right. I put my head down for a second. I rub my fingers across my forehead and am not surprised to feel how sticky it is. Gross.

There’s another tug on my arm. “Olivia.”

“What, Rhett?” I spit. “What are you even doing here?”

“Apparently taking your drunk ass home,” he tells me.

“Go fuck yourself.”

He huffs. “Cute, Olivia. Let’s go.”

I try to pull away from him. “I don’t need my big brother to swoop in and save me.”

“You think I want to be out at three in the morning trying to find my immature little sister? No, I fucking don’t. But here I am, so let’s go.”

“Serena?” I say her name to ask where she is. Rhett knows my drunk mumblings by now. This isn’t the first time he’s had to get me home after a night out.

“She texted you saying she left with some guy.”

I smile. “Good for her.”

“Yeah, good for her,” Rhett says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. If I could keep my eyes open, I’m sure I would’ve

seen him roll his eyes. “Such a great best friend that she just left you passed out on a bar to go fuck a stranger.”

“Shut uuuup Rhett. God, you are such a loser,” I whine.

He pulls my arm through the crowd. “And you’re such a spoiled brat.”

I give in, letting him pull me out of the club and into a car waiting for us. We slide into the back seat, leaving a good distance between us.

We’re both pissed. He’s mad because he had to come get me, and I’m mad because he came and got me.

“How did you know where I was?” I ask after a few minutes of tense silence.

“Great story. I’m glad you asked.” He hands me my phone. How did he get my phone? “You left your phone in the bathroom. I’m your emergency contact, so some random girl called and said she found your phone. Figured you’d be nearby.”

I roll my eyes, face the window, and watch the buildings pass us. The streets are still busy even though it’s so early. This is the city that never sleeps, after all.

Rhett and I don’t say a word for the rest of the trip back to my parents’ penthouse, where I stay when I’m in the city, which is more often than not these days. It gets me away from my parents and usually from Rhett since he has his own place. Unfortunately for me, he still found a way to get to me tonight.

Rhett keeps a tight grip on my arm as he walks me through the lobby to the elevator. The movement of the elevator makes my stomach churn, but I hold it down.

He walks me to my room like I'm a child and tosses me on the bed. "Try to sleep on your side so you don't choke on your vomit."

And then he turns and leaves. I hear the front door slam, and I know I'm alone.

I flop down on my bed, still in my silver sequined dress, and pass the fuck out.

CHAPTER 2

“O livia.” Someone shakes me. “Olivia.”

“What?” I groan into my pillow.

“Get up. We need to talk to you.” It takes me a second, but I recognize that voice. Helena Sterling. Former beauty pageant queen, wife of department store tycoon Jameson Sterling. And my mother.

I groan again, refusing to open my eyes yet. I’m actually not sure I *can* open my eyes right now. There’s a deep throbbing in my head, and my mouth feels like the Sahara desert.

“Olivia, get out of bed. Now. Your father and I need to talk to you in the living room.”

I finally roll over as she’s walking out the door. I reach for my bedside table and am disappointed when I find there’s no water. If she was going to wake me up, the least she could’ve done was bring me some water.

Slowly, so very slowly, I sit up, careful not to agitate my headache too much. Looking down, I see that I’m still in my clothes from last night, and I can safely assume I didn’t take my makeup off either. I don’t bother looking in the mirror.

I shimmy out of my dress that reeks of alcohol and put on my bathrobe before walking to the living room.

My father is standing in his suit with his arms crossed over his chest. My mother stands next to him in her perfect navy blue dress, not a hair out of place. They both look too perfect for this early in the morning.

I ignore them and go to the kitchen for a glass of water and ibuprofen. They watch me the whole time and don't say a word until I turn around. I give them my full attention or as much as they're going to get this freaking early.

"What's so important you had to wake me up for?" I ask, swallowing down the pills.

"Olivia, it's after noon, and you're still in bed," my father informs me.

"So?" I ask nonchalantly. It's not like I have anything to do today. I'm a night owl anyway.

"Look at you, Olivia. You've got makeup running down your face, your hair looks like an animal is living inside of it, and you clearly slept in your clothes," my mother says, her voice betraying a rare show of emotion.

"Where were you last night, Olivia?" Dad asks.

I shrug. "I went out with Serena. We had a few drinks."

"A few drinks?" He raises his eyebrow at me. "Is that why Rhett had to peel you off a bar and bring you home in the middle of the night?"

Jesus. What a little snitch.

I don't answer. I just shrug again.

"This behavior cannot continue, Olivia."

I roll my eyes. Here we go with this conversation again. We've had it so many times. Get your life together, Olivia.

What are you doing for your future, Olivia? You need to be an outstanding member of society, Olivia. God, I'm so fucking tired of their judgment. I wish they would leave me alone and let me live my life.

"Not only are you hurting yourself, but you're hurting this family," my father tells me.

"Oh my god." I throw my arms up in frustration. "How am I hurting the family by going out with my friends?"

"You're embarrassing us," my mother says. Embarrassing. Huh. That's new. Usually, I'm a disappointment. A failure. A disaster. But I haven't been an embarrassment yet. I won't lie; it kinda stings. "Your nipple was on the cover of a gossip magazine last week."

I wince. That wasn't my greatest moment. But it wasn't my fault the paparazzi was right there when I tripped on the sidewalk and my dress slipped. I knew I should've put my nipple pasties on that night, but Serena told me not to worry about it because the dress was sexier without them.

"And you're in a different bar every other night," my dad continues. "You have no direction. What are you doing with your life besides partying?"

He pauses like he expects me to answer, but I stay silent because he already knows the answer.

Nothing. I do nothing. I went to college to keep up with appearances and to party, but that was years ago. Now, I rely on the Sterling name to keep me relevant and to keep up my lifestyle. Really, it's their fault I'm like this. They have so much money that I don't have to do anything with my life. I just live off the stipend my father gives me.

“Exactly as I thought,” he says. “So now you’ve left us no choice.”

That gets my attention.

“We’re sending you to live with Aunt Dottie,” Mom tells me.

I laugh. “What? Aunt Dottie? Have you lost your minds?”

Mom shakes her head. “No. She needs help on the farm, and you need something to do. This will be a great time to prove yourself. You need to get out of this city and away from these people. Do some hard work.”

“Hard work? What do you want me to do? Become a farmer? I don’t see how sending me to bum-fuck Georgia will do anything for me,” I whine. There is no way this is happening.

“You’re going. End of story.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m an adult. You can’t make me do anything.”

Dad raises a brow at me. “If you want to keep your credit cards, you’ll go. You’re supposed to gain access to your trust fund next year, but I won’t allow that if you’re still acting like this. You need to prove to us that you deserve this money. So far, all you’ve shown is that you can spend money on clothes and booze.” I also have an extensive shoe collection, but this doesn’t feel like the right moment to bring that up.

“So, what? I’m supposed to pack up and move my whole life to live on a farm with an aunt I’ve seen once in my life?”

“Yes,” they agree in unison.

I tap my foot, trying to think of a way out of this. But I’m nothing without my money. I can’t actually *do* anything, so I

wouldn't be able to get a job. If they took away my inheritance, I'd be left with nothing.

I look into their eyes to see if they're bluffing, trying to scare me. But they both look... sad. Fuck.

"Well, it sounds like I don't have a choice. When do I leave?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, mentally making a list of all the appointments I have to make before I leave.

"Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" My eyes nearly bug out of my head. "I can't get everything done in a day! I need to get my hair done, my nails filled. I don't even have any farm clothes. I have to go shopping."

Dad shakes his head. "Tomorrow. You can keep one credit card, but it can only be used on necessities while you're there. If we find out you're using it on other things or if Aunt Dottie says you're acting up, everything is gone. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," I grit out. "Is there a time frame on this great adventure?"

"Until we think you're ready," Dad replies like that's a fair answer.

"So I'm stuck down there indefinitely?"

My mom gives me a sad smile. "Think of this as an opportunity. We'll check in on you periodically, and once we feel like you've found a purpose, we'll let you come back."

"Fine, whatever. I'd love to stay and chat, but apparently, I have to pack my whole life up and head to Hicksville. So, if you'll excuse me." I stomp off toward my room and do

something that no twenty-six-year-old woman should, but I do it anyway.

I slam my bedroom door.



Serena is laying on my bed while I sort through my closet, trying to figure out what in the hell I'm going to take to wear on a farm.

"I can't believe your parents are doing this." She's propped up against the headboard, staring at my half-packed suitcases.

"I know."

"I didn't even know you had an aunt named Dottie."

"That's because I've only seen her like once. She's my mom's sister." The one time I met her, she flew up to New York for a few days. I remember she wore jeans and plain T-shirts, which I thought was the strangest thing. It was hard to believe she was my mom's sister when they stood next to each other. My mom was dressed to the nines, and Dottie looked like she rode a horse to the restaurant.

My mom was born and raised in a small town called Thundersville, in southern Georgia. She did beauty pageants from a young age until my father met her right after she won Miss Georgia in her early twenties. It was love at first sight or something like that. He swooped her off her feet and brought her to New York, and the rest is history.

She always talks about how glad she was to get out of Thundersville, and now she's sending me right back to the place she hates? It's unbelievable.

“What am I going to do without my partner in crime?”
Serena pouts.

“You better not find a new best friend while I’m gone.”

She shakes her head. “Never. It’s me and you forever.”

Serena and I attended the same all-girls high school and hated it. When it was time for college, we picked the same one so we could be roommates. Things got a little crazy then. Neither one of us was really there to study. We’re both trust-fund babies and proud of it. We partied hard. Drank, tried drugs. Fooled around with boys. I’m surprised we even graduated.

But it was fun. So fun that we decided to continue the party after graduating.

What’s the point of life if you aren’t having fun? Am I right?

“I’m going to miss you, bitch,” she says.

I lie down next to her and stare up at the ceiling. “I’m going to miss you more.”

She laughs. “So, do you think there are any hot cowboys down there?”

“I doubt it. And cowboys have never been my type.”

“You’re telling me you wouldn’t be interested in a hot cowboy?” I don’t respond as I try to hold back a smile. She shoves my shoulder. “Yeah, that’s what I fucking thought.”

I hold my hands up in defense. “I’m just gonna go down there, do what I’ve gotta do, show them I’m a functioning human or whatever, and then come home, and everything will go back to normal. This is just a minor blip in my life. Everything will be fine.”

She sighs. “If you say so, Liv.”

I do say so. I have to say so. I cannot be stuck on a farm in the middle of nowhere. I’ll lose my goddamn mind.

CHAPTER 3

Olivia

My parents neglected to tell me that my flight would leave at eight in the morning. I frantically jump out of bed when Mom storms into my room, clapping her hands and grabbing my things before the sun is even up. I quickly put on some clothes and fix my hair before she rolls my two large suitcases out of my room.

Mom hands me a coffee when I stomp into the living room. I don't thank her for it because I wouldn't need this coffee right now if she wasn't trying to ruin my life.

She looks my outfit up and down like she wants to say something but decides against it. Serena helped me pick out the black mini skirt, white bustier top, and black blazer with my Dior heeled boots. We figured I couldn't go wrong with classic black and white.

"Alright, ladies, let's go," Dad says from the doorway. He's grabbed both my suitcases while I've got my carry-on.

The ride to the airport is tense, and everyone is quiet. I refuse to look at either of them.

Mom hugs me at the terminal drop-off, but I stand rigid, not hugging her back. Dad hands me my plane ticket, and I scoff because I can't believe he's not even letting me take our

private jet. I have to fly commercial. At least he got me a first-class seat. Really, it's the least he could do.

They say goodbye and some shit about how this will be good for me, but I wave them off and check my bags before braving security and finding my gate. I don't need another lecture.

My phone vibrates with a good luck text from Rhett. Like he even cares. I wouldn't even be in this mess if he hadn't been a tattle-tale. He's always been a suck-up to our parents. The perfect child, following in Dad's footsteps. Boring.

I ignore his text and board my flight, ordering champagne as soon as I'm seated.



The first thing I notice when I step out of the Savannah International Airport is how fucking sticky it feels.

Like, it's disgusting.

I slip off my blazer as I pull up the Uber app on my phone and type in the address my parents gave me for Aunt Dottie's.

It takes forever for the car to show up, and when it finally does, I'm sweating and starving. Not a good combination.

When we get on the highway, the driver asks, "So, whatcha in town for?"

I look at him in the rearview mirror. "I'd prefer if we didn't talk, thanks."

His eyebrows raise as he mutters, "Ok, then."

He respects my wishes, and we sit silently for the entire hour-and-a-half ride to Aunt Dottie's farm.

We exit the highway, and I stare out the window at the little town we drive through and have to hold back tears. This place is terrible. Absolutely terrible. Serena would describe it as charming. She loves those made-for-TV movies set in small towns. I'd describe it as my worst fucking nightmare.

Where do people have fun around here? The fucking ice cream shop?

At least there's a coffee shop. Maybe it will have some decent coffee.

The driver turns onto a dirt road and drives under a sign that says Underwood Farms. The house appears at the end of it, and I almost tell the guy to turn around and take me back to the airport. Maybe I could fly somewhere else. Would anyone really notice or care if I grabbed a one-way ticket to Costa Rica? I'm sure Dad would care about the charge on his credit card. Ugh.

The house is nice, if not a little run down, but I guess it could be worse. There's a cute wrap-around front porch that I always see in movies and several pickup trucks parked out front. Based on what I saw on the main road, that seems to be everyone's vehicle of choice in this town.

"Is this the place?" I can tell he's asking because I don't look like I would fit in here. He wouldn't be wrong.

"I guess so."

He helps me get my bags out of the trunk before he takes off, probably hoping never to see me again. I leave them on the gravel drive and walk up the creaky steps to the front door.

I knock on the bright red door and wait.

Finally, the door opens, and a man, probably a few years older than me, stands there with dirt smudged all over his clothes and even some on his face. His hat is backward, but some of his brown hair curls out from underneath. His dark eyes take me in from head to toe before a smirk crosses his lips.

“Um, hello. I don’t know if you know this, but it’s rude to stare,” I say to this strange man.

“I don’t know if you know this, but you stared first,” he says.

Excuse me? “I only stared because you look like you just rolled around in a pile of dirt.”

“And *I* only stared at you because you look like you should be on a stage somewhere. Possibly with a pole.”

Did he just say I look like a stripper? Who does this man think he is? “This is business casual, thank you very much,” I say, gesturing to my outfit.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “I’ve never seen business casual quite like this.”

“Well, there don’t appear to be any actual businesses around here besides the local coffee shop,” I scoff. “So I don’t imagine you would see anything like this.”

A slow smile spreads across his lips. “Are you here for a reason, or did you just come here to have a staring contest with me?”

“Please,” I scoff. “I don’t even know you, and I’m sure I can find much better things to stare at than you.”

He leans against the door frame, and I try not to notice how lean his body is. I especially try to ignore the six-pack I

can just barely see through the giant gaping hole in his cutoff t-shirt. “I’d like to see you try.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “Listen, hotshot. I’m here for Dottie. This is her farm, right?”

“Yep. What do you need with Ms. Dottie?” he asks like it’s any of his business.

“That’s between me and Dottie.” I put my hands on my hips. “Now, are you going to let me in or not?”

“I guess so. Wouldn’t want you to try to kick the door down with one of those heels. Could be dangerous for all of us.”

I roll my eyes and push past him into the house.

I take a few steps inside before a voice calls, “Olivia? Is that you?”

“Um, yeah,” I answer distractedly because my eyes are too busy taking everything in around me. There is no sense of design here. No theme. There’s a blue plaid couch with faded red curtains on the windows. There are paintings of chickens on one wall and cows on the other. I almost gag when I see the deer antlers. There are so many things it’s hard to focus on just one, so I stare at the peeling paint on the wall in front of me.

“Come on back, hun. I’m just getting the boys lunch,” the voice calls. Boys? As in, more than one? Awesome. Just what I need.

The guy I was talking to shuts the door and walks around me down a hallway.

I follow, my heels echoing with each step. The kitchen comes into view, and all I can see is... yellow. So much yellow. Aunt Dottie is standing at the counter in her standard

jeans and a T-shirt. Unlike my mother, who dyes hers religiously, she's embraced her gray hair. The only way I can tell they're related is their eyes. We all share the same green eyes.

The first guy I met, and I'm using the term 'met' loosely, sits at the kitchen table next to two other guys in cut-off T-shirts and hats. One of them even has an actual cowboy hat on. Serena will get a kick out of that. They're all covered in dirt, and I'm getting wafts of an unusual stench coming from their direction, making my stomach churn.

Aunt Dottie comes and gives me a hug. "Olivia. It's good to see you, hun. How was your flight?"

"Uh, it was good." The guys at the table stare at me like I'm an alien who just walked through the front door. I try to ignore them. I'm used to people staring, just maybe not this close.

"Good. Good. Sorry I couldn't pick you up from the airport. Couldn't get away for that much time on such short notice." At least it wasn't just me who got this jail sentence on short notice.

"It's fine. I got an Uber," I tell her.

"You took an Uber from the airport?" one of the guys at the table asks. "That must have cost a shit ton. Why didn't you just rent a car?"

"They were out of cars," I respond with the first thing that pops into my head. He doesn't need to know that I don't know how to drive.

"They were out of cars?" he asks slowly, like he doesn't believe me.

"Yes."

“Olivia, these are my farm hands. That’s Camden.” She points to the guy badgering me about a car. “This is Bennett,” pointing to cowboy hat. He gives me a head nod. “And this is Landon.” Landon is the guy from the front door. He looks me up and down again before the side of his mouth tugs up in a small smile.

“Boys, this is my niece, Olivia. She’s going to be helping us out here for a little while.”

Camden chuckles. “Not in that outfit, she’s not.”

Aunt Dottie takes in my outfit. “Cam, I’m sure she’s got some jeans.” I stare at her as she cocks her head to the side. “You have jeans, don’t you? And work boots?”

“I have a pair of Gucci jeans that I wore to an event last year.” I look down at my feet. “But these are my only boots.” Because, like a normal person, I don’t typically wear boots in the summer.

Laughter comes from the table, but I don’t look to see who it’s coming from. They can laugh all they want. The opinions of three farm boys mean nothing to me. Get in, get the job done, get out. That’s my plan.

“Those are not boots,” Camden says.

“That’s ok, hun,” Aunt Dottie says. “We’ll get you to Walmart later and fix you up with everything you need.”

“Walmart?” I practically choke on the word. I’ve never set foot in a Walmart in my life, much less worn clothes from there. That would destroy my reputation if it got out.

“Yeah. There’s one right down the road. We’ll get you set up.”

My parents are actually trying to kill me.

“Can you show me my room? I’m exhausted.” Really, I just need to get away from these people. This is all a little too much, but I refuse to cry in front of everyone.

Aunt Dottie studies me a moment before a smile spreads across her face. “Alright. I’ll let you rest today, but tomorrow, you’re jumping right in.”

I swallow. Jumping right into what exactly? I feel three sets of eyes on me, so I keep my question to myself, deciding it might be better if I don’t know what’s coming.

I follow her up the stairs. She opens a door on the right of the hallway and ushers me in. The first thing I notice is how much wood is in this room. It’s overwhelming. There’s all different shades of it, too. “This’ll be your room. Bathroom is across the hall.”

The bed has a wooden frame and is made up with an atrocious floral bedspread, the dresser is made out of cherry wood, and a small desk by the window is made of, you guessed it, wood. There’s even a picture of a tractor hanging up over the bed. A fucking tractor. It’s all very, um, depressing.

Serena would say quaint, but I can’t. I just can’t. This is a far cry from my lavish white and gold-accented room back home. There’s barely room to move around in here.

It feels stuffy as hell in here, or maybe I’m having a panic attack. This is all too fucking much.

Aunt Dottie looks around. “Did you bring any suitcases?”

“Yeah. I left them outside for now. I’ll go get them.”

“I can have one of the boys help you bring ’em up.”

I'd rather die than have one of those dirty boys touch my designer suitcases. "It's ok. I'll get them."

She nods. "There're sandwiches in the kitchen if you're hungry. I'll let you get settled."

She leaves me alone in this terrible room. I walk over to the one window that overlooks the back of the house.

It looks like... a farm. There are animals behind fences but also meandering around. There are flowery-looking things and other buildings, which I assume are barns. It stretches on for miles. There's not an office building or skyscraper in sight. It's just land. It's gross and boring, and I feel so out of place.

I'm a city girl. I belong in a city.

I sigh. There's no point in having a pity party. I've got to do this and prove to my parents that I can be a real adult. So, I'll do it fast and then go home. Easy peasy.

I walk down the stairs and out to the dirt driveway where I left my suitcases.

To my absolute horror, all three smelly guys have made their way to the front yard. They all stand around one of the trucks, looking at something and talking quietly.

I pretend they aren't there and walk right past them. Grabbing one of my suitcases, I roll it to the front door. The first problem I encounter happens when I try to go up the stairs. I may have overpacked a bit, so the case is a lot heavier than I expect. I try to drag it, but it doesn't budge.

I feel them staring at me again.

"Need some help?" Landon asks.

"No," I grunt out.

I dig my spiked heels into the floor and put my back into it. The case moves up one step, but the momentum throws me on my ass with force.

The guys laugh.

“Are you sure?” he asks again.

I grit my teeth. “Yes. I’m sure.”

I don’t look at them. I just get up and do the same thing again, except without the falling on my ass part until I’m all the way up the stairs.

I wipe the disgusting sweat off my forehead before grabbing my other bag.

Thankfully, they’ve moved on and aren’t standing out there anymore, so they won’t be watching me slowly drag this thing up stair by stair.

This could not get any worse.

CHAPTER 4

It got worse.

Walmart is not a place I ever need to experience again. People are in their actual pajamas. Pajamas in public! There is no way my mother knew about this. She would've warned me.

Aunt Dottie pushes a cart down an aisle, and I try to keep up with her in my heels. She's basically sprinting, and it's making my skirt ride up with the giant steps I have to take, so I'm constantly tugging it down while jogging behind her.

She finally stops under a giant blue sign that reads "Womens."

She starts rummaging around through a stack of blue jeans. She asks my size, and when I tell her, she hands me several pairs of jeans to try on in the fitting room.

The *fitting rooms* look more like a bathroom than a changing room. I decide I'd rather take the chance of these not fitting than removing my clothes in one of those rooms. Who knows what kind of diseases are in there, and I wouldn't doubt someone has a camera angled somewhere inappropriate. Nope. Too sketchy.

She grabs a few plain, boring T-shirts and some denim button-down shirts. I can't imagine when she thinks I'm going to wear those, but I don't say anything.

Then she takes me to the shoe section. It's pretty much all boots. And not cute boots. They're 'I'm going to jump in some mud' boots. Dottie hands me a pair of black ones and a pair of brown ones. They might be the ugliest things I've ever seen.

My face must show my thoughts because she says, "It's not about looks down here, hun. You need something practical. Something you're not afraid to get dirty. Those crystal things"—she points to my Dior boots—"aren't gonna do a damn thing to protect your feet. You'll be stuck in the mud in no time."

"Fine," I grumble as I test out the fugly boots and try not to think about the mud thing. Serena would die if she saw me right now.

"That'll do." She grabs both pairs and flings them in the cart. "Anything else you need while we're here?"

"Do they sell vodka?" I mumble under my breath.

"There's no alcohol in my house. Never has been, never will be," she informs me.

Great.

"I guess I'm good then," I sigh.

We head to the checkouts. Right before we get there, an older man calls Dottie's name. She stops and turns to the man.

"How ya doin', Jim?" She gives the man a hug.

"Doing alright, Dottie."

"I got a good bit of eggs for ya. Come on down to the market this weekend and grab some," she tells him.

"Wouldn't miss it. You know Shelley loves your eggs."

"Best in the state." She winks.

Are we really discussing *eggs* in the middle of a store right now?

“Who’s this young lady?” Jim turns to me.

“This is my niece, Olivia. Olivia, this is Jim. He lives about a mile down from the farm.”

I nod and smile, hoping he doesn’t want me to shake his hand or anything. I’m not a fan of touching old, wrinkly strangers. To my relief, he just nods to me.

“This Helena’s girl?” I guess people still remember my mom even after all these years. Dottie nods. “Spittin’ image.”

This Southern drawl is something I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to. My mother says a few words funny, but for the most part, you’d never be able to tell she’s from the South.

“Don’t I know it,” Dottie agrees.

They both stare at me long enough that I feel even more uncomfortable than I already did. “Well, Jim. We gotta get going. But it was good to see you. Tell Shell I said hello.”

“Will do. It was nice to meet ya, Ms. Olivia.”

“You too,” I mumble. Even though it was not nice to meet him, and I hope I don’t have to see him again.

We check out with all the terrible clothing she’s picked for me, and I swipe my credit card since, apparently, these are a necessity. Dad has to know I’d never willingly be caught dead in these.



I thought my day had maxed out on terrible things that could happen, but again, I was wrong.

I finally sit at the table for my first meal all day. I slept through lunch, and then Aunt Dottie took me to town as soon as I came downstairs.

For dinner, I changed into a black-collared dress and gold sandals. I'm not sure the floor in this house is clean enough to be walking around barefoot in. I wonder when her housekeeper comes.

Before I can ask, the back door flies open, and one of the smelly guys from earlier walks in. Landon. I didn't think it was possible, but he's even more dirty than earlier.

"Hey, Ms. Dottie. I'm about to take off for the day. The others are already gone."

She turns from the counter where she's preparing our dinner. I won't lie and say I'm not a little nervous about what she's about to put on my plate.

"Landon, you're here late." Is it late? I glance out the window and realize the sun is starting to set. This is usually when I'd start getting ready for a night out with Serena. It's early, by my standards.

"Yes, ma'am. I was fixing some of the wire in one of the chicken coops. Should be good now."

"You wanna stay for dinner? There's plenty," she offers.

Landon looks from her to me, where I'm sitting silently at the table. A slow smirk crosses his lips. I roll my eyes. "That sounds wonderful, Ms. Dottie. Thank you."

Lovely. He's going to use this time to laugh and make fun of me. Just what I need today.

“Go on and wash up then,” she tells him.

His gaze remains on mine until he’s out of the kitchen.

When he gets back, he sits directly across from me, removes his hat, and sets it on the table next to him, running his fingers through his dark brown hair. I look away. I don’t want to be caught staring at him...again.

Aunt Dottie puts a plate of something in front of me and sits down next to me.

I look down at the food. I must look confused because Aunt Dottie says, “It’s a chicken and broccoli casserole.”

“Oh.” I guess that is supposed to explain it? It looks like mush with some cheese on top.

The two of them start eating right away while I hesitantly put a bite in my mouth and chew. It’s not terrible, but it’s definitely not the tuna poke bowl I would rather be having.

“So, where are you from, Olivia?” Landon asks. I’m surprised he even has time to talk with how fast he’s shoveling food in his mouth.

“New York.”

“Should’ve known,” he says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“Calm down, *hotshot*. Just that you look like someone who would be from New York with your fancy clothes and all that,” he explains.

“Well, it’s better than looking like I grew up in a barn.”

He looks down at his clothes and smiles. “I did grow up in a barn. Been around barns all my life. I’m not ashamed of that.”

He's so cool and calm about it that it pisses me off even more.

"You do realize you smell terrible, right?" I ask, taking another bite of the mush from my plate.

"Olivia," Aunt Dottie says.

Landon laughs. "I'm afraid it comes with the job, sweetheart. You'll get used to it in a few days, I'm sure."

"Um, I don't think so. I know how to shower properly."

He raises his stupid eyebrows at me. "Is that so?"

"Yep," I say, popping the P.

He smiles at me. "We'll see about that. So, what're you doing down here?" he asks. I won't be giving him any fuel to make fun of me. He doesn't need to know that I was forced against my will to come down here because my parents are embarrassed by me and don't think I can handle money. Nope. I'll be keeping that to myself.

"I came down to help Aunt Dottie," I explain.

"I know that, but why?" he presses.

I shrug, acting like I'm not bothered by his questions. "Just wanted to."

He looks to Dottie and then back to me. "You, princess of New York City, decided to come down to a farm in south Georgia to help out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Yes," I respond quickly so that Aunt Dottie doesn't have a chance to correct him. Thankfully, she seems to be on my side and doesn't say a word.

Landon shakes his head. "Alright, if you say so."

He focuses back on his plate, and Aunt Dottie asks him questions about the farm. They talk about chickens and cows and something about blueberries. I tune them out, not caring about any of it.

I finish my plate because I'm starving, not necessarily because it was good, but I thank Aunt Dottie anyway. After dinner, Landon offers to wash the dishes, but she declines, telling him to go home and get some sleep.

Before he leaves, he turns to me. "It's been a pleasure, Ms. Olivia. See you in the morning."

I cross my arms over my chest and say, "Bye."

He smiles, grabs his hat, and leaves. I watch him walk down the hall and out the front door. As annoying as he is, he is kinda hot. His ratty, cut-off T-shirt shows off his toned arms, and his jeans fit his ass so perfectly that I can't stop staring. But when the door closes, I snap out of it. He could be the hottest guy in the world, but he's still annoying.

Aunt Dottie starts cleaning the dishes. "Alright, Olivia. I gave you your rest day. Tomorrow, you're getting your hands dirty. You need to be out the door by five to help feed the cows and milk 'em. Then, you'll check the coops for eggs and do some blueberry harvesting. We'll see how the day is at that point. Moving forward, I'll cook, and you'll do the dishes. I always feed the boys lunch, so you'll do the dishes after lunch and dinner. I'll handle breakfast since you'll be with the cows."

"That seems like a lot to do." I don't even know what half of those things mean, but it definitely sounds like too many things for one person to do.

She nods. “It is, but you’ll get used to it. Your parents sent you here to work, so you’re gonna work.”

I sigh. “Fine.”

“After I do these dishes, I’m going to work on my puzzle in the living room for a bit before bed. You’re welcome to join me,” she offers. A puzzle? I don’t think I’ve done a puzzle since I was three years old, and I have no desire to do it now. Is that what her life is? Farming, cooking, and doing lame puzzles? Nope. Hard pass on that.

“No, I think I’ll just go to bed,” I tell her.

“Alright,” she says, unbothered by my rejection

“Night.”

“Olivia?” she says right before I walk out. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I give her a small smile. I can’t say the same.

CHAPTER 5

Olivia

There's a loud pounding on my bedroom door the next morning. I'm getting really tired of these harsh wake-ups.

"Get up, Olivia. Time to get to work."

I groan and throw the ancient floral blanket off me. "I'm up," I call out groggily.

"You gotta be in the kitchen in ten minutes," Aunt Dottie tells me through the door. At least she's keeping some boundaries and not barging in my room.

Ten minutes? "I can't be ready in ten minutes."

"You don't have a choice." She knocks once more. "Let's go."

I crawl out of bed and head to the bathroom. My curls are still intact from yesterday, so I comb through them quickly and respray with hairspray. I brush my teeth and do as much makeup as I can in the time I'm given, which ends up only being eyeshadow, mascara, and eyeliner.

I run to my room and grab a pair of the Walmart jeans and one of the oversized T-shirts Aunt Dottie insisted I get. I tie the shirt up, leaving my stomach showing to be more flattering, and put on the terrible boots.

My reflection makes me want to cry.

This is so not me, and I can't believe my parents are making me do this.

"Olivia!" Aunt Dottie calls. I guess my time is up.

I hurry downstairs and meet her in the kitchen, where she shoves a cup of coffee at me.

"Is there dairy-free creamer in here?" I ask, peeking into the coffee cup. It doesn't look like there's much creamer at all.

"No creamer. It's fresh milk from the cows on the farm."

Gross. "Oh."

"Do you have an allergy to dairy?" she asks, even though I'm sure she already knows the answer since I ate the cheese-drenched food she put on my plate last night at dinner.

"No, but—"

"Then drink the coffee." I'm taken aback by her harshness this morning. She must be in work mode or something. I should've just said I had an allergy, but it's too late now.

I take a sip of the almost-black coffee and nearly gag. She doesn't seem to notice or maybe doesn't care.

"Here's your breakfast." She hands me a tortilla filled with stuff.

"What is it?" I question. I'm not used to being handed food and just expected to eat it. I usually follow a meal plan that my trainer emails to my chef each week and is brought to me cooked and plated.

"A breakfast burrito. Eggs, sausage, cheese, and potatoes. You're gonna wanna eat that, too. You'll need your energy." She looks at me for a long moment. "Is there something wrong with it?"

“No, I just—”

“Then eat.” Alright, someone is not a morning person. I’m not either, but that doesn’t mean I would bite someone’s head off first thing in the morning.

Sitting at the table, I scroll through my phone while I eat. Serena posted pictures of herself at a club last night. She looks amazing. I like the picture and keep scrolling. My friends are posting their fancy dinners or shopping sprees, with an occasional charity event. But it’s the same stuff we always post.

Everyone else’s lives are still moving on without me there. I won’t lie, it hurts. Serena was the only one to text me last night to make sure I got here okay. My parents didn’t even reach out to me. Maybe they talked to Dottie and knew I was here safe.

“Aunt Dottie, did you talk to my mom yesterday?”

“No. Why?” There goes that theory.

“Just wondering.”

I usually hate my parents being in my business. But they finally pushed themselves into my life and forced me to do this, and they don’t even care if I made it here safely? They did call me an embarrassment. Maybe they’d be happy if I wasn’t safe. One less thing for them to have to worry about.

A knock on the back door pulls me from my morbid thoughts.

“Mornin’ Ms. Dottie. Mornin’ Olivia,” Landon drawls as he opens the door.

He’s showered and doesn’t smell like cow shit today. He’s not terrible to look at if you ignore the stained blue jeans and

the ripped T-shirt. His facial hair is short and perfectly sculpted around his jaw, and his dark brown hair curls around the edges of the same baseball hat as yesterday.

“Mornin’ Landon. You need any coffee?” Aunt Dottie asks, gesturing to the coffee pot on the counter.

“No, ma’am. I had some at home.” Then he looks at me. “You ready, sweetheart?”

Uh, sweetheart? Who does this man think he is? But I’m too tired to argue right now. “Ready for what?”

“Gotta get the cows ready for milkin’,” he answers like that’s a totally normal thing.

I nearly choke on a piece of sausage. “You want *me* to actually milk a cow?” I thought it was a joke when she mentioned it last night.

I look between the two of them.

They say yes in unison.

“Olivia, hun. You might wanna put your hair up. It’s gonna be a hot one today.”

“Like in a ponytail?” Aunt Dottie nods. “I don’t have a hair tie.”

“Of course you don’t,” she mumbles. Landon chuckles in his spot by the door. Aunt Dottie walks off and comes back with a bandana. She comes behind me and yanks my long hair back, tying it with the bandana.

“This will have to do for now.”

I don’t have time to look at it before she ushers me out the door, leaving my half-eaten burrito on the table.

I follow Landon outside. The sun isn't even up yet, but it's already hot.

"You ready for this?" he asks.

"Of course I'm ready. I've always dreamed of milking a cow at the ass crack of dawn."

He chuckles. It's a nice laugh. Or it would be if he wasn't currently walking me to my own personal hell. "Cam is already working on getting the cows inside. We've gotta clean the udders and get them hooked up."

"Clean the udders?" That really doesn't sound like something I'm interested in doing.

"Yep. Don't worry, I'll show you."

"That's not what I'm worried about," I mutter.

I follow him into a barn-like building where there are a ton of cows or at least more than I've ever seen in real life. "This is one of the smaller dairy farms in the area. Dottie wanted to try it out a few years ago, and it's growing, but the primary focus of this farm isn't dairy," Landon explains. I nod, pretending like I care about any of this. I can't believe I have to touch a cow because Aunt Dottie wanted to *try something out*.

Landon grabs a pair of gloves and then hands me a pair. "You'll wanna wear these."

Camden has the cows all lined up. Landon shoves a cloth and spray bottle into my hands and asks, "Do you think you can handle this?"

My back teeth clench together in annoyance. Can I do this? I guess I have to. Do I want to? Absolutely not.

"Just show me what to do," I grumble.

He smiles and shakes his head but bends down next to one of the cows and starts cleaning the giant nipple things. Then Camden goes behind him and attaches a machine to the cow.

“Look at you. I figured you’d run away crying before you touched a cow,” Camden says.

I ignore his stupid comment mainly because I do actually wish I could run away from this, but unfortunately, I can’t.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to the machine he put on the cow.

He stares at me as if he’s not sure if he wants to answer. “It milks the cow and takes the milk straight to a tank that we can take to the processor later.”

“So, you don’t have to, like, squeeze the nipples?” That’s the only way I’ve ever heard of milking a cow, but the way these two are looking at me right now makes me think I’ve been incredibly misinformed.

“I’m sure we can arrange that for you.” Camden laughs like an asshole instead of answering my question.

Ignoring him, I spray my towel and bend down next to a cow. It’s bigger than I thought it would be and smells really bad. Now I know why the three of them smelled so bad yesterday. I swear to god, if I end up smelling like them, I’m going to die.

I clean the cow off just like Landon did. “Ew ew ew,” I repeat the entire time I touch it. “This is so gross.”

They’re laughing behind me. I’m glad they’re getting a real kick out of this. Eventually, Landon moves on to clean the other cows, and Camden comes in behind me to attach the thing to the cow.

I'm sweating by the time I'm finally finished.

"Not bad," Camden says. I start to smile, but then he adds, "For someone who's never done a day of hard work in their life."

I rip the gloves off. "Glad to see you're still being a little bitch. What's next?"

Landon gestures to the open door, so I follow him to the chicken coops. Thankfully, Camden stays with the cows so I don't have to see his stupid, smug face.

"Where's the other guy?" I ask Landon as I look around the farm.

"Bennett? He's in the stables with the horses," he answers.

Horses? God, how many animals are on this damn farm? I don't bother asking because I'm sure he'll launch into some story about how Aunt Dottie wanted to create an ark, so she had to get two of every animal, and now she has enough to have her own personal zoo.

I don't care. I'm here to do the work and go home to New York City, where I belong.

The chicken coop is massive. A lot bigger than I was expecting. It's more like a house than a coop.

Landon opens the door and ushers me inside. "Alright, I'm going to feed them. You go in and grab the eggs."

"Grab them? Like take them from the nest?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Won't the chickens be mad?" I'm basically going in there to steal their babies.

He chuckles again, and I'm really starting to hate that sound. "They'll be eating. They won't even notice."

He hands me a basket. I try to ignore the smell as I enter, but it's making my eyes water. How do they manage to be around this every damn day?

The chickens notice their food and leave their nests to eat. I sneak behind them and start grabbing eggs to put in the basket. There are tons of them. I'm not wearing gloves this time, so I have to touch the gross eggs with my bare hands.

"Ew ew ew," I chant as I grab each egg. I move as quickly as I can so I can get out of here.

When I'm finished, I practically sprint out the door for a giant breath of fresh air.

After a few minutes, Landon walks up behind me and places a few more eggs in my basket. "You missed a few."

I roll my eyes. Great. He's checking my work like I'm in fucking kindergarten. To be fair, I was just trying to get the hell out of there. I didn't look too closely for any eggs left behind.

"Go take those to Dottie while I finish up here. Then we'll get you set up on the blueberries," he tells me.

Can't wait to find out what that means.

The basket is heavier than I expected. My arms are aching by the time I reach the main house.

I drop the eggs off with Dottie and find my way to where Landon said the blueberries are. I'm so sticky. The sun has barely been up an hour, but I feel like I've been lying out in it for at least half the day already.

Landon hands me a bucket and walks me to the closest blueberry bush. He plucks one off and drops it in my bucket.

“That’s all you gotta do here. Just pick the blueberries and put them in the bucket.”

I look out at the rows of blueberry bushes. There must be hundreds of bushes. Maybe even more. “Am I supposed to pick them all?”

He nods. “As many as you can. Some high schoolers come by in the afternoon to help pick during the summer. So you’ll have company then.”

My eyes widen as I look back at him. “Wait. You’re just going to leave me here? All day?”

He puts his hands on his hips, his arm muscles flexing as he does it. I hate that I even noticed that. “I don’t have time to babysit you, Olivia. I have other things I’ve got to do.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I huff. “I just didn’t know I’d be stuck outside picking blueberries. What if I get dehydrated and pass out or something?”

He pulls a water bottle from his back pocket and hands it to me. “You’re a big girl. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

He gives me one last smile before he turns and walks away, leaving me with miles of blueberry bushes and an empty bucket.

CHAPTER 6

Everyone left me out here all alone in the blazing heat. I drained the water bottle less than an hour after I got it. My fingers are purple from the stupid blueberries, and my shirt looks like I just took a shower from all my sweat. And my blueberry bucket isn't even all the way full.

Tears start to burn in my eyes. This is cruel and unusual punishment. If my parents were trying to kill me, they could've found a faster, less painful way.

Someone calls my name. Or am I hallucinating? That's a thing that can happen if you get overheated, right?

It sounds like Aunt Dottie.

I drag my feet to the start of the blueberry bushes and see her waving her arm at me. "Lunch is ready."

It's only lunchtime? I thought for sure they'd left me out here during lunch and the day was almost over. Why can't it be almost over? Put me out of my misery.

A tear falls down my cheek, but I quickly swipe it away. None of these people need to see me cry. I'll wait until I'm tucked away in my rock-hard bed later tonight before I let the tears fall.

I slowly make my way back to the main house, dragging my large bucket of blueberries behind me.

Everyone is seated at the table, already eating whatever Dottie made for lunch. Glad to see they waited for me. I'm so hot and disgusting; I'm not even that hungry. I really just want to pour ice-cold water over my head.

"How's it going out there?" Camden asks. He's got a stupid smirk on his face, like he knows exactly how it's going.

"Fine," I tell him. "I just didn't realize it was going to be hotter than Satan's asshole out there today."

The three guys choke out a laugh, and Aunt Dottie looks at me with an open mouth. "Olivia. Language."

I mumble an apology. "And those blueberries are turning my fingers purple. I'm going to have to get my nails re-done."

"Glad to see you have your priorities in order," Camden says. I roll my eyes. Landon chuckles. Bennett says nothing and pretends like none of us are here.

Aunt Dottie just shakes her head and tells me to go wash up for lunch in the bathroom down the hall. When I get there, I look in the mirror. The person I see is not me. My hair is a mess, mascara is running down my face, dirt is smeared across my cheek, and my eyes are red.

I hate this place. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

I wash my hands and attempt to get some of the dirt off my face before walking back out. I stop in the hall outside the kitchen when I hear voices from the kitchen and realize they're talking about me.

"What's she doing here, Dottie? You know we can handle this without her. She's more worried about breaking a nail than doing hard work."

“Camden Ellington. Don’t be like that. It’s her first day,” Aunt Dottie says. “She’ll come around. She’s my sister’s daughter, after all.”

“Yeah, your sister who ran off with a billionaire and left you to run this place the first chance she got,” Camden replies bitterly.

“Boys, I wanted this farm. Helena didn’t. She did what was best for her, and I stayed here, which is what was best for me. We’re both happy. But I’m getting older. I need someone to look after this farm when I’m gone.” Is she talking about me? No way. If she is, my parents conveniently left that part out when they sent me on this little “adventure.”

“And you think *she’s* the one to do it?” Camden asks in disbelief.

“I don’t know yet,” Aunt Dottie answers honestly. “But I’m keeping an open mind. You should, too. She’s family.”

He scoffs. “She’s not cut out for this. She’s going to go running to Mommy and Daddy as soon as she can.”

“That’s enough,” Dottie says with a sharper tone.

“Come on. We all saw how she showed up here yesterday, looking like something from a lingerie fashion show.” Man, Camden really does not like me. Too bad I don’t really care.

“I said that’s enough,” Dottie says, her tone is even more forceful. This time, everyone goes quiet. “People can change. The three of you know that more than anything. So give her a chance. She needs this. I need this.”

There’s silence for several more moments before I realize no one else is going to say anything, so I step into the kitchen.

Everyone is looking down at their plate when I walk in. Only Aunt Dottie looks up at me. “Your sandwich is right here, hun.” She points to the plate sitting next to her at the table.

I look around the table, but no one will meet my eyes. I clear my throat. “I think I’m going to eat outside.”

Aunt Dottie’s brows furrow, but she doesn’t stop me as I grab my plate and walk out the back door. I sit down on the porch swing and take a bite out of my sandwich.

These people think I’m a joke. My so-called friends back home don’t even notice I’m gone. My family is embarrassed by me.

How did this happen? How did my life take such a terrible turn?

I focus on eating my sandwich to keep myself from crying when the back door opens. I expect to see Aunt Dottie, but Landon comes and sits next to me.

“How much of that did you hear?” he asks, not trying to deny what I heard.

I shrug. “I don’t care what some stupid, uneducated farm boys think about me.”

He laughs his stupid laugh that makes my stomach flutter for some unexplainable reason. I take an angry bite of my sandwich, refusing to look at him.

“And I don’t want this stupid farm,” I tell him.

“I didn’t think you did,” he says casually.

I’m silent for a minute before I say, “But I could do it, you know.”

He turns to look at me. There's a smirk pulling at his lips. I'm readying myself for him to tell me all the ways I can't do it, but he says, "I know you could."

He knows I could? That's... unexpected. I'm not entirely sure I believe I could do it, but I can't back down now.

"Well, good."

He doesn't apologize for what his friend said. He just sits there silently, looking out to the land before us.

He takes a swig of his water bottle and then stands. "I gotta get back to it, but don't let Cam get to you. He doesn't do well with change, but he'll get over it. Prove him wrong, Olivia."

Like I care what Camden does or doesn't do well with. He can kiss my little rich girl ass for all I care. But I will prove him wrong. Not about taking over the farm but doing the best job I can while I'm here and making him eat his words.

I don't say anything as Landon walks off the porch, but I do sneak a peek at his backside as he goes. It's impossible not to. I've never seen a pair of jeans fit someone so well. I quickly look away when I hear the back door open again. I don't want to get caught checking him out. That wouldn't be a good look.

Camden and Bennett file out. They don't look at me as they head down the stairs and back to whatever they were doing.

I take my plate inside. Aunt Dottie doesn't ask if I heard anything. She doesn't ask if I'm ok. I'm glad. I don't really want to talk about it.

She nods to the sink as she turns to leave. "Dishes are all yours."

Then it's just me and a sink full of dirty dishes.



After finishing the lunch dishes, I go back to the blueberry bushes. I almost beg to be sent anywhere else, but then I see one of the guys throwing a giant square of hay and figure picking blueberries might be easier.

The high schoolers eventually show up. They tell me their names, but I don't care enough to remember them. I don't need to know these people to do what I'm supposed to. I'm not here to make friends with children.

By the time my name is called again at the end of the day, I just want to crawl into my bed and die. Or at least sleep for forty-eight hours straight. I don't think I've ever been so tired in my life.

Before I make it to the main house, Landon meets me with a basket.

"I'll take the berries." He reaches for my bucket. "You take the basket and check the chicken coop again for eggs."

"Again?" I groan. I just want to sit down.

"Yep. We check them twice a day."

I snatch the basket from his hand and stomp off towards the chicken house. I grab the eggs I can see and put them in the basket. I go around twice, making sure I didn't miss any for Landon to find before I go back to the house. I'm almost there when my foot hits a rock or a tree stump or something hard, and I trip. The basket drops as I fall to my knees, the hard ground catching me.

I wince at the impact.

The next thing I know, Landon is at my side, grabbing my arm to help me up. “Are you alright?”

I brush off my hands on my pants. I will not cry. I will not cry. “I’m fine.”

“Great. Look what she did. She cracked the eggs.” This, of course, comes from Camden, who is looking down at me from the back porch. I hate that he saw me fall. My one moment of weakness.

Landon looks inside the basket. “They’re not all cracked. And we got most of the eggs this morning anyway.”

“It was an accident.” My voice comes out soft and a little shaky, which I fucking hate. I’m tired and gross. Now my knees and hands hurt. I just want to go home.

Camden scoffs at me. “An accident? You just lost the farm money. Good one.”

Landon steps in front of me. “Calm the fuck down, Cam. You know it’s not that big of a deal, and you know it was an accident. You’re just trying to be an asshole right now.”

“Whatever, man. I’m out.” Camden throws his hands up and walks off.

Bennett looks at me like he wants to say something but doesn’t. He turns and follows Camden.

Landon turns his attention back to me. “Are you sure you’re ok?” His dark brown eyes search mine, but I look away.

“I’m fine, and I don’t need you fighting my battles.”

“I’m not fighting anything. Cam was being an ass, and sometimes he needs to be put in his place. I’ve known him my

whole life, so it's better if it comes from me.”

“That’s great for you.” I grab the basket of half-cracked eggs and walk around him. “He seems like a really great friend.”

Landon laughs behind me. “Good night, sweetheart. See you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

I mumble, “Don’t remind me,” as I walk inside.

I should’ve said that I’m not anybody’s sweetheart, but for some reason, I don’t think he’d care. And if I’m being completely honest with myself, I kinda like when he calls me that. Probably more than I should.



Later that evening when I’m showered and in my favorite pair of pink pajamas, I call my best friend. I just need to hear her voice.

“Hey, girl!” she answers cheerily.

“Hey.” I try to sound happy, but there’s a definite wobble in my tone. Serena notices.

“What’s wrong?”

I lie back on the flat pillow in my bed. I knew I should’ve brought my own pillow. “What’s not wrong, Serena? I’ve been outside all day long. I was drenched in sweat and covered in dirt. I have to wear the most godawful, clearance-rack clothes that don’t even fit right. I got sunburnt on my nose, which is not a good look. And the worst part is everything around here smells. Like so bad.”

“Oh my god, honey. I’m so sorry. That sounds like torture. I seriously can’t believe your parents are making you do this!”

“I know!” The tears are falling now. I think I needed a good cry. I’ve bottled all this up, trying so hard to hold it all back since I got here. I hate this and don’t want to be here, but I don’t have a choice if I want my trust fund.

“Well, how was your first day? Something good had to have happened?” she asks. That’s Serena. Always trying to see the positive.

“No. Nothing good happened. Everyone hates me. I had to touch a gross cow. And my fingers are stained purple from picking blueberries.”

“Everyone hates you?” she asks. “I don’t think that’s possible. People love you!”

“Not these people,” I counter. “They all hate me. Well, one of them was kind of nice. He showed me around.”

“He? Is he cute?” She’s always looking for cute guys. Everywhere we go, that’s the first task on her agenda. Mine too, usually, but today... I’m just tired.

“I mean, yeah, I guess he’s cute in a rugged, dirty sort of way,” I answer, picturing Landon. He is attractive, but I’d like to see him freshly showered and not in work clothes to make my full assessment.

“Oooh, rugged and dirty. That sounds fun. Why don’t you try to befriend him? You could have a fun friends-with-benefits thing while you’re there,” she suggests.

“Trust me, he does not want to be my friend,” I mumble. “And anyway, I’m too tired to even think about opening my legs for anyone.”

Serena laughs. “Look at you. Growing up already. Listen to me, Liv. You can do this. Just get up every morning and do what they ask you to do. The faster you show them how responsible you are, the faster you can come home.”

I sniffle and wipe my nose. “I know. I will. I just hate this.”

“Me too, girl. Me too. I miss you already.”

“Miss you too. Alright, I should probably go. I’ve got to get up before the sun is up.”

“Ew!”

“I know.”

“Ok, well, call me if you need to talk. I’m here for you, babe!”

We say goodbye, and I plug my phone in next to the bed. The combination of a day in the sun and the cryfest I just had makes me fall asleep the instant my eyes close.

I’ll get through this hellhole one day at a time.

CHAPTER 7

Landon

After working four days straight, I'm more than ready for my day off. Cam, Benny, and I work four days in a row, and then Dottie has a few other guys work the next two days while we're off. It's a constant rotation and took a while to work out, but we've got it down.

I spend my morning doing laundry and cleaning up my house. I've got a small, two-bedroom, one-bathroom bungalow just off Main Street. It's not much, but it's mine.

When I graduated high school, I was so ready to move out of my parents' house. Cam, Benny, and I all roomed together for a few years in a small house we rented. Then Benny had a daughter with his ex and needed a place of his own to be with her, so it was time for each of us to get our own place. We still live within walking distance of each other, though. It's hard not to be so close in a town this small. And we like to be close to Dottie's farm, just in case.

Cam texts me to meet them at Rick's Rockin' Diner for lunch. It's impossible to turn down one of Rick's milkshakes, even though I know Ellie will probably be there.

Ellie and I have dated on and off since we were sixteen. We've been off the last two years, and I plan on keeping it that way. She's a great friend, but we're just looking for different

things. It wouldn't be fair to keep stringing her along, but she's having a hard time accepting that.

My group of friends is taking up one of the back booths in Rick's. Music blares from the jukebox, and the distinct smell of French fries hits me. I love this place. We've all been coming here for years. It's a staple in Thundersville.

I wave to the hostess as I walk to the table. Along with Cam, Benny, and Ellie, Cat and Laura are also here. The six of us have been friends since before I can remember. Even now, we all hang out at least once or twice a week, no matter how busy we are. It's never been weird, even with the drama between me and Ellie. We can't let it be awkward. We all need each other in this town.

"There he is," Cam calls out when he sees me. I slide into the booth beside him.

"Landon, Cam was just telling us about your new farm hand," Cat says with a laugh. I immediately tense. I'm tired of people laughing at Olivia. Cam has been a dick all week. She's worked with us for three days and is doing a good job. She's only been assigned to easy stuff so far, but we can't just throw her into it. The day after I taught her how to do everything, she showed up right on time. She slid her gloves on and got to work without a word. Honestly, I was impressed.

But Cam has a stick up his ass about her. Benny hasn't said much, but that's to be expected. He pretty much keeps to himself. The less drama, the better.

"Oh yeah?" I answer, trying my best to keep my voice calm. I don't really want to hear what Cam has been saying about her.

“Yeah. Do you know who she is?” Ellie asks. She’s looking at me like it’s a trick question.

“Uh, no? I don’t guess I do. I just thought she was Ms. Dottie’s niece.”

“No. Well, yeah, she is, but she’s also pretty famous and, like, not in a good way. Have you Googled her?”

“Why the hell would I do that? You know I hate that gossip shit,” I tell her.

“I know. You’re no fun. She’s the daughter of Jameson Sterling of Sterling’s department stores. She’s made a name for herself by partying and getting in trouble. She’s basically the definition of a hot mess.”

Cam laughs, and I’ve never wanted to punch my best friend as badly as I do right now. He hasn’t even given Olivia a fair chance. There’s something about her that intrigues me. Not only because she’s beautiful, but she’s got a fire in her eyes that makes me want to get to know her. The real Olivia. Not the act she puts on for everyone else.

“What kind of trouble?” I ask. Olivia is feisty, that’s for sure. But I can’t see her getting into too much trouble.

“Apparently, she has a drinking problem. A paparazzi got a picture of her nipple one night when she was leaving a club. She looked toasted. And it was on the cover of like every magazine,” Cat tells the table. The thought of the whole world seeing Olivia’s nipple makes me livid, but I keep my fists balled at my sides to hide it. Olivia is just a co-worker. A very hot co-worker. I have no claim on her. Yet.

“Yeah, and TMZ is saying her parents sent her here to get her life together,” Laura finished.

“That makes sense,” Cam adds. “You should see her. She looks like she’s about to cry at the end of every day.”

“Shut up, man. She’s trying.” She does look like she’s about to cry every day. I try to talk to her, but she walks right past me. I’m sure she’s tired. It takes time to get used to this lifestyle.

Ellie squints at me like she’s trying to figure something out. I look away. Ellie has a weird way of seeing right through me. Probably because she’s known me for so long. I hate it.

“Speak of the devil, is that her?” Cat looks out the window of the diner. I follow her gaze until I see Olivia.

Her long chestnut hair is braided back today, starkly contrasting the messy ponytails she’s had the past few days. She’s wearing her jeans and boots, but she’s got on some sort of tight tank top that shows off her stomach.

I can’t lie; that look does something for me. I feel my dick twitch in my pants, which is really inconvenient right now. I’ve noticed that I get a similar feeling every time I look at her.

“What’s she doing?” Benny asks.

She’s walking down the sidewalk with her hands full of Walmart bags. That wouldn’t be unusual, except Walmart is a few blocks down. Why would she park over here if she was going to Walmart? Something doesn’t add up.

Before I think too much about it, I’m sliding out of the booth, telling my friends I’ll be right back. They call after me, but I don’t stop.

I walk out of the diner and jog until I catch up with Olivia. She doesn’t stop walking when she sees me.

“Olivia. Hey. What are you doing?” I glance down at the bags in her hands.

She looks at me like she’s never seen me before and answers, “Going home.”

“Are you walking?” I ask.

She looks down at her feet and then back up. “Looks like it.”

“Where’s Dottie?” I look around, expecting to see her somewhere, but I don’t.

“Farmers market.” That’s right. It’s Saturday. Dottie is always at the markets on Saturday and Sunday. I’m surprised she didn’t have Olivia go with her.

“She didn’t leave a truck for you?” I know Dottie has two vehicles. She prefers one over the other, but there’s no reason Olivia couldn’t have used the second.

“She did.”

I look around again. “Where is it?”

“At the farm,” she states plainly.

“Was there something wrong with the truck?” Maybe I can take a look at it. Car repair isn’t my favorite, but I’ve fixed a tractor or two on the farm.

“No.” God, she’s so infuriating sometimes. It makes me want to shake her and kiss her senseless at the same time.

“So you’re walking from Walmart to the farm? That’s like five miles,” I tell her.

“Thank you for that reminder.”

“Why are you walking?” I ask again, not giving up that easily.

“Jesus,” she groans, exasperated. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t know how to drive. Aunt Dottie needed me to grab some stuff from the store, and I needed a few things, so I walked.”

I grab her arm to stop her. “Olivia. Let me take you home.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m fine, Landon.” I think that’s the first time she’s said my name, and even with her voice laced with attitude, I like it.

“Olivia, come on. It’s hot out here. You’ve already walked this far. Let me take you back.”

She tugs her arm out of my grip. “It’s no big deal. I’m fine.”

I reach for the bags in one of her hands. “Can you stop being a brat for five seconds and let someone help you?”

It comes out a little harsher than I intended, but it gets her attention. She stops fighting me and lets go of the bags I was trying to take.

“Fine.” I lead her to my truck and throw her bags in the back before I open her door.

She looks at me like I’ve just grown a second head. “I can open my own door.”

I smile. “I’m sure you can, but my mama taught me manners, which means I open doors for a lady.”

One corner of her mouth tips up like she wants to smile but stops herself. “Was that almost a smile, sweetheart?” I tease.

“Shut up.” She rolls her eyes and climbs into my truck.

I get in my seat, crank the engine, and pull out of my spot on Main Street. I feel my pocket vibrate with what I’m sure is

a text from one of my friends, but I ignore it. I don't owe them an explanation. I wouldn't even know how to explain this anyway. Since Olivia walked through the front door of Dottie's house, I've felt a pull toward her. One I can't seem to ignore. One I don't *want* to ignore.

"Why don't you know how to drive?" I ask after a minute of silence.

"I'm from New York. We don't drive much there. And my father has a few drivers on staff for us. I just never needed to learn."

I nod. That makes sense. What does not make sense is what I say next. "I could teach you."

She looks over at me with one eyebrow raised. "To drive?"

"Yeah."

"Why would you do that?" she asks slowly, like she thinks I might have some big ulterior motive. It pains me to think she doesn't trust people and makes me wonder why. But that's a conversation for a different day.

I shrug. "Why not? If you're going to be here awhile, you should probably learn to drive. And who knows, you may enjoy driving."

She laughs. "Have you ever been to New York? I doubt I'd enjoy driving there."

"I haven't. The only place I've ever been to is the beach in Florida," I tell her honestly. Growing up, we didn't have much money. My parents tried their best, though. We'd get a hotel room every few years and drive down to the beach. They're some of my best memories; I'm sure my younger sister would say the same.

Her eyes go wide. “You’ve never been anywhere else?”

I chuckle at her expression. “No, ma’am. I take it you have?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, for events and stuff, but also vacations...” She trails off like she suddenly realizes she’s not supposed to talk to me like a friend. As much as I like her attitude, I want her to open up to me. I think I can get her there one day.

“So what do you say? Can I teach you how to drive?” I ask like she’ll be doing me a favor if she agrees. And in a way, she would be. I’d be able to get some extra one-on-one time with her. See if she’ll open up to me.

She studies my face, and I try not to smile. I like her eyes on me. “I guess I’ll let you.”

I pull into the familiar Underwood Farms dirt drive. “Alright. Next time I’m off, we’ll get started.”

“Ok.” She stares out the windshield. “Could you just not tell your friends I don’t know how to drive?”

Fuck. I hate that Cam has made her feel like this. She doesn’t deserve this. If what the girls were saying is true, she’s here to turn her life around. From what I can tell, she’s trying. Just in the few days she’s been here, she’s gone from wearing high-heeled boots and lingerie—which I certainly didn’t mind looking at—to work boots and baggy jeans. Her fingers are caked in dirt at the end of every day like the rest of us, and she hasn’t complained... much. But no one has swooped in to save her. She’s here, doing something she’s never done before, and I respect the hell out of that.

“Sure, sweetheart. It’ll be our secret.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” she asks quietly.

“Because you deserve my respect as much as anyone else,” I answer. The truth is, everything about her fascinates me. Maybe it’s because she’s shiny and new in town. Or maybe I see someone special under the mask she tries to put up. Someone who needs a friend and who might be a little more afraid than she leads on.

She eyes me for a second before climbing down from the truck, not allowing me to get the door for her, and grabbing the bags from the back.

I lean against the side of the truck and watch her walk up the porch. I could say I’m not checking out her ass, but it would be a lie. She turns right before the door and catches me checking her out.

She smirks. “Hey, Landon?”

“Hmm?”

She smiles at me. “Thanks for the ride.”

CHAPTER 8

Aunt Dottie gave me a day off from the farmers market, but the next morning, I'm up bright and early to help pack the truck.

Since I won't be doing any manual labor today, I decide to forego the baggy clothes Aunt Dottie made me buy and wear something from home. Hopefully, it'll make me feel like a real person again.

I put on high-waisted pink shorts and a black, cropped tank top I wore to a beach party in the Hamptons earlier this summer. At least here, no one will know I've already worn this outfit. I pull my hair back into a tight French braid I learned how to do yesterday from a YouTube video. I'm relying on YouTube how-to videos a lot these days, actually. I didn't realize how many things I didn't know how to do on my own.

Dottie and I have our tent at the market all set up as the sun starts climbing into the sky. I don't expect to see any customers for a while, but I'm proven wrong when a little old couple strolls over to our stand.

Being in a small town is weird. Everyone seems to know everyone. I've lived in New York for twenty-six years and hardly ever see the same people twice unless it's intentional.

Aunt Dottie introduces me to her friends, but I stay as far away as I can so I don't get dragged into their conversation. It's bad enough that I'm even here. The last thing I want to do is make small talk with people who are older than dirt. Yes, I confess—old people make me uncomfortable. What am I supposed to say to them? I can't relate to anything about their lives. It's just awkward.

As the morning goes on, more and more people show up. Dottie explains that on Sundays, a lot of people come out before or right after church. There are a few churches nearby, so people come in waves.

I run around, grabbing what people ask for and refilling things from the truck as stock runs out. We run out of our sunflower bouquets quickly. I didn't even know there were sunflowers growing at Underwood Farms, but I guess I haven't seen the whole farm yet.

There are a ton of other vendors at the market, but Dottie always has a consistent line. Mid-morning, I wipe the sweat off my brow and take a second to grab some water. I look around at the crowd and see the only familiar faces I know in this town.

Landon, Camden, and Bennett.

Great. I should've known that even on their day off, I'd still have to see them. Can't I catch a fucking break? Maybe I'll get lucky and they won't come over here.

I crane my neck a little more and see three women with them. Probably girlfriends or wives, although I haven't noticed any rings on their fingers. The first I do when I meet a man is check their ring finger. I'm not about to be pulled into that kind of drama.

One of the girls puts her hand on Landon's arm and throws her head back in laughter. She's pretty. Pretty enough that I feel a little tug of jealousy in my stomach, which is insane. I do not have a thing for him. He was nice to me like one time. That's all. But I did catch him checking me out yesterday, and I didn't hate it.

I wonder how the blonde would feel about him giving me driving lessons. I wonder if he even told her.

"Olivia. I need some more peaches," Aunt Dottie calls, breaking me out of my trance.

"Yep. Coming."

I get back to work, tossing the thought of Landon and his girlfriend out of my head. Dottie introduces me to people as the day goes on, several people telling me how much I look like my mother. A few of them ask me how she's doing, to which I respond that I have no idea. Aunt Dottie must not like that answer because she quickly follows it up by telling them my mother is doing great. Which is probably true since I'm not around to embarrass her.

"Look who it is." I look up to see Landon standing in front of me. I'd almost forgotten he was here. Like yesterday, he's switched his usual work cut-off T-shirts for a normal shirt, but this time, his hat is on backward, showing me more of his face. The backward hat is different. I like it more than I expected I would. And now I can officially confirm that he is attractive. Damn it.

Camden, Bennett, and the three women crowd around him.

"Hi. Do you need something?" I gesture to the food laid out on the table.

“Nah, just wanted to say hi. See how everything is going over here,” Landon tells me.

“Must be making lots of sales with that outfit,” Camden scoffs.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Well, I’ve got to make up for all that money I lost when I dropped those eggs, huh?”

He shakes his head. One of the girls, the pretty blonde that was all over Landon earlier, extends her hand to me. “Hi, I’m Ellie. The guys have told us so much about you.”

I look at her hand for a second before giving it a light shake. “If it came from Camden, I’m sure it wasn’t anything good.”

They all laugh, and no one tries to deny it. It’s basically a confirmation that he’s talking shit. What a little bitch.

Ellie links her arm with Landon and looks up at him. I know that look. I’ve seen it so many times. It’s infatuation. She’s head over heels for him. Unfortunately for her, Landon hasn’t looked at her once since he saw me. Poor thing. Someone should tell her that he’s not that into her.

“Landon, let’s go get food. Our favorite food truck is here today,” Ellie tells him. Aw, how cute. They have a favorite food truck. Gag.

“Right. See you bright and early in the morning, Olivia,” Landon says, keeping his eyes on me. His gaze unsettles me. It’s like he’s trying to see into my soul, and I absolutely can’t allow that.

“Yep,” I say, organizing the fruit to keep busy and not stare at Ellie holding onto his bicep. “Can’t wait to clean cow tits with you.”

Ellie chokes out a laugh. It's clear she doesn't know what to say to my comment. I don't try to help her either.

Landon laughs and shakes his head as he walks off. I jump back in helping Dottie with customers and try to forget that the last five minutes happened.

After a few more sales, there's finally a lull where we don't have a single customer.

"You're doing good today, hun," Dottie tells me before she takes a sip of her water. I seriously do not understand how she makes small talk with every single freaking person. How exhausting.

"Thanks. It looks exhausting having to talk to everyone. How do you remember all of their names?"

She laughs. "Well, most of 'em have lived here all their lives, like me. And I've been doing this farmers market for almost thirty years. I see the same faces over and over again. You start to get to know people. But I like it that way. People go with who they know. They're more likely to buy from me than to swing by Walmart and grab a carton of eggs."

I nod. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"I saw the guys stop by with their friends." She nods to where the group has moved near the food trucks.

"Yep. Sure did."

"They're nice people. Maybe you could try to be friends with them while you're here," she suggests.

I huff a laugh. "I don't think they want to be friends with me."

"You never know if you don't try."

We're silent for a moment before I can't help but ask, "What's the deal with Ellie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, are her and Landon a thing?" I hate myself for asking, but it's safer to ask my aunt than Landon. I don't understand why he was being so nice to me if he had a girlfriend. Is he trying to play me? Is he playing her? I will ditch any and all driving lessons if that's the case.

"I don't think so now, but they used to be. High school sweethearts, actually. I think they ended things a few years ago and are just friends now. Poor girl wants more from him though."

"Yeah." I think about her constantly touching him and how she looked at him. He didn't return any of those looks. "It did seem that way."

"Since we've got a break right now, why don't you grab some food from one of those food trucks? I hear that's where the kids like to eat these days."

I almost laugh but hold it back, recognizing that she's trying to be nice. I've eaten at a food truck before in New York, but they've never been my first choice. But I guess anything is better than the boring ham sandwiches Aunt Dottie packed for us.

I thank her and offer to bring her something back, but she waves me off, telling me she'd rather eat her sandwich. Weird.

There aren't many options here. I can go with tacos or pizza. And since I doubt anything will compare to pizza back home, I head to the taco truck. I get two spicy shrimp tacos and sit on the curb. I really don't want to get these shorts dirty,

but I've got to sit down for a minute, and there isn't anywhere else available.

I'm halfway through my first taco when someone sits beside me. Can't a girl eat a taco without being bothered?

"What's a pretty lady like you doin', eatin' all alone?" I look over, half expecting it to be Landon, but it's a man I've never seen before. He's wearing a baseball hat, which I'm learning is a standard uniform for guys down here. His beard is neatly trimmed but a little longer than I typically like. His smile is nice, though. Overall, I would say he's attractive. If we were at a party, I would probably let him dance with me, maybe even buy me a drink.

"Maybe I was waiting for you to find me." I figured it couldn't hurt to flirt a little. I wouldn't want to lose my touch while I'm down here.

He chuckles. "Well, today is your lucky day. I'm Dawson."

"Olivia."

"Olivia," he repeats like he's feeling it out. "Of course, you'd have a pretty name. Are you new around here?"

"Yep. I'm helping my aunt on her farm for a little while." This random stranger, along with anyone else in this town, doesn't need to know I'm here for one reason only: money. I want my money so I never have to work another day in my life.

"Who's your aunt?" he asks.

"Dottie Underwood."

His eyes go wide. "*You're* Dottie's niece?"

"Yes," I answer slowly, unsure why that's so surprising to him.

“Wow. I heard talk about you around town, but I just wasn’t expecting you to be so…”

“So?” I ignore the comment about the town talking about me. Nothing I’m not used to, honestly. Serena already sent me an article about how I’ve been sent away to get my act together. So now the whole world knows. At least the people who read the gossip mags.

“So beautiful.”

“Dawson, you flatter me.”

We talk for a few more minutes, and I learn he’s a mechanic at a shop just off Main Street and has lived here his entire life. The farthest north he’s been was Washington, D.C. for a class field trip years ago. And he’s really into baseball. Snooze fest.

By the time I finish my lunch, I know he’s about to ask me out. I’m considering saying yes, even though I can already tell that he’s too boring for me. But a night away from Dottie’s and a free meal sounds really good right about now. There are only so many mush casseroles I can eat.

Just as expected, when I stand to throw away my trash, he also stands and rubs his hands on his pockets like he’s nervous.

“Would it be ok if I asked for your number? I’d like to take you out sometime,” he says with a smile. If I’m not mistaken, he’s got a hint of a dimple. He’s cute; I’ll give him that. At least I’ll have something nice to look at on our date.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask and see?”

He smiles and lets out a little laugh like he wasn’t expecting me to say that. “Can I have your number, Olivia?”

I purse my lips and act like I'm thinking. "Yes, Dawson. I think that would be ok."

He takes out his phone. I rattle off my number, and he says he'll text me later, then heads off in the other direction. I walk back to Dottie's table and, without thinking, look over and see Landon staring directly at me. He's leaning against his truck with his arms crossed over his chest. The pretty blonde is nowhere to be seen.

His usual smile is gone, making it seem like he's pissed off about something, although I'm not sure how that would involve me.

I raise my hand and wiggle my fingers at him in a taunting wave. He smirks and shakes his head before climbing in his truck and taking off.

CHAPTER 9

Olivia

Apparently, there is no rest for the wicked around here because I never get a day to sleep in. Dottie never fails to bang on my door when it's time for me to get up. I'm certain the sound will haunt my dreams even after I leave here.

She's got a cup of steaming hot, mostly black coffee waiting for me when I finally stumble down the stairs. It's nothing like my favorite iced coffee, but I've learned to choke it down because it gives me the caffeine spike I need. Breakfast is always handed to me, although I don't usually have time to finish it before I'm thrown out the back door and off to my demise with the cow udders.

Landon always greets me with a smile. I'm not sure how the guy can be so happy this early in the morning. Camden greets me with a scowl and judgmental gaze. It's honestly impressive that my mere presence annoys him as much as it does. I barely say a word to him, yet he seems to hate me with every fiber of his being, and I have no clue why. Nor do I care.

After a week, the job has become routine. I know where the gloves are and the cleaner. Landon and I each start on a side and meet in the middle. Then I leave them to do their jobs while I check the chickens.

I've gotten quicker at it. I feed the chickens before snatching their eggs. It feels terrible that I'm stealing their

babies away, but there's no way in hell I'll say that to anyone else working on this farm. Nope. I'll continue to be the bad guy to keep an ounce of dignity.

I've just dropped the eggs off at the main house when Landon drives up next to me on a UTV.

"Let's go see some goats," he calls out.

I keep my eye on my next target—blueberry bushes. "No thanks."

He huffs a laugh. "It wasn't a question, sweetheart. Get in. We're going to see goats."

I sigh and stomp to the other seat. I'm barely seated before he takes off.

He pulls up to a large fenced-in area. I've seen it before but didn't take the time to notice what was housed there. I follow Landon up to the gate, and he nods to the fence. "Built this fence myself."

I roll my eyes. Does he think that would impress me? "Good for you."

He chuckles under his breath before he opens the gate. Several goats come running up to us. I instinctively grab Landon's arm and try to ignore the feel of his flexing bicep under my hand. It's made easier when a goat nips at my pants.

"Why is it trying to eat me?" I shout.

Landon chuckles beside me. "Relax. They're just excited."

I let the goats sniff around me while staying glued to Landon. He bends down to pet one of the smaller ones.

"You know, as much as I love you hanging on me, we're not going to get much done like this."

I immediately let go of his arm and step away. I'd kinda forgotten I even grabbed it to begin with.

“What do I need to do with the goats?” I ask, hoping we can ignore the fact that I had attached myself to him.

“We've got to give them some food and check their water.” He points to one of the bigger goats on the other side of the area. “That one just gave birth last week, so she needs some extra food to keep up her milk supply.”

We walk through the pen with a hoard of goats trailing behind us. Landon grabs a bale of hay and tosses it in front of me, telling me to spread this out in the area. I lean down to grab some of it when a goat comes up and hits my leg with her head.

“She wants pets,” Landon explains.

Am I supposed to pet her? I look from him to the goat at my leg and slowly place my hand on her head. She better not fucking bite me.

She's softer than I was expecting. I move my hand back and forth a few times before another goat comes up to me with an expectant look.

Oh fuck. They all want pets now. I sigh and squat down to drop the handful of hay I was holding. But when I get close to the goats, they both step forward, scaring me, and I end up falling back on my ass.

I yelp, but that doesn't scare them off. One of them even starts licking my arm. “Ew, gross! They're licking me, Landon. Help!”

I hear his amused laugh. Several other goats crowd around me until I'm stuck in the center of them.

“I think they like you,” Landon calls out. And when I look up, I see him standing in front of me with his phone out.

“Are you taking a picture of this?” I ask in disbelief. These goats are going to eat me, and he’s taking a freaking picture.

“The town newspaper needs a new headline for the week.”

“Are you kidding me?” That is the last thing I need right now. No one in this town likes me, and now I’ll be the butt of their jokes because I got attacked by some goats.

“Yes, I’m kidding. I wanted to document this for my own personal enjoyment.”

“Great.”

A small animal pushes through the bigger goats until he gets to me. He looks at me before climbing on my lap and sitting there. I freeze. A baby goat is sitting on my lap. What am I supposed to do with it?

“You can just stand up. They’re all very sweet and won’t hurt you,” Landon explains. Easier said than done. He’s not the one being held hostage right now.

“The baby is on me.” How could I possibly get up now? He’s actually kind of cute.

“Pick him up. You can hold him while you spread the hay.”

It feels wrong to disturb him, but I’ve quickly learned that the longer I mess around, the longer I have to work. So, I pick up the baby and hold him awkwardly as I attempt to stand. One of the goats knocks me with its head again, but I keep my balance this time.

Suddenly, they realize Landon is more exciting because he has the food, so they take off in his direction.

I watch as he gives them their food while taking the time to pet each one. It's kind of sweet, not that I would ever tell him that after he laughed while they were attacking me.

I distribute the hay like Landon said to. Then we refill their water before I put the baby down by his mom.

"It was nice meeting you, little guy. Maybe I'll see you again soon." I pet his head before I turn to leave.

"Seems you made a new friend."

"Shut up." I walk towards the gate.

"What? It's cute. Maybe that should be the next headline. New girl in town befriends baby goat."

I roll my eyes. "Are you always this annoying?"

"Only to you, sweetheart," he says. I don't look at him, but I can tell by his voice that he's smiling.

"Well, aren't I the lucky one?"

He laughs as he opens the gate, and we walk out, making sure not to let any of the goats out.

"You did good in there," he tells me when we get to the UTV.

"Thanks," I mumble.

"How was the market yesterday?" he asks, starting the engine.

"Good. I guess. Aunt Dottie seemed happy."

"Make any new friends?"

I shrug. "Maybe." I'm sure he's asking about my conversation with Dawson, but that's none of his business, just

like it's none of my business if his ex-girlfriend is still in love with him.

“Hmm.”

The rest of the ride is silent until he drops me off with the blueberries and tells me he'll see me at lunch.



At the end of the day, once everyone is gone and the work is done, I sit at the dining room table, eager to eat whatever Dottie has cooked. I'm freaking starving. I was also dying of thirst. As soon as I walked in, I chugged a bottle of water like I used to chug beers.

While we're eating, Dottie says, “You should probably do some laundry tonight. I imagine you're getting low on clean clothes.”

“Laundry?” I ask.

“Mm-hmm.”

“You don't have a service for that?”

She stares at me for a moment. “A service for laundry?”

“Yeah, you know they come and grab your dirty clothes and then drop them back off the next day all nice and clean.”

“No, hun. No laundry service around here. You've got to do it yourself. I take it you don't know how to use a washer?” I shake my head, and she sighs. “Bring your clothes down after dinner, and I'll show you how to do it. But after that, you're on your own.”

“Alright.” Seems like I'm on my own a lot these days.

After I do the dishes, even though I'm exhausted, I haul a giant pile of dirty clothes to the laundry room. Dottie shows me how to put the soap in and which setting to use, and before I know it, I'm doing my first-ever load of laundry.

"Not too bad, huh?" Dottie asks. "Almost seems a shame to pay someone to do that when it's that easy."

I don't agree with her, but I don't think she expects me to. She's said the same thing about cleaning the house and mowing the front lawn. All of which I would definitely still pay someone to do.

"Well, I'm going to work on my puzzle. *Wheel of Fortune* is on if you want to join." She walks away before I can answer.

I've got to wait for these clothes to finish so I can put them into the dryer before I go to sleep. There's nothing else to do, so, much to my dismay, I find myself sitting next to Dottie on her ugly ass couch, watching a weird game show and working on a puzzle of a basket full of kittens.

At the end of the night, after I've transferred my clothes to the dryer and lie in bed staring at the ceiling, I realize I actually had fun tonight. Dottie and I solved a few of the puzzles on the TV, and it was exciting each time we found a connecting piece on our kitten puzzle.

I kind of can't believe all the things I've done this week that I've never done before.

My mind wanders to the way Landon looked at me today when I was holding the goat. His smile was wide, and his eyes never left me, like he never wanted to stop looking at me. I hate to admit that I actually liked him looking at me. I'm used to being the center of attention, but this was different. He made me feel pretty even when I was looking my absolute

worst. And I can't believe a dirty farm boy made me feel that way.

What the hell is this place doing to me?

CHAPTER 10

Landon

I've been counting down the days until I get some one-on-one time with Olivia during our driving lessons. It's been killing me not to ask her what Dawson said to her that day at the farmers market, but I try to keep it strictly professional while we're at work, making sure to thoroughly show her every task Dottie asks me to. I want her to be successful for her sake and for the farm. She picks up everything quickly, and I think she's even starting to like the goats.

The day before my next day off, I pull her aside and quietly ask if she's still good for our driving lesson tomorrow. She looks around to make sure no one heard me before nodding and walking off. It feels like we're sneaking around, and I guess, in a way, we are. Although there's definitely a different kind of sneaking around I'd like to do with her.



Olivia is already walking down the porch when I pull into the driveway to pick her up. She hops into the passenger seat before I can even undo my seatbelt. I was going to open her door, but I guess she had other plans.

“Let’s go,” she tells me as she shuts the door.

“Are you in a hurry?” I ask, putting the truck in reverse.

“I told Aunt Dottie I was going on a walk. I don’t want her to see your truck.”

“Aw, sweetheart. Am I your dirty little secret?” I tease.

She looks me up and down before she answers. “You’re certainly dirty.”

I laugh. This woman doesn’t know how dirty I can be. I know she was referring to my clothes, even though I wore my nice jeans today. But it still makes my dick twitch in my pants. The things I want to do to her...

Her phone vibrates, pulling me out of my dirty thoughts. She looks at it and smiles.

As I pull out onto the road, my curiosity gets the better of me, and I have to ask, “Who’s that?”

“My best friend, Serena. Why? Am I not allowed to text in your truck?” she responds snidely.

“You can do whatever you want in my truck, sweetheart. Just thought it might be Dawson.”

I see her head turn to look at me from the corner of my eye.

“How do you know I know Dawson?” she asks, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. She knows I saw them together. She wants me to admit I was watching her.

I shrug. “Saw you with him at the market. Y’all were lookin’ mighty friendly.”

She straightens in her seat. “I didn’t realize you were watching me so closely. And not that it’s any of your business, but we’re going on a date. Tonight, actually.”

I can't stop the laugh that comes out. "You and Dawson?"

"Yes. What's so funny about that?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. It's just... I'm not sure he can handle you, sweetheart."

She scoffs and looks out the window. "I'm sure he can *handle* me just fine. But thank you *so much* for your concern."

Concern or the fact that Dawson doesn't deserve to be anywhere near her. She's way too good for him, and I tell her that. But it seems to rub her the wrong way.

"I don't think your girlfriend would appreciate you telling me this," she spits back.

I raise an eyebrow. "Girlfriend?"

"Yeah, the pretty blonde from the market. Ellie."

Fucking Ellie. She was all over me that day. I had to tell her I needed to leave just to get her off me. I don't know what her deal is lately, but she's acting like we're together when we're not. We haven't been for years, but every so often, she gets it in her head that we'll get back together. I love Ellie. She's a great person. But she's not the person for me, and it's unfair of me to keep stringing her along.

"I don't have a girlfriend," I tell her.

"Does she know that?" I can hear the irritation in her voice, and I like it. She sounds a little jealous.

"Yes, she does know that. We haven't been together in years." I leave out the romantically or physically part. I know Ellie wants more with me, but I don't want that with her. Not anymore.

We ride in silence until we get to the abandoned strip mall where I'm going to teach Olivia how to drive.

"Alright," I say, putting the truck in park. "Let's switch places."

She nods, and we get out of the truck to swap seats.

She straps herself in and puts her hands on the steering wheel. Her back is straight, but she looks like she belongs right where she is. I can't take my eyes off her, sitting there like she owns the road. So much fucking confidence.

"You know, you look good in the driver's seat of my truck," I tell her before I think better of it.

She smirks. "I look good doing a lot of things."

God, I bet she fucking does. But I'm not here to picture what she would look like with her lips around my cock, so I show her how to adjust the mirrors and point out which pedal is the gas and which is the brake.

"Alright, put your foot on the brake and move this gearshift to the D." I point out the gearshift, and she follows my directions. "Now, take your foot off the brake and press down slowly on the gas."

She takes a deep breath before she moves her foot. It's not as graceful as I hoped, and we're flung backward before she slams her foot back on the brake.

"I said slowly press the gas," I tell her laughingly. "Try it again, but this time, don't stomp on the pedal. Ease your foot down gradually."

She tries again, and this time is a little smoother. Still a little jerky, but at least we aren't pressed against our seats.

"There you go."

I direct her to try some turns around the abandoned parking lot. She's not a terrible driver, but she definitely needs some practice.

One minute, she seems like she has the hang of it. The next minute, she's slamming on the brakes because a bird flew in front of the truck twenty feet away.

Her knuckles are white from her death grip on the steering wheel. I try to get her to relax by turning on some music, but it doesn't help. Apparently, country music isn't her thing, and the radio doesn't get much else around here.

We continue this for about an hour before calling it a day. I figure she's probably going to have a cramp in her hands from that grip.

"You did really good," I tell her on our way back to Dottie's.

"You don't have to lie to me, Landon."

"I'm not lying. Everybody is a little nervous when they start out. You'll get used to it."

"Were you nervous?" she asks.

I laugh, thinking about the first time my dad took me driving. "Oh yeah. I was so nervous. I ended up jumping a curb and hitting a street sign in my dad's truck. It's his favorite story to tell people."

She laughs, and I love the sound of it. She looks beautiful when she laughs. Her eyes close, and her head tilts back a little. It's true joy. I'd let her laugh at me all day, every day, if it made her this happy.

Olivia asks me to drop her at the end of the driveway so Aunt Dottie doesn't see my truck. I don't bother telling her

that Dottie isn't stupid. She'll figure it out eventually. But I let her have this.

"Have fun on your date tonight," I tell her, even though it physically pains me that she's going out with him. She shouldn't be going out with him. She shouldn't be going out with anyone but me. She just doesn't know it yet.

"I'm sure I will. Thanks for the driving lesson."

"Anytime, sweetheart." I wink at her before she shuts the door.



Later that evening, I hit my lowest of lows, but luckily, no one is around to witness it.

I know exactly where Dawson is going to take Olivia on their date. It's the only nice restaurant in town and a well-used place for first dates. Everyone goes there, which is why I would never take Olivia there. She deserves something special.

I can't sit at home any longer, thinking about the two of them sitting across a table from each other. Is he holding her hand, looking into her eyes? Is he going to try to kiss her? Is she going to let him? The unknown is killing me.

So I hop in my truck, telling myself I'm going to stop by a fast-food restaurant and get a burger for dinner, which I do. But instead of going straight home after, I drive down Main Street a bit.

I'm kicking myself for not making a move before Dawson did, but I didn't want to seem desperate. I wanted her to get to

know me. But fucking Dawson grew a pair and asked her out before I could. Honestly, I'm still surprised he had the nerve. He was always a quiet dude in school.

I make an illegal U-turn when I reach the end of the brick buildings down the street. As I drive by the little Italian restaurant again, it just so happens that Dawson and Olivia are walking out. Olivia is smiling, but thankfully, she's not holding his hand, and there's a good five feet between them as they head down the sidewalk to Dawson's truck.

Seeing them makes me feel better; there's no way this date is going anywhere.

God, I'm pathetic. I pass the two of them quickly, hoping they don't notice me. When I'm out of their line of sight, I pull the burger out of the bag and eat it as I drive home. Alone.

Selfishly, I want Olivia to be my girl. All I've got to do is convince her that it's a good idea.

Shouldn't be too hard. Right?

CHAPTER 11

I'm knee-deep in dirt when I look up and see Landon standing over me.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

I'm sure it looks a little suspicious that I'm frantically digging up dirt around a bunch of sweet potatoes.

"I dropped an earring," I explain, turning back to the dirt to keep sifting through it.

He kneels down next to me. "What's it look like?"

"Um, it's a gold and sapphire stud." I show him my other ear so he can see the one still attached.

He starts digging next to me. "Did it fall out?"

"Obviously."

He laughs, and I feel his gaze on mine. "Oh, wait. Look at me." He wipes his hands on his jeans and then reaches for my hair. His fingers tug gently on one of my braids, and something falls into his hand. "Is this it?"

I look down at the earring and then up at him. "Yeah, it is."

His face is inches from mine. We're both sweaty and covered in dirt, but I can't help glancing at his mouth. Do I want to kiss him? Does he want to kiss me? I think he does. His lips part, and he reaches out to tuck a loose strand of hair

behind my ear. That's a classic "I want to kiss you" move, right?

What is happening?

I don't even like kissing. When I'm with a guy, I'll let them kiss me because I know it's what they want. But I would rather get straight to the orgasming portion of the evening. And, at least in my experience, that doesn't happen with kissing.

"Thanks," I tell him, tearing my gaze away from his annoyingly perfect lips before I get any more hot and bothered. "My mom gave me these for my birthday a few years ago. I shouldn't have even been wearing them out here today. Guess I was just feeling a little homesick."

I don't know why I share that when he didn't even ask. Maybe because he keeps being nice to me. I've noticed that when I talk, he looks at me like he's genuinely interested in what I have to say, which is rare for me. Even when I was out with Dawson the other night, he looked at my tits more than my face.

To be fair, my dress was very low cut, but still.

"Are you and your mom close?" he asks.

"Um, I wouldn't say that. Not anymore, at least." We used to do things together all the time, but it was always things she wanted to do where I had to be the perfect daughter. I couldn't have a hair out of place. It got to be too much for me. It seemed I could never meet her expectations of me. I lashed out and rebelled. Started looking for attention from random guys. I got caught up in the party lifestyle and didn't look back.

"Why not?"

I scoff. “You know who my mother is, right? She’s perfect. A beauty queen. I’m her opposite. Far from perfect. A disappointment.”

He frowns. His fingertips trail down my cheek, and I lean into his touch without thinking. “You’re the furthest thing from a disappointment, sweetheart.”

I used to hate when he called me that, but now, with his voice low and husky, it sends a flutter straight to my core.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You don’t even know me.”

“I’m trying to change that. There’s a party tomorrow night, down by the lake. Come with me.”

The word party piques my interest even though I know it won’t be anything like the parties back home. Anything would be better than nothing, though. But still... something seems suspicious.

“Why would I go with you?” I ask

“Why wouldn’t you?” he counters.

“You haven’t exactly been welcoming.”

He tilts his head to study me. “I think you’re confusing me with someone else. I drove you home that one day and have shown you the ropes. And I’m giving you driving lessons. I would’ve thrown you a welcome party, but I didn’t know you were coming until you showed up here.”

I look away. He’s right. He’s the only one who’s been nice to me.

“Come on. It’ll be fun. I’ll pick you up around five. Wear your bathing suit.”

“Fine,” I say with a forced huff, not wanting to show him how excited I am to go to a party. Hopefully, there will be enough people there that I won’t have to talk to Camden at all since he’s the one who seems to have it out for me.



Dottie is hesitant to allow me to go to the party, but when I tell her Landon is picking me up and bringing me home, she relents.

I call Serena while I’m getting ready. I’ve hardly had a chance to talk to her since I’ve been here. I’m so tired by the end of each day that I fall asleep instead of calling her. I’m a shitty friend, but she doesn’t hold it against me.

Hearing her voice reminds me of home and how much I miss it. I admit I don’t miss the hangovers, but I miss the city and the people and my life.

“I can’t believe you’re going to a real cowboy party,” Serena squeals into the phone.

“I don’t know if I would call it a cowboy party. It sounds like some people just hanging out at a lake.”

“Uh, yeah, but I bet one of them will be wearing a cowboy hat, which makes it a cowboy party.” I don’t know if I agree with that logic, but ok. “I’m so jealous. I bet they’re all hot as fuck.”

Landon’s face immediately pops into my head, but I quickly shake it away. “They’re alright, I guess.”

“I wonder if your new boyfriend will be there.” She laughs, and I groan. I never should’ve told her about Dawson,

and I never should've agreed to go out with him. He's been blowing up my phone ever since. I tried to be nice about it, but I finally had to tell him I wasn't interested in seeing him again.

"I hope not. He's so boring," I whine.

"Still, I'm proud of you for going on an actual date. And you didn't even let him fuck you afterward. That's a big improvement. Put it on your 'how I'm maturing' list for Mom and Dad. That should be a step in the right direction for your inheritance, right?"

It's almost embarrassing that keeping my legs closed is an actual improvement for me. I enjoy sex. Who doesn't? When sex started to get boring, I tried doing it with a lot of different men, but they all fell flat.

Maybe I'm the problem. Maybe I'm asking for too much. But I don't think so. I shouldn't have to settle, right?

"Yeah, I'm sure I'm making Daddy proud," I murmur.

She changes the subject. "So, what are you wearing to the cowboy party?"

I sigh and don't bother correcting her again about the cowboy thing. "Well, he said to wear my bathing suit, so I was going to go with the white one."

"Oooh, that's a good one," she interjects. I wore it to a pool party before I was shipped off. It definitely attracted lots of attention. It's... tiny.

"And then I'm going to pair it with my white miniskirt and the see-through black tank."

"Oh my god. These boys are going to fall to their knees for you, babe. You're probably the hottest thing to hit that town since your mom left."

I laugh. My mom and her departure seem to be the talk of the town. I'm learning that people who grow up here don't tend to leave. So when she left, everyone noticed. More importantly, everyone remembered.

I glance down at the clock. "Shit. Landon is going to be here soon. I've still got to get dressed."

"Yum. Landon sounds like such a hot name. You better snap a pic of him for me, or you're officially a terrible friend."

"I'll try my best to get one."

We say our goodbyes and hang up. I throw on my bikini and clothes and find my Valentino studded sandals.

I'm walking down the stairs right as Landon knocks.

His eyes darken when I open the door, and he takes in my outfit. I try my hardest to not look at the way his muscles look in his tank top, but they're hard to miss. I imagine he's built this way because of all the physical labor he does and not from spending hours in the gym. For some unexplainable reason, that makes it even more attractive.

"Landon. You better have her home at a decent hour. She has to work tomorrow," Aunt Dottie announces as she comes up behind me. I didn't even hear her walk up because I was so entranced with Landon.

He tips his baseball cap at her. This one is nicer and cleaner than the ones he wears while he's working. "Yes, ma'am, I will."

She looks at me and tells me to be careful and make smart decisions. It sounds like something my mother used to tell me before we all realized I wasn't capable of making smart decisions.

I nod and follow Landon to his truck. He opens the door for me, something I'm still not used to, and I climb in. I'll never admit it, but I love his truck. It smells like him. Not the gross end of a long day of work smell, but his actual scent. Like the way he smells now. It's subtle but spicy, like I could wrap myself up in it and never get tired of it.

I was surprised that he actually trusted me to drive this truck. He casually handed over the wheel like he would've let me do whatever I wanted. I figured most of the men in this town were unnaturally attached to their trucks, but Landon seemed the opposite.

That first driving lesson was a little more intense than I was expecting. I was nervous. It's a lot of responsibility to be in control of a vehicle, and I'm not sure I'm ready for it. People always make driving look so easy. Even so, I still find myself excited to do it again.

"When are we doing another lesson?" I ask when he starts up the engine, careful to keep my eyes straight ahead and not on him. I wouldn't want him to think I like staring at him or anything. That would be crazy.

He chuckles. "How about tomorrow?"

I smile. "Ok."

He drives us to the lake with one hand out his open window and one hand casually draped over the steering wheel. I keep sneaking glances at his hands. Ever since he brushed his fingers down my cheek yesterday, I've been thinking about him touching me again. His hands were rough from callouses, but his touch was gentle. It was... surprising.

We get to the lake, and he parks behind a bunch of other trucks. It seems like we're one of the last ones here.

I wait for Landon to open my door because he likes to do that for me. Who am I to fight it if he wants to treat me like a princess?

He grabs a case of beer from his truck bed and laces our fingers together with his other hand. I look down at where we're connected, feeling those stupid flutters in my stomach again.

"Is your girlfriend going to be here tonight?" I ask. The question is meant to be playful, but he doesn't take it like that.

He stops abruptly and puts the beer down. Then he pulls my hand and spins me until my back is up against a tree. He puts our linked hands over my head and rests his free hand on my hip.

His lips hover over my ear as he whispers, "Seems I haven't been clear enough with my intentions, so let's fix that. I want you, Olivia. I want you to give me a chance. I don't just want to be some guy you work with, alright? I've wanted you from the moment you walked into Ms. Dottie's house with those ridiculous shoes and a bad attitude. No one else at this party matters. Not my friends. Not Ellie. Not Dawson. Not any other man who takes one look at you and thinks they deserve a shot with you. If you're giving out shots, I want the first and only one."

"Oh," I breathe out.

His mouth is so close to mine that I could easily turn my head and our lips would touch. I can't think straight. Not with his closeness and not with everything he just said, because wow.

"What if... what if I don't like you like that," I say, although it's not very convincing. At this point, I'm just trying

to argue to keep myself from falling to my knees.

He chuckles, sending a tingle down my body straight to my core. “You’re gonna tell me you don’t want me, Olivia?” His hand slides up from my hip to rest against my chest. “Your heart is racing.” He slowly drags his hand up to my cheek, lightly brushing over it. “Your cheeks are flushed.” His thumb trails along my bottom lip. “Your breathing is erratic. You want me, Olivia. Whether or not you want to admit it.”

When his thumb gets to the middle of my mouth, I use my teeth to gently pull his thumb into my mouth and bite.

“I guess we’ll have to see, won’t we,” I tell him after I release his thumb.

He smirks. “I guess we will.”

CHAPTER 12

Landon

All eyes are on us when we clear the tree line, but I ignore them. My focus is on Olivia.

She doesn't fully trust me yet because Camden is still acting like a fucking fool. I get it. He doesn't want the farm falling into the wrong hands after we've worked so hard to get it to where it is today. We've all put our blood, sweat, and tears into that farm. We've learned everything, from how to grow crops to dealing with certain livestock. Benny even set up riding lessons and put a lot of work into marketing them in town, something he hates to do. We work long-ass days, but we do it because we love it and are good at it.

But at the end of the day, it's not our farm. It's Dottie's, and she can do whatever she wants with it. If that means giving it to Olivia, then so be it. I'd stand right beside her and help her through it if she needed it or leave if she told me to kick rocks.

Honestly, at this point, I'd probably do anything Olivia asked me to do. She's got me wound so tightly and doesn't even know it. Well, she might know it after that little stunt I pulled back by the truck, but I needed her to know my intentions.

I put the case of beer over by the coolers, grabbing a cold one for myself. Olivia asks for water.

“You don’t drink?” I remember what the girls talked about at the diner a few weeks ago. I haven’t asked Olivia about it and don’t plan on it. If she wants to tell me, she will.

“I... used to. Just trying something new,” she explains.

I grab her a bottle of water, and we walk hand in hand over to where my friends are sitting.

It’s a big deal to show any kind of PDA with someone around here. It gives everyone the idea that you’re serious about someone.

But that’s exactly what I want.

My friends don’t get it. Sure, Olivia is beautiful. That’s obvious to anyone who looks at her. Her attitude is her defensive mechanism. I can see that, but I don’t think others do yet.

Something is going on in her pretty little head, and I want to break through it. I want to know the real Olivia, not just the one who can throw out a sarcastic comment. Even if I love those.

So, yeah, I want things with Olivia to be serious. I want my friends to realize I’m serious when I tell them to stop talking shit. And I want Ellie to know once and for all that I can’t be with her how she wants.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Olivia tugs on my arm to stop. “Your friends don’t like me that much.”

I turn to her and tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Since when do you care what anyone thinks about you?”

She smiles at me, and that look alone makes me want to drag her out of here and back to my place where I can have my way with her.

“I don’t really...”

“That’s what I thought. Just be yourself. And if they don’t like that, then fuck ’em.”

She laughs, and I walk us through the crowd to my friends. Several people call my name and shoot me a wave, and I tip my beer to them. No way am I letting go of Olivia’s hand.

There’s got to be at least fifty people here tonight, mostly people we went to school with. The only one not here is Benny, and that’s because it’s his night with his daughter. My group sits in big chairs on the dock by the lake. There’s one chair intentionally left open for me.

I didn’t tell anyone I was bringing Olivia. One, because it’s none of their business, and two, I didn’t want to hear any shit from anyone.

I sit in the empty chair and tug Olivia’s hand, motioning her to sit on my lap. Her eyes widen as she looks from my lap to my face. She slowly sits down, a little stiff at first, but I wrap my arm around her and pull her into my chest. Her shoulders finally relax.

She feels too good on my lap, though. This might not have been my best idea.

“Hey, guys. Y’all remember Olivia, right?” I say, breaking the tense silence.

She does a tiny wave that’s so out of character that I almost laugh. She seems nervous.

“Hi, Olivia. How are you?” Laura asks. Thank god one of them is going to be nice.

“Good. You?”

“Good.”

Silence.

Ok, well, that ended quickly. Usually my friends can't shut up when we're all together.

Cat leans forward in her chair with a beer in her hand. "Olivia, can I ask you something?"

Oh, shit. Here we go. I narrow my eyes at Cat, but she doesn't see me. She's focused on Olivia.

Olivia shrugs. "Sure."

"Did you really party with The Knox Summerland Band? I saw a magazine linking you together," Cat asks.

She laughs at the question. "I've partied with Knox, but we aren't together and never have been. His parents live down the street from mine. He actually went to school with my older brother, so I've known him for a while."

"That is so cool," Cat squeals. Olivia smiles, and the conversation picks back up. The girls start talking about whoever this Knox Summerland is. Cam ignores them and focuses on me, talking about a place he heard might have some good fishing this season.

Everything feels normal all of a sudden. There aren't any snide remarks. No one is being mean to Olivia. Everything is actually going my way. It's going to be a good night.



Olivia takes out her phone and snaps a selfie of us. She smiles at the camera while I look at her. She's getting comfortable with me, and I love it.

“Let’s get in,” Cam announces, standing from his chair and taking off his shirt.

Olivia turns to me, horror written on her face. “You guys actually get in that lake? You can’t even see in there.”

I chuckle and nuzzle into her hair. “Just try not to think about it.”

“You’re joking.” Her eyes are so wide.

“Not joking, sweetheart. The closest pool is a town over, so we’ve always spent our summers swimming in this lake.”

My hands move to her hips and help her stand, tugging my shirt off. Even though the sun is setting, it’s still blazing hot. Her eyes trail down my body, and I can see the want in them.

“Like what you see?” I tease.

She scoffs. “Don’t flatter yourself. I was just checking for any strange deformities.”

Her response doesn’t stop my smile. “Whatever you say.”

I reach out and help pull her tank top off, leaving her with two tiny triangles covering her nipples. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought her here in a bathing suit. I don’t need everyone in town lusting over my girl.

She shimmies out of her skirt and looks at the water again. “It’s just gross.”

I grab her hand. “You’ll be fine.”

Walking backward, I bring her along with me. She’s resisting, but I pull harder. Behind me, I hear all my friends jumping in.

“Come on. You’ve got to have the full Thundersville summer experience,” I tell her.

She groans but takes a few steps until we're standing at the edge of the dock.

“On the count of three, we jump.” I count down, and we jump hand in hand into the water.

When we surface, she latches on to me. Maybe this was a good idea after all.

“See, not too bad, right?” I ask, wrapping her legs around me. There's no way she can't feel how hard I am, but thankfully, she doesn't say anything.

“I'm not thinking about it.”

I laugh and swim us over to my friends. She stays wrapped around me the entire time. We all take turns jumping into the lake with the rope we put up as kids. I'm surprised it's held up as well as it has. We've used this thing so many times. My mom would probably have a heart attack if she knew we were out here doing this when we were barely ten.

But we're all alive and well, so what she doesn't know won't hurt her.

Even Olivia takes a turn with the rope. I'm a little nervous that her bikini will fall off when she jumps. I've honestly never seen a bathing suit that small before. Thankfully, she makes it back to me, everything still tucked into the fabric. I don't want any nip slips happening on my watch. I don't care if her nipple was plastered on the cover of a magazine—something I never looked up. When I see her nipples for the first time, they'll be on display right in front of me and for my eyes only.

Everyone starts getting out when the sun finally sets.

Cat pulls Olivia away to meet someone. Olivia looks at me to make sure it's ok. Like I could tell her what she can and

can't do. I smile at her, and she walks off with Cat and Laura. Ellie stays behind.

I've seen her eyeing me all night, but she's kept her distance. Now that Olivia isn't glued to my side, she makes a beeline for me. She stands next to me and keeps her eyes on Olivia, who is shaking hands with someone.

"You like her, huh?" Ellie asks quietly.

I sigh, hating that it's come to this between us. When we broke up the last time, we both agreed that we weren't right for each other. Over the years, I've encouraged her to date other people, but she's never been with anyone seriously. It's always felt like she was waiting for me. No matter what I say to her, she doesn't get it. But maybe seeing me with someone else will help her move on.

"Yeah, El. I do," I tell her.

"She doesn't seem like your type." She doesn't sound mad, just curious.

I shrug. "Maybe that's why I'm drawn to her. She's not like anyone I've ever met."

"She's... a lot."

I chuckle. That's an understatement, but I wouldn't want Olivia any other way than how she is. "I can handle it."

Ellie nods and purses her lips. She looks like she might cry but holds it back. "I'm happy for you, Lan. I am. She really does seem nice. I keep trying to figure out why Cam doesn't like her, but I still don't get it."

"Yeah, well, Cam just doesn't like change. He'll get used to her." I have to hope my best friend will get over whatever issues he has with her because I want Olivia around.

“Is she staying here permanently?” Of course, Ellie would be the one to bring up the thing that’s been festering in the back of my mind. Olivia hasn’t told me the circumstances around why she’s here. The only thing I have to go on is the gossip the girls gave me.

“I’m not sure,” I answer honestly.

“She doesn’t seem like the type of girl to be okay living in a small town.” I know she’s not saying this to hurt me. She’s just stating a fact. A fact I’ve been thinking about for weeks, but I’m trying my best to live in the moment. If I only have Olivia for a little while, then I’m going to enjoy it while I can.

“Yeah. She’s way too much for Thundersville.” Olivia looks at me over her shoulder with a smile that makes me weak in the knees. “Excuse me, El.”

I walk over to Olivia and slide my arm around her waist. “You ready to get out of here, sweetheart?”

She nods, so I lead us back to my truck. I help her in and start the drive back to Underwood Farms.

“Did you have a good time?” I ask.

“Yeah. I did.” Her window is down, and her hand hangs out, moving with the warm air. She didn’t bother with her coverup after we got out of the lake, so she’s practically naked in my truck. It’s distracting, to say the least.

“Not like your New York parties, huh?”

She laughs. “No, definitely not. Although I wasn’t sober enough to remember most of those.”

I’m quiet for a minute to see if she’ll keep talking, but she doesn’t.

“Do you miss it?” I finally ask.

She thinks about it. “Not as much as I thought I would. I miss my friends. I miss getting dressed up. I miss the shopping. Oh god, the shopping.” We both laugh at that. There are a few small boutiques in Thundersville, but for the most part, it’s Walmart or bust around here. “But I don’t miss the blackouts. Not knowing how I got somewhere at the end of the night.”

I’ve had my fair share of drunken nights, but they’re few and far between because of my job. Waking up so early and working long hours makes it hard to do any partying.

“Do you feel better being away from all of that?” Selfishly, I know what I hope her answer is.

“I don’t feel better that I haven’t had my nails done in weeks and they’re caked in dirt. But I guess I needed to get away. Gain some perspective or whatever. I think that’s what my parents said after they called me an embarrassment.”

“Hmm.” It pisses me off that her parents would say that to her, but their decision led her to Thundersville, which led her to me.

“So, now I’m here. Getting down and dirty on a freaking farm. Never in my life did I think I would say that sentence.”

I laugh. “Well, you’re doing a great job. I think your parents would be proud.”

“Let’s hope so.”

I pull into Dottie’s drive. All the lights in the house are out. I’m sure Dottie’s been in bed for hours at this point.

Olivia waits for me to help her down, and we walk to the front door.

“Do you wanna come in?” she asks me slowly, like she’s nervous to ask. A lot is implied with that question, and as badly as I want her, I can’t have her just yet.

I smile. “You have no idea how much I want to come in. But not tonight.”

Her smile falls. “Oh.”

My hand cups her face, and I lean in toward her ear. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. When I finally have you, you’ll beg me for it.” I kiss her cheek and take a few steps back. “We have our second driving lesson tomorrow. I’ll see you then.”

She watches me walk to my truck, and then I wait for her to go inside. I see her stand at the door for a minute through the window, probably wondering why I didn’t go inside with her.

I want to make sure she knows I’m not just in it for the sex and show her how she deserves to be treated. I want her to see me for me and not just because I’m here and convenient. And I want her to show me who she really is so I can hand her my heart on a silver platter.

CHAPTER 13

As excited as I am for my next driving lesson, driving Landon's truck is a little intimidating, even if I'm only driving around in this parking lot. The truck is so big, I'm afraid I'll hit something, but Landon seems to have enough confidence for the both of us.

"Alright, we're going to turn out of the parking lot and go for a little drive down the street," he tells me casually like it's no big deal. No big deal to drive on an *actual road*?

I slam on the brakes and look over at him with wide eyes. "What? Are you freaking kidding?"

"No. There's only so much you can do in a small parking lot. We've got to get you out there," he explains.

"I don't know. It feels a little too soon for that." My palms are already sweaty from gripping the steering wheel so hard.

"You're in an expedited course, and you've been doing great so far." I roll my eyes at him, but all he does is smile. "You can do it. I know you can."

How am I supposed to say no to that? I give him a tiny nod and let him tell me what to do.

I stop at the entrance of the parking lot. He instructs me to turn my blinker on and turn right when no cars are coming. Inching out as slowly as I can, I turn onto the street and feel

the truck lift before coming down with a big thud on the passenger side, which makes me screech.

“Alright,” Landon says calmly. “You ran over the curb, but that’s okay. Keep going straight to get you used to being on the road. Just stay between the lines.”

I nod, squeezing the steering wheel a little harder. There aren’t any cars behind me, so I go pretty slowly down the road. A lot slower than the speed limit sign tells me to go.

“You might want to go a little faster, sweetheart.”

“I’m trying,” I snap. If he’s bothered by my tone, he doesn’t show it.

My foot presses against the gas pedal, and we jerk in our seats. I immediately remove my foot. “Shit.”

Landon puts his hand on my thigh. “You’re doing great. There’s no one around. It’s ok to make mistakes.”

I take a deep breath before I put my foot back on the gas and slowly put pressure on it. Our speed goes up, but not at a jarring rate like last time. He squeezes my thigh, and I finally start to relax a little as we cruise down the road.

I stop at the stop sign and look all ways before continuing. Things are actually going well. I’m feeling good, like maybe I can do this.

We come to an intersection, but there’s no stop sign, so I keep going. But apparently that was wrong because Landon goes, “Shit, Olivia. That was a red light. You’ve got to stop at those.”

I wince. “I was only looking for stop signs.”

He chuckles. “Alright, you’ve gotta be looking for signs and lights, ok?”

I exhale. There's so much to remember. "Ok."

Suddenly, there's a loud siren, and I see red and blue lights behind us in my rearview mirror. Landon sees them, too.

"Shit," he mumbles. "I didn't see him."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"We're getting pulled over."

"What?" My voice is louder and squeaky because what? Pulled over? This is the last thing I need right now.

"It's alright, calm down. Just pull over slowly to the shoulder over here." I go where he points me, and the police car stops behind us. The officer gets out and goes to Landon's side of the truck.

"Hey, Dean," Landon greets the officer like he's known him for years. Which he probably has.

"I thought this was your truck, Landon. Was like, what're you doin' running through stop lights?" the officer asks. Thankfully, he's smiling and doesn't look as scary as I was expecting... except for that gun on his hip.

"Sorry, man. I'm teaching my girl how to drive. It's a little overwhelming for her. She didn't realize there was a light back there."

His girl? He called me his girl to a complete stranger. He wouldn't even come inside when he dropped me off last night and hasn't even kissed me. This is so not how I'm used to relationships going. He also didn't even ask me if I wanted to be *his girl*. It feels awfully presumptuous of him. I keep my mouth shut, though, because I have a tiny suspicion that being his girl might just help in this situation.

The officer looks through the window at me, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion, probably because I'm a grown woman who doesn't know how to drive. "She doesn't have a license?"

"No. Not yet. I was trying to get her used to being behind the wheel. To get her license, she needs forty hours of drive time," Landon answers while I sit here wondering how he even knows that.

The officer sighs. "Alright. I won't give you a ticket, but I need you to switch places. She shouldn't be on the main roads until she knows the basics, man."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Landon. Now, y'all be careful."

Landon nods. "We will."

The officer walks back to his truck, and I watch in the rearview mirror as he turns his lights off and drives away.

"Alright, let's switch, and I'll take you back to Dottie's," Landon says, unbuckling his seat belt. I do the same, and we get out and change sides.

"Sorry I got us pulled over," I tell him when he's started down the road again.

"You don't need to apologize. I never went over stop lights with you." What he doesn't say is that he didn't go over stop lights because any idiot should know to look for them. It's not like I've never seen one before. I was just more focused on looking for stop signs. Why do they even need stoplights in this town? There are only like twenty people living here.

We sit in silence as he drives me back to the farm, and I think about my mistakes today. He idles the truck at the end of the driveway.

“Olivia, I’d like to take you out,” Landon says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I blink slowly. “Take me out?”

He nods. “Yeah. On a date. I want you to get all dressed up in one of your fancy dresses and let me spoil you for an evening.”

I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face. Not only because I might actually get to wear my normal clothes for a night but because I’m almost always smiling around Landon. It’s kind of annoying. “I think that would be nice.”

“Good.” He wants to do it on his next day off, and I agree. We say our goodbyes, and I walk to the main house with a little more confidence after the promise of a date.

Walking inside, I hear familiar voices, and my stomach instantly knots. I walk down the hall to the kitchen and am relieved when I only see Aunt Dottie there. She’s holding a phone, apparently, video chatting with my parents.

“Oh, here she is,” Dottie says when she sees me. “Your parents wanted to speak with you.”

She hands me the phone. “Hey,” I greet them, my mood instantly dropping.

“Olivia. Where were you?” Dad asks. No hello. No how are things. Just where were you.

My eyes dart to Dottie for a second, and she also looks genuinely interested in my answer. I left without telling her where I was going. To be fair, I didn’t know where she was and didn’t have time to look.

“I was out with a friend,” I answer.

“A friend?” Dad questions. He sounds like he doesn’t believe me, which hurts a little more than I thought it would.

“Yes. A friend,” I confirm.

“What were you doing with this friend?” More accusations. Mom sits next to him and doesn’t bother saying anything.

Exasperated, I answer, “He’s teaching me how to drive.”

Everyone is silent for a second while they try to decide if they believe me.

“You’re learning how to drive?” my mom finally asks.

“Yeah. It’s kinda hard to get around in this town without a car. He offered to teach me.” I glance at Aunt Dottie, and I can tell she’s remembering when she asked me to grab something from town while she was out. I never told her no. I just walked and made sure I was back before she got home.

“Well,” my mother responds. “That’s great. Good for you. Dottie says you’re working hard on the farm.”

“Mm-hmm,” I answer. I have been working hard, and honestly, I’m pretty damn proud of myself. But I’m not going to tell them that. It sounds like Aunt Dottie has been updating them on my progress, anyway. Heaven forbid they just ask me, but whatever.

I want to ask how much longer they plan on making me stay here. What is the timeline for this torture? Do they really want me to take over this whole operation when Dottie decides to retire? Why did they leave that little fact out when they gave me my packing orders?

“You’re making great progress, Olivia,” my father says. “Make sure you keep it up.”

“Yep. Got it.”

I hand the phone back to Dottie without a goodbye and grab a glass of water while she finishes her conversation. When she hangs up, she turns and looks at me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you couldn’t drive?” she asks.

I shrug. “I didn’t want to be any more of a burden.”

“Olivia, you aren’t a burden, hun.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I know I’m a lot of work. I get it. Having to train another person is annoying. I’m just trying to get through this in one piece.”

I start to walk off, but she keeps talking. “Olivia, you are not a burden. You’re doing a great job. Having an extra set of hands on the farm during the summer has been great. You’ve given the guys a break, too.”

I take a sip of my water. It’s nice to know something that I’m doing is actually helpful.

“Is Landon teaching you how to drive?” she asks, although I’m sure she already knows the answer.

I nod. “He... he also asked me on a date. Do I need to ask permission or anything?”

Dottie doesn’t pick up on my sarcasm. Instead, she answers honestly, “Of course, you don’t have to ask permission.” She hesitates for a moment. “Do you want to go on a date with him?”

It’s true Landon is nothing like the guys I typically go for. My last boyfriend almost exclusively wore suits and almost always had his phone glued to his ear. We made sense on paper, but he didn’t give me the attention I wanted, and I couldn’t be the trophy wife he wanted. Mainly because a

trophy wife doesn't get blackout drunk at bars four out of seven nights a week.

Landon lives in cut-off tees, jeans, and baseball hats, and I've actually never seen him on his phone. As for attention, he gives me all of his. Every time I look at him, he's already looking at me. Every time we're together, I secretly hope he's going to kiss me.

He's different, but maybe I need different.

At least for now.

According to everyone else, my life was going nowhere. Maybe going on a few dates with a guy who genuinely likes me will be good for me.

"Yeah, I think I do."

She studies me for a moment. "Alright. Landon is a good kid. I don't think he'll get you into any trouble. Just... go easy on him, Olivia. That boy's got a big heart."

Go easy on him? He's the one teasing me! I want to say that, but I don't. I've got a reputation in New York. I get it. Since my ex and I broke up, I've been seen with a different guy at almost every party. Not a great look.

Dottie knows I went out with Dawson, but I told her it wasn't going to work between us. She understood. I'm sure it makes her a little nervous that now I'm trying to date Landon.

Landon certainly isn't Dawson, though.

While I dreaded the date with Dawson, I'm already nervous about the date with Landon, and it's not even happening for another five days.

CHAPTER 14

Two days later, at the end of the day, Landon finds me attempting to get an egg from a nest in the chicken coop. The hen came out of nowhere and started pecking my hand when I went for it. I wanted to leave it, but I'm trying to make sure no one has a reason to say I'm not doing my job. And by no one, I mean Camden. Because even after hanging out with Landon and his friends, where Landon clearly showed his interest in me, Camden still shoots me dirty looks anytime he sees me. He doesn't even try to hide it at this point.

I'm convinced he'll never like me, and honestly, it's no sweat off my back. People say mean things about me online all the time. They're complete strangers who know nothing about me but think their opinion matters. Nope.

So Camden's doesn't either.

He can hate me all he wants, but he damn well won't be able to say I didn't do what I was asked to do.

I quickly reach around the hen and grab her egg as Landon says, "There you are."

I glance over at him and almost drop the damn egg. I haven't seen him since I left the milking station this morning. He's got his hat on backward today, and his cheeks are pink

from the sun. He's dirty like always, but I think I'm starting to like this look on him.

"Here I am," I tell him, turning back to search for more eggs and pretending like his presence doesn't affect me.

"I wanted to see if you would hit up the stables with me."

My shoulders slump. More work? I've been out all day grabbing peaches and was really looking forward to finally sitting down to eat something.

"Isn't it almost time for you all to leave for the day?" I ask, hoping he didn't realize what time it was.

"Yeah. We're done working. But I wanted to take a ride with you," he says.

"A ride?"

"Yeah, on the horses," he clarifies.

I stand frozen for a second before my eyes go wide. "You want *me* to get on a horse?"

He chuckles. "Don't tell me you've never ridden before."

"Of course, I've never ridden before!" My voice gets high and screechy. Who in the world does he think I am?

"Well, now we're definitely going. I'll take the eggs to Dottie and let her know."

He grabs for the basket, but I hold on tight to it.

"Give me the basket, Olivia." I tug it back toward me, not letting go.

"What if I fall off?" I ask.

His free hand cups my cheek. "Olivia, I would never let anything happen to you."

His touch and the tone of his voice somehow make me believe that. I finally let go of the basket and watch as he jogs it up to the main house. When he comes back, I'm still standing in the same spot. He ushers me onto the UTV he drove over here and takes us to the stables.

Bennett is inside doing something with the horses. He nods at Landon when we walk in.

"Hey man, I've got your horses ready to go out back," Bennett tells him.

"Thanks. I'll take care of 'em when we're finished so you don't have to hang around."

Bennett nods and gives me a small smile before returning to his work. Bennett doesn't seem as bothered by me. He's fairly quiet and doesn't talk much, at least when I'm around. Landon says that's how he's always been, though.

Landon leads me to where two large horses are tied to a post by the fenced-in circle they use for riding lessons. I've heard about the riding lessons, but I'm never usually near the stables and haven't seen them in action.

"Alright, you're going to be riding Sugar over here." He leads me to the white horse, who I'm pretty sure is glaring at me. "She's a sweet girl. We use her a lot for the children's lessons. Put your hand right here and let her get to know you." He shows me where to place my hand. Sugar does a little nudge toward me but doesn't try to trample me, so that's good, I guess.

Once she's comfortable with me, Landon leads me to the saddle. I follow his directions to put one foot in the stirrup, and then he puts his hands on my hips and hoists me up. I was

supposed to throw my leg over the horse but end up lying on my stomach on the saddle.

I hear Landon chuckle behind me. “This is not funny,” I spit out, attempting to get my leg over the saddle.

“It’s a little funny,” he says, the amusement heavy in his voice. He pushes my butt a little and helps shove my other leg over. I didn’t imagine that the first time he touched my butt would be to get me on a horse. Nope, that never crossed my mind.

“Good girl,” Landon says when I’m finally seated. I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or the horse, but I’m going to pretend it’s for me because the praise makes my pussy clench, and it’d be embarrassing if he was talking to the horse.

I watch as Landon unties the horse and hands me the reins. He unties his own horse, and his muscles flex as he easily pulls himself onto his saddle.

He gives me a quick rundown on the basics of riding. It seems easy enough, but when it’s time to go, I hesitate to give Sugar the little kick she needs to get started.

“Come on, sweetheart. You can do it,” Landon calls over his shoulder.

I give the horse a small kick, and she starts trotting to where Landon is waiting with his horse. I have a death grip on the reins, but when I look up and see the smile on Landon’s face, I relax a little.

“I’m doing it. I’m riding a fucking horse!” I yell. I’m not sure why I’m yelling since he’s right next to me, but I can’t help my excitement.

“I see that, sweetheart. You’re doing great. ” His smile is so genuine, like he’s actually proud of me. My eyes start to

burn, but I swallow back the tears. It's been a while since anyone has been proud of me for something, even if it's as small as riding a horse.

We trot alongside each other through fields of grass. He takes me around the farm, showing me some parts I haven't been to yet. It's hard to believe I've been here for weeks and have yet to see the entire farm. He shows me the pumpkin patch, where families from town come and pick out their pumpkins for Halloween. I think I might like to be here to experience that. I don't tell Landon, but we never carved pumpkins when I was a kid.

We go around a small pond that I didn't know existed and end up near a huge field of sunflowers. I gasp when I see it. I thought someone mentioned a sunflower crop, but I had no idea it was this big.

"This is amazing," I say, looking around. The flowers are so tall and fully in bloom. They're beautiful.

"I thought you'd like this. It's one of my favorite places on the farm." He climbs off his horse and ties the reins to a post nearby.

When he comes over to Sugar, I attempt to swing my leg over the saddle but fall straight into Landon. His arms steady me until I can get my feet on the ground. I swear this man has seen me do so many embarrassing things. I don't know how he could possibly still like me.

He ties Sugar up next to his horse and takes my hand. We walk down a path in between a row of sunflowers.

"Give me your phone," he says. Without question, I hand it over, and he opens the camera. He pulls me close and takes a picture of us with the sunflowers as the backdrop.

We both look tired and have dirt marks on our faces. I have zero makeup on, and hair strands are coming out of my long braid. A few months ago, I wouldn't have allowed my picture to be taken unless I looked perfect.

But this... this is us. This is how we see each other. He doesn't know the socialite who attends lavish parties every other night and only wears designer brands. He knows Olivia, the girl who had to learn to do hard work and get her hands dirty. Like really dirty. I still can't get all the dirt from under my fingernails.

It's almost like I'm a completely different person now.

"What was that for?" I ask when he hands me my phone back.

"I wanted you to have a picture of the day we had our first kiss," he says casually.

My eyes go wide, and I swallow hard. "What?"

He turns to me and cradles my face in his hands. His dark eyes bore into mine. "I've been dying to kiss you, Olivia. I can't wait another day."

"O-ok," I stammer.

He inches towards my face, tilting my chin up. I can't believe this is happening. He's finally going to kiss me. And I can't believe how badly I want him to kiss me. I never usually care about kissing. It's boring and a means to an end for me.

But with Landon? I think I'm going to enjoy this. No, I know I am.

His lips graze mine lightly in a whisper of a kiss as my eyes flutter closed. He pulls back a tiny bit before finally pulling me closer and kissing me with everything he has.

His lips are soft but claiming. His hand remains steady at the back of my neck, holding me to him as he kisses and kisses me. I open for him, letting him explore my mouth. Our tongues dance together, and I feel like I can't get enough of him, can't get close enough to him. My hands grip the back of his shirt like I'm holding on for dear life.

A moan escapes me, and I feel his lips form a smile against mine, but he doesn't stop. I think I would kill him if he did. I never want this kiss to end.

His free hand snakes around my waist and grabs my ass, bringing me closer. I want to climb him. I want him to lay us down in the fucking dirt so I can ride him. I want every piece of this man, and I want to give myself to him in return.

But when he finally pulls away from my mouth, I know that's not going to happen today.

I'm breathless as he studies my face, trying to gauge my reaction. I hope he can see how badly I want him.

"That was one hell of a first kiss, Landon," I manage to say.

"There's plenty more where that came from, sweetheart." He chuckles, his lips swollen from our kiss.

"I want more. Right now." My body is on fire with need. I can't imagine not experiencing all of him.

He gives me a gentle peck. "That'll happen soon enough. Trust me, I want it just as bad as you do. But I'm not fucking you for the first time in the dirt."

"Why not? I don't care." Is that true, or am I just in a kiss-induced stupor? Dirt and I don't usually mix. I'm not sure why I think I would enjoy having sex in it, but that should tell him how badly I want this.

“Olivia, you know you don’t want that. I’m doing things right with you. I just couldn’t wait another two days until our date to kiss you,” he explains.

I groan and put my forehead on his chest. His heart is pounding almost as fast as mine. He kisses my head. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. It’ll be worth the wait.”

For some reason, I really believe that. I think Landon knows exactly what my body wants, and that’s why I want it so damn badly.

“Come on. I’ve got to get you home. Dottie’d kill me if I had you out here after the sun goes down.”

Reluctantly, I let him lead us back to our horses, and we make our way back to the main house.

CHAPTER 15

Getting ready for my date with Landon is the most nerve-wracking thing I've ever done. I've been on a lot of dates, but I've never really cared what the guys thought about me. I knew where it would end up and that it wouldn't go anywhere else. But this is different.

For one, I have to see Landon every day until my parents decide I'm responsible enough to handle money.

And then there's the fact that I like him. I really, really like him. I like his stupid Southern drawl and his stupid, backward hat. I like his stupid cut-off T-shirts that give me glimpses of his perfect, stupid body. And most of all, I like his stupid eyes and the way they look at me like he wants to devour and cherish me all at the same time.

I've never been wanted in that way before.

In an effort to ease my nerves, I video call Serena, who is pre-gaming for a night out.

"I wish you were here, Liv. Going out just isn't the same without you," she pouts.

"Yeah, I wish I was there too," I say, but I'm not sure if I believe that anymore. I haven't thought about partying or drinking for weeks now. I don't know if my body is too tired from all the manual labor throughout the day or if I'm just not

interested, but either way, it's a little strange and a big change for me.

“Oh, please. No, you don't. You're going on a date with your hot farm boy.” I sent Serena the selfie of Landon and me from the night at the lake. She called me squealing about how hot he is and what a lucky bitch I am. I had to remind her that he hadn't even kissed me at that point.

But everything has changed. He smiles at me every time he sees me and will send me little texts telling me how beautiful I look even though I think he's full of shit because the baggy jeans I wear are really unflattering. I can't wait to see what he thinks when he sees me all dressed up tonight.

“I know.” I hold a little black dress up to my body and look in the mirror. “But I have no idea what to wear.”

“That dress is cute and makes your boobs look amazing,” Serena tells me. She's not wrong. I wore this to a restaurant opening in the city and ended up going home with the owner's son. “Do you know what you're doing on the date?”

I sigh. “No, I have no idea, which is why this is so difficult.”

I throw the dress down and pick up another one covered in gold sequins. I'm not sure why I packed this. Where did I think I would wear this in the middle of nowhere? Old me was so clueless.

“None of these dresses feel like Landon,” I whine and flop back on my bed.

“What do you mean they don't feel like him?”

“I mean, Landon wears boots and T-shirts every day. His ex-girlfriend, who he still hangs out with by the way, is a cute little blonde who wears jeans that perfectly hug her hips, is

perfect, and everyone likes her.” It really annoys me, and I hate that I’m annoyed by it. I’ve never been the jealous type, but seeing her standing next to him every time I turn around does something uncomfortable to my stomach.

“Honey, listen to yourself. She’s his ex-girlfriend for a reason. He doesn’t want to be with her anymore. He wants you. So you go on this date and be you. Just you. That’s what he wants. Any man would be lucky to have you, Liv.”

“I know. I know. It’s just... being me feels like too much in this town.” And too much for Landon. I’ve never been worried about what people think of me, but for some reason, I care about his opinion. I don’t want him to know about my past—who I’ve been with or what I’ve done. For the first time since I got here, I’m starting to think that maybe my parents were right. Maybe I was embarrassing and needed a kick in the ass to be responsible.

That thought just pisses me off even more. I hate it when they’re right.

“You are too much for that town. That’s why you aren’t staying forever, right? You’re there a little while longer, and then you can come home and be with me again.” I try to mirror her smile. I am excited to go home. I miss the city. The humidity and fucking mosquitoes down here are no joke and, honestly, really bad for my hair and skin.

But I do think there are things I might miss about this place.

At least I don’t have to worry about that just yet. My parents haven’t given me any hints about when this test period will end. So, for now, I’m still here indefinitely.

I dig through all my clothes and pull out a white dress with big blue flowers. I bought it to go to a charity golf event but ended up wearing something else.

It's pretty and perfectly hugs all of my curves. I hold it up to the phone for Serena to see.

“Yessssss, girl. That's the one.”

I quickly throw it on and turn to face Serena. “He's going to die. If he doesn't fuck you tonight, there's something wrong with him.”

We both laugh, but I hope she's right. I'm really hoping something happens tonight. That one kiss we shared left me wanting him so badly. It's insane how patient Landon has been while I'm over here, ready to hump his damn leg. Every time I see him working on the farm, with sweat glistening on his muscles, I start drooling. Like, I'm fairly certain actual drool drops from my mouth. It's embarrassing.

Since there's not a single waxing place in this freaking town, I took the time to shave all my important bits, just in case. I like to be prepared, and prickly legs are never fun.

Serena and I say our goodbyes so that I can do my hair and makeup.

My stomach tingles with nerves as I walk downstairs to wait for Landon. Dottie hears my heels clicking on the wooden floors and comes out of the kitchen.

She looks me up and down and smiles. “You look nice. So much like your mother.” It's still weird to me that almost everyone here remembers my mom. I don't think she's been back since I was born.

“Thank you.”

“Do you know what you’re doing tonight?” she asks, sitting on one of the couches in the living room.

“I’m not sure. He didn’t give me any details.”

She nods. “Landon is a good kid. A good man. Go easy on him, ok, hun? Be honest with him about your intentions.”

Meaning, getting the hell out of this town as soon as I’m allowed. She doesn’t want him to get too attached to me. Which is good because I can’t get too attached to him either.

I nod in understanding. “I will.”

There’s a loud knock on the door, and I suck in a breath.

“Have fun.” Dottie smiles at me as I open the door.

Landon is standing on the other side in jeans, a black button-down with the sleeves rolled up, and a pair of clean boots. He doesn’t have his hat on tonight, and his chestnut waves have a tousled look like he ran his hands through it a few times. Something I hope he’ll let me do later.

His eyes scan my body, and I can tell he likes what he sees.

“You look gorgeous, sweetheart.” His voice is low and sexy, and I wish I could just take him upstairs right now.

My cheeks heat, which has never happened in my entire life. “Thank you. You clean up nice as well.”

I take his offered hand, and he walks us to his truck. I let him help me in, and he backs down the drive.

“Where are we going tonight?” I ask when we’re on the main road.

“It’s a surprise.” I love surprises, although, with the look on his face, I’m not exactly sure what I’m in for. Surprises in the city are all your friends showing up to the same club or a

lavish trip to my favorite spa. I have no idea what surprises in Thundersville could be.

We talk about our day, and he asks about the farm, and before I know it, we're pulling down a gravel path.

He pulls right up to a giant oak tree covered in Spanish moss. I'm confused. Is he bringing me here to climb a tree or something because I'm very over dressed for that.

"Stay here. I'll be right back." He hops out of the truck before I can answer.

I look around. There's literally nothing on this property except a few of these big trees and a small, half-destroyed house. This has to be a mistake.

Did he bring me here to kill me? That seems like an elaborate plan, but I've heard worse on some true crime podcasts.

Suddenly, the tree in front of the truck is lit with twinkle lights, and Landon is beside me, opening the door. I take his hand to help me down. It's a lot more difficult in heels than in the boots I normally wear.

We round the truck, and I see a big blanket with a picnic basket, some candles, and two glasses.

It's adorable. So simple yet so sweet.

"I know it's probably not what you're used to on dates," he starts, sounding kind of nervous, "but I couldn't figure out what to do for the girl who has probably seen and done some pretty extravagant things. So I figured I'd keep it simple because maybe that'll mean I have a chance of standing out."

"This is beautiful. You did all this for me?" He pulls me towards the blanket while I take it all in. It's super simple, but

he took the time to put something together instead of just making reservations at a restaurant.

“Yeah. My mom helped me make the food and string up the lights, but yeah, it was my idea.”

“Your mom? You told your mom about me?” I ask. For some reason, I’m suddenly worried about his mother knowing about me.

“Of course I did. I’m pretty close to my family. They know about everything important in my life,” he explains.

“I’m important?” I ask quietly.

He gives me a warm smile. “Very important.”

My heart skips a beat, and I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Landon, before we do this,”—I motion to the blanket—“I need to be upfront with you.”

He turns to me to give me his full attention. “Alright. I’m listening.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m not going to be here forever. Hopefully, I won’t even be here much longer. My parents forced me to come down here to prove I can be responsible before giving me my trust fund.” I say it all so quickly that I forget to take a breath. It’s like I’m trying to get a bad taste out of my mouth.

He slowly nods his head. “I kinda figured you wouldn’t be here forever. You’re way too special for this place. But if it’s alright, I’d like to be with you while you’re here. I’d regret not having you while I had the chance.”

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, trying not to cry. “Yeah,” I whisper. “I’d like that.”

“Alright then, sweetheart. Let’s enjoy our night.”

I smile as we sit, and he pulls a bottle of non-alcoholic wine out of a bag and pours it into the two glasses. He looks at the label on the bottle. “I hope this is good. I had to drive a town over to find this.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

He shrugs. “You said you weren’t drinking anymore.”

I laugh. It’s still hard to believe I haven’t had a drink since I’ve been here. I used to live off shots and cocktails, and now I’m going through bottles of water like I can’t get enough.

“Thank you.” He pulls out the sandwiches he said his mom helped make and some chips and brownies, which he claims are from scratch. “This is amazing, Landon.”

We eat and talk about everything. He tells me that the land we’re sitting on is his and is his favorite place to come when he needs to get away from everything. I tell him a little about my life in New York. I leave out the parties but tell him about Serena and some of my favorite places. We talk about my brother Rhett and my parents. He tells me about his little sister and how he can’t wait for me to meet his family, which terrifies me.

It’s an easy conversation between us, just two people getting to know each other. It’s exciting and comforting at the same time. I feel more at ease sitting here with him than I have in years. I’m not worried about anything or anyone.

We lay down next to each other and look up at the stars. I think that this is the most perfect date he could’ve planned. He knew what I needed without me even knowing it myself.

Then he looks over at me, and the fire in his eyes makes my heart rate speed up.

CHAPTER 16

Landon

She smells like flowers, and I want to memorize the scent and keep it on me forever. The heat of her body is driving me crazy, and it's taking everything I have not to reach over and touch her. I'm dying to kiss her, but I'm trying to be patient.

I look over and see the want in her eyes. She wants me just as badly.

Her chin tips toward me, giving me permission to kiss her. I don't waste another minute.

My lips press to hers, gently at first, but then I get greedy. She opens for me, letting me deepen the kiss and explore her mouth with my tongue. She moans, and the sound goes straight to my already hard dick. Every time I kiss her, the world disappears around me. It's just me and Olivia.

She shifts her body onto mine and straddles my waist without breaking our kiss. Another moan escapes her when she feels my cock press against her core. Her dress has ridden up and sits on her hips. My hands move to her ass and dig into her ass cheeks as she grinds against me.

The friction between her pussy and my jeans is too much. If she doesn't stop soon, I'm going to come in my pants like a fucking teenager. It's been too long since I've been with a

woman, and I want to take my time with Olivia. It's got to be perfect.

“Sweetheart, let me take you back to my place,” I say, pulling away from her lips only long enough to catch my breath. The drive back to my place will give my dick a chance to calm down.

She shakes her head. “No.” My heart drops. Does she not want this? “I don't want to wait. Fuck me here, Landon. Right here, right now.”

Fuck. She's going to be the death of me. I smirk up at her before I flip her on her back.

I grab the hem of her dress—the dress that fits her body like a glove and had me turned on from the moment she answered the door earlier—and pull it off her body, leaving her in a strapless bra and the tiniest pair of underwear I've ever seen.

“Goddamn, Olivia.” She squirms underneath my gaze but lets me look. I reach under her and unstrap her bra, exposing her perfect tits. Her nipples instantly harden, and I can't resist leaning down, taking one in my mouth, and sucking.

“Take your shirt off,” she commands, her voice already breathless and I've barely touched her.

Chuckling, I unbutton my shirt as quickly as I can. I love her eyes on me, and I love it even more when she says, “You're so fucking hot, Landon.”

I take her other nipple into my mouth and then kiss my way down her stomach to her underwear. There's already a wet spot on her thong, telling me she's ready for me.

I groan. “Olivia, look at your little cunt. Already dripping for me.” I push the thong to the side and slip a finger in,

gathering her wetness and rubbing it around her clit.

Reaching into my back pocket, I grab my knife and open the blade. She gasps as I slice the fabric apart, pull it off her body, and look at her completely naked in front of me. I take a mental picture to remember this night for the rest of my life.

Her cheeks are flushed, likely a mixture from the summer heat tonight and how worked up she is.

She spreads her legs wide as I kiss and bite her thighs. “God, Olivia. I can’t wait to eat your pussy.”

She gasps and arches her back off the blanket when my tongue licks her, finally tasting her. My tongue dips into her center, and I thrust it in and out a few times before I replace it with my finger. My attention turns to her clit as I flatten my tongue and move it around in slow circles.

I insert another finger and finger fuck her while licking her clit. I keep my movements slow and steady at first, wanting to enjoy her pussy. But when she starts squeezing my fingers, I increase my pace. I curl my fingers each time, hitting the spot I know she needs. She’s chasing her own orgasm, grinding her clit against my mouth. She fists the blanket and screams my name as her release pounds through her.

I hold her through it, keeping my fingers moving inside her, slowing them down only as she tries to wiggle away from me.

“Fuck, Olivia. I need to fuck you.”

“Yes. Please. Please,” she begs. I strip out of my boots and jeans faster than I ever have. I grab one of the pillows I had situated around the blanket and put it under Olivia’s hips. She spreads her legs again for me to climb in between them.

“I’m going to make you feel so good, sweetheart. So fucking good.” I line my cock up with her entrance and slowly slide into her. She’s so fucking wet, it makes it easy for me to bottom out, stretching and filling her. My heart rate quickens as I look down at her, taking all of me. She’s so fucking perfect, perfect for me in every way.

My thrusts are slow and methodical as I take her body and make it mine.

“Olivia, open your eyes. I want you to watch me fuck you.”

For a second, I think she won’t do it. But then they slowly open, and her green eyes meet mine.

It’s so intimate to look into someone’s eyes while you’re inside them and not something I usually do. But with Olivia, I want to see her, and I want her to know who’s fucking her. I want her to remember this and remember me so when she eventually leaves, she’ll never be able to forget.

My thumb circles around her clit while my thrusts get harder, deeper inside her.

“Landon,” she whimpers, and I feel her legs shaking. She’s going to come again with me inside her.

I look into her hooded, lust-filled eyes. “Are you gonna come on my cock, Olivia?”

“Yes,” she cries. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“Eyes on me, sweetheart,” I tell her when her eyes close again.

They fly open and meet mine as her pussy tightens around me.

“Fuck, that feels so good, Olivia. So. Fucking. Good.” I emphasize each word with a thrust.

After she rides out her orgasm, her body relaxes. I move my hands to her hips, gripping her tightly. “It’s my turn now, sweetheart. I can’t hang on much longer.”

I don’t wait for her to say anything as I pound into her faster. Being inside her is too much. It feels too good. I do exactly what I asked of her and keep my eyes on her while I spill my cum inside her.

It’s breathtaking and soul-crushing all at once.

I brace myself above her and attempt to calm my heart rate.

“That was...” she starts but trails off when she can’t think of the words to finish.

“Yeah,” I agree because I have no words either. Sex has never been like this for me before. It’s been so long since I’ve been with anyone that I can’t even remember what it was like before Olivia. I wanted her the second she got here, and she’s been consuming my thoughts ever since.

Now that I’ve finally had her, I’m terrified I won’t be able to let her go. This—tonight, right now—feels like she’s mine. And that’s exactly what I want her to be.

I slowly pull out and watch my cum drip from her pussy. I’ve never fucked without a condom. I’m not sure what possessed me to do it tonight, but I like knowing that she’s full of me.

I lie on my side next to her and drape my arm over her stomach. “Thank you for agreeing to go on a date with me.”

“It was the easiest yes I’ve ever said.”

I kiss the corner of her mouth, then her cheek and neck. I could kiss her all night long if she'd let me.

“Come home with me tonight.” It comes out of nowhere, but I'd love to have her in my bed, make her come a few more times, and wake up with her legs wrapped around me.

She looks at me and sighs, “I can't. I have to work the farmers market in the morning.”

I fall onto my back and groan, rubbing a hand down my face. “Right.”

She leans over me and kisses me. “I wish I could, though.”

“I wish you could, too.” She rests her head on my chest, and we lie there in peaceful silence for so long I'm afraid I might fall asleep on the ground, completely naked under the starry night sky.

“I should probably get you home so Dottie doesn't yell at me,” I finally say, even though it's the last thing I want to do.

She laughs softly into my chest. “Alright.”

She sits up and gathers her clothes, holding her ruined underwear. “If you didn't want me to wear underwear, you could've just said so.”

I laugh. It was probably a ridiculous move to cut them off when I was so close I could just slide them down her legs. But my brain was thinking of the fastest way to get to her, and my hand instinctively went to my knife.

“Sorry about that,” I tell her, but I'm really not.

“It's ok. I'd rather not wear Walmart panties, so maybe don't do that to the next pair. I didn't bring that many with me, and I'm still figuring out the whole laundry thing.”

She slides her dress over her body, and all I can think about is how she probably has a drawer full of these skimpy little thongs. “You are something else, Olivia.”

She smiles. “That’s why you like me.”

Ain’t that the fucking truth.

CHAPTER 17

Dottie hands me a box of small sunflower bouquets to put in the truck bed. A smile creeps across my lips even though it's barely six in the morning. Sunflowers will forever remind me of Landon. I still can't believe he planned such a sweet first kiss for us. Serena squealed so loud through the phone when I told her about it. She said it was straight out of a movie.

Dottie notices my smile and asks, "How was your night last night?"

She was asleep by the time I got home, which is a good thing. I don't think I would've been able to look her in the eye after what Landon and I did. Not that we did anything wrong, but seeing someone right after you just had sex is a little awkward.

"It was really good," I say as I push the box onto the truck. Although good might not be the right word. It was amazing. Earth-shattering. Life changing. But I'll keep that to myself.

"Wow, I don't think I've seen you smile that big since you got here."

Honestly, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face even if I tried. I smiled when Landon kissed me goodnight. I smiled as I walked to my room. I smiled as I changed and climbed into

bed. And I woke up this morning, way earlier than I wanted to after having a late night out, smiling.

Because Landon Bowen makes me fucking happy.

I shrug, and Dottie laughs. “He’s turned you into a lovesick puppy.”

Maybe he has. And maybe I’m not mad about it. Go ahead and get me a collar that says ‘Property of Landon. Call him if lost.’

“Can you grab those other boxes on the porch and load them up?” she asks.

I do as she asks, thankful she’s not pressing me for more details, and we take off for the farmers market. Since I’ve been with her a few times now, she lets me work both parts of the process—grabbing products or taking payments. I kind of like it. I feel like I’m needed here, not just because my parents asked her to take me off their hands for a little while. We stay busy, which makes the day go by faster.

Mid-morning, I hear someone call my name. I turn and see Landon a few feet away from the table with an iced coffee in his hand. He’s told me that he hates cold coffee, so I can only assume it’s not his.

I look to Dottie for permission to go over there, and she gives me a nod and a tiny smile. I take a few steps around the table to Landon. Before I can say anything, he leans down and kisses me. I don’t think I’ll ever tire of being kissed by him. It’s hard to believe I went from hating kissing to looking forward to my next one in the span of a few weeks. The person doing the kissing might have something to do with it.

“Here. I brought this for you.” He hands me the iced coffee.

“What is it?” I ask, taking a sip.

“It’s the small-town version of the fancy coffee you like in New York.” He remembers the coffee I said I liked? We talked about that weeks ago.

“How did you...?”

He shrugs. “I Googled it and asked the coffee shop in town to do their best.”

“Landon. That is so sweet.” I almost cry as I take another sip. I’ve missed this coffee so much. For him to go out of his way to get it for me—even if it’s not exactly the same—makes me feel so special.

“You deserve the best, sweetheart.” I suck in a breath. I’m not sure if that’s true. Landon puts me on a pedestal that I don’t deserve. I’m a mess. An embarrassment, as my family so kindly phrased it. I wonder if he would feel the same if he knew me before I was forced to come down here. If he saw what I was like: getting wasted at bars, stumbling home, and ending up in places without any memory of how I got there. “What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

“I... You’re too good to me.” He doesn’t need all of my trauma unloaded on him now. And I don’t need to tell him about the person I used to be because that version isn’t here right now, and I don’t know if she’ll ever be back. The idea of spending my nights getting blackout drunk doesn’t sound appealing to me anymore.

He kisses me again before nodding to the table. “You better get back there. The line is getting backed up.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” I look at the line but really don’t want to leave Landon. I wish we could spend all day together.

As if Aunt Dottie was reading my mind, she yells, “Hey, Landon! I need my girl back, but why don’t you come over for dinner?”

He smiles and waves at her. “Thanks, Ms. Dottie. I’ll see you then.” Then he looks back at me. “See you tonight, sweetheart.”

I nod and watch as he walks away. He’s by himself today. No Cam with his unpleasant glares or Ellie hanging all over him right in front of me.

He came all the way out here on his own to see me.

“Olivia. Need some help!” Dottie calls.

“Coming!”



Later that evening, after a long, hot morning at the market, followed by an afternoon of checking on the chickens and the goats, I’m finally showered and relaxing at the kitchen table while Dottie cooks.

I scroll through my social media accounts, something I haven’t done in weeks. All of my so-called friends are posting pictures of their lives, but not one of them besides Serena has reached out. Not that I’d expect them to, really, but a DM asking where I’ve been would be nice.

On a whim, I post a picture Landon took of me in the chicken house.

My hair is a mess, and I’ve got dirt on my cheek. My shirt is baggy, and the jeans don’t show off any of my curves. It’s definitely not a picture I would normally post on my social

media. A few months ago, I would've been embarrassed for someone to see me like this. But now? I don't really care. In fact, I kinda like it. Let the haters hate.

I post the picture without a filter as a knock sounds on the front door. Putting my phone down, I jump up. "I'll get it!"

Dottie laughs. "Figured you would."

I jog down the hallway and stop before I get to the door, tucking my loose strands of hair behind my ears and smoothing down my shirt to pull myself together.

I open the door and don't hold back. I fling myself at Landon, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him. His arms go straight around my waist, and he pulls me closer.

"Did you miss me?" he asks humorously.

"A little." I smile against his lips.

"Good. I missed you too." Gah, this man makes me swoon. Dottie was right. I am a love-sick puppy.

We walk back to the kitchen, hand in hand. Aunt Dottie is finishing dinner, so we take a seat at the table. Landon and Aunt Dottie talk about the farm, and it's easy to tell that he truly cares about this place. He always wants to know how everything is going, even on his days off. He lives and breathes this place. So do Camden and Bennett. Even though Camden doesn't like me very much, I can't lie and say he isn't a hard worker.

Landon holds my hand as he talks, absently rubbing his thumb along the side of my hand. Dottie brings over a large pan of some sort of cheesy pasta bake. Something I wouldn't have eaten only months ago but have kinda gotten used to. After working all day, I'm usually starving, so there's no way I'm turning it down.

We each take a heaping spoonful of the pasta for our plates with some garlic bread. It's a nice, pleasant dinner. We talk, we laugh, we have fun. Live, laugh, love and whatever. It's like a real family dinner.

It makes me miss the way my family used to be. We used to have family dinners all the time when Rhett and I were younger, but as we got older, everyone got busier. At that point, we stopped having them all together. Before I left, we barely had dinners once a month. I was always in a hurry to go do something after. I should've slowed down. I should've enjoyed my time with them.

Maybe when I get home, we can have those dinners again. If they still want me.

After dinner, I wash the dishes, and Landon dries them while Aunt Dottie works on her puzzle and watches *Wheel of Fortune* in the living room. I've kind of picked up this nightly routine as well. More often than not, I find myself sitting next to her, looking for the next puzzle piece. It's oddly satisfying to match a new piece to the big picture. We're currently working on a beach landscape.

"Do you want to stay and help us with the puzzle?" I ask Landon after we've finished the dishes.

He tilts his head and studies me. "*You're* working on a puzzle?"

I shrug. "Yeah. Dottie is really into them, and there's not much else to do around here."

He chuckles and pulls me into him. "I'd love to work on a puzzle with two of my favorite ladies."

"Aw, shit. Am I competing against Dottie, too?"

He smirks. “She does make a mean mac and cheese.” I laugh and playfully hit his stomach.

We crowd Aunt Dottie in the living room on the ancient blue couches that I’m convinced have been here since this house was built, and we work on the puzzle. We get a good bit done before Aunt Dottie excuses herself to bed.

Landon and I sit on the porch swing for a bit. The lightning bugs are out tonight, making the front yard glow. He tells me how he and his sister used to run around their yard, catching them in Mason jars. The thought of getting anywhere near a bug grosses me out, but I can just picture a small Landon running around barefoot, chasing bugs.

Life is so different down here than in the city. It’s hard to believe my mother used to live here. She probably ran around catching bugs, too. Nowadays, she wouldn’t be seen not wearing the latest designer shoes, even in her own home.

We swing until I start to get sleepy. Landon gets up to leave since we both have to get up early. I reluctantly let him go, kissing him a few more times before his truck disappears down the drive.

CHAPTER 18

Landon

Olivia is the first thing I think about when I wake up each morning. Today is no different, even if I wake up before dawn to get to the farm. I love my days off, but I'm looking forward to seeing Olivia. She always looks so adorable when she's tired. I just want to pull her into my arms and keep her there... Actually, I'd rather take her back to bed with me. But I'm sure Ms. Dottie wouldn't be happy with that option.

I throw on my standard uniform of permanently stained jeans and a cutoff T-shirt. I used to wear shirts with sleeves, but they weren't kidding about the whole farmer's tan thing. After my first summer working at the farm, I cut the sleeves off all my work shirts. Learned my lesson.

Cam, Benny, and I pull up to Underwood Farms at the same time. After all these years, we have our routine down. We get there at the same time every morning; if someone's late, something's wrong.

"Morning, boys." I greet them when I get out of my truck. I get two groggy "Mornings" back.

Benny jumps onto an UTV and takes off for the stables while Cam and I start herding the cattle for milking.

Olivia walks up after we've gotten most of the cows into the milking parlor. She looks sleepy, but there's a soft smile on

her face, which is new. I walk right over and kiss her. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

She smiles against my lips. “Good morning.”

As much as I want to kiss her all morning, Cam will get pissed if we waste too much time. It’s bad enough that I see him roll his eyes when we walk in holding hands.

Olivia puts on her gloves and gets right to work. She’s come so far since first starting. She doesn’t even gag when she cleans the udders now.

She does her job and gives me a little wave as she walks to the chickens.

“What’s the deal, man?” Cam nods at Olivia.

“I like her,” I tell him. It’s more than that, but I don’t think Cam is asking me to spill my guts right now.

He scoffs. “How can you possibly like someone like her?”

“How can you *not* like someone like her? She’s gorgeous, funny, confident. Yeah, she’s different from most of the women in Thundersville, but that’s what I like about her. She is exactly who she is and doesn’t care what anyone thinks.”

“She doesn’t belong here, man.” Cam has always been a little grumpy, but I’ve never seen him this pissed off. And it’s kind of pissing me off that he’s talking about my girl like this.

“Cam, she’s doing her job, just like the rest of us. This is so out of her wheelhouse, but she hasn’t been late once, and she stopped complaining after the first week. She’s working her ass off to prove herself around here, and all you’re doing is being a dick.”

“What about Ellie?” he asks.

My head cocks in his direction. That's not at all what I was expecting from him. "What about Ellie?"

"Y'all are really done? Like that's it?" he says as if we haven't been done for years.

"Yeah, man. Ellie and I are done. Even if Olivia wasn't here, I wouldn't be with Ellie. I need her, you, and everyone else in this goddamn town to understand that. Ellie is my *friend*. That's it. There's a reason we aren't together."

He's quiet for a long minute, soaking in my outburst. It's too early for this shit, but I'm tired of everyone throwing Ellie in my face. Just because we dated in high school doesn't mean we're gonna get married.

"Is this why you don't like Olivia?" I ask. "Because you think it's breaking up our friend group or some shit?"

"Nothing will be the same," he says, "if you alienate Ellie like that. You know she still has a thing for you."

"Ellie and I have talked about this. She understands that friendship is all I'm willing to give her. She's fine, Cam. And you know what? Maybe things do need to change. I want Ellie to find her person. Someone who swoops her off her feet like she wants. I want that for all my friends. But she's never going to find it if she's hanging on to hope for me."

He shakes his head like he's disappointed in me. Fine, let him be disappointed. This is my life, not his. "Olivia's going to leave eventually. You know that, right?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, I know that. But I'm going to enjoy my time with her while she's here. I really like her, Cam. And as my best friend, I would like you to give her a fair chance."

He spits out a mumbled, "Fine."

“Thank you.”

We get back to work in a tense silence. I’ll let him be mad. I have to trust that he’ll come around. And if he doesn’t, then oh, well. I like Olivia. I like her a little too much. If I’m willing to have my heart broken when she leaves, other people need to stop acting like I’m a child. I know they care about me, but I can make my own decisions. And Olivia is my decision.



Olivia is almost to the main house when I finally catch up with her at the end of the day. I grab her by the waist and pull her into me, kissing her forehead.

“Good day?” I ask.

“Better now,” she responds, making me smile.

“Good. Will you come to dinner with me at my parents’ house tomorrow? My mom is dying to meet you, and my little sister, Lucy, is home from college right now.”

She freezes in my arms, and I wonder why she’s concerned about meeting my family. I don’t say anything and let her think through whatever is going on in her head right now.

“You want me to meet your family?” she finally asks, her voice trembling with unexpected emotion.

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want you to.” I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

“What if they don’t like me?”

That makes me laugh. “Sweetheart, if I like you, they’ll like you. Trust me.”

She nods. And nods again and again before saying, “Yeah, ok. I’ll come.”

“Good. And tell Dottie I’ll have you home plenty early since we’re both working the next day.”

“Ok.” She takes a few steps and then turns back to me. “What should I wear?”

“Whatever you want. Whatever makes you feel beautiful. I think you look amazing in everything. You make me walk around with a hard-on all day long.”

She laughs and tugs at her jeans. “You’re telling me these dirty, baggy jeans turn you on?”

“Absolutely. I can still see your ass.” I lean closer and whisper, “And I can’t stop thinking about how your pussy tastes.”

She looks up at me wide-eyed.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you, Olivia. And I can’t wait to have you again.”

“Are you sure we can’t skip your parents and go roll around in that field again?” Man, I wish I could, but my mother would kill me if I showed up without Olivia after I’ve been talking about her so much. She’s been bugging me about bringing her for dinner since I first mentioned her name. But I had to make sure Olivia felt the same way, and after our date, I think it’s safe to say she does.

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll make you come after dinner. How’s that, sweetheart?”

She leans into my body, and her cheeks flush. I can tell I'm turning her on. I bet if I reached down into her jeans, she'd be just as wet as she was the other night.

She nods. "I can be your good girl."

"Good. Be my good girl at dinner so afterward you can be my little slut." She shivers, and I chuckle in her ear. I can't imagine what we must look like. Both of us covered in dirt from the day, standing so close to each other, whispering into each other's ears. "You like that, don't you, Olivia? You want to be my little slut?"

"God, yes," she moans.

My fingers tip her chin up to look into her hooded eyes. "Don't touch yourself without me, Olivia. The next time you come, it's going to be with me. Understand?"

She groans but agrees. "Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll see you in the morning."

I lean down to kiss her one last time before I leave for the night.

She returns the kiss and reluctantly pulls back when Dottie calls her name.

She turns to walk away, but not before I smack her ass. She looks over her shoulder at me and winks. This woman is going to break my heart. But that's a problem for future Landon.

CHAPTER 19

Olivia

I'm a nervous wreck by the time Landon pulls up to get me for dinner. Aunt Dottie assured me the Bowens are nice people, and she's sure they'll like me. But I can't get out of my own head.

Ever since my parents called me an embarrassment, I've been spiraling without realizing it. And I really don't want Landon's family to think I'm an embarrassment either or that I'm not good enough for their son. Everything needs to be perfect. I need to be perfect.

I opted for a two-piece ensemble for dinner. It's a black crop top with pink flowers and a matching flowing skirt. I picked it because it makes me feel beautiful, and that's what Landon said he wanted.

I'm already waiting when Landon comes to the front door. I would've just run out to meet him, but he likes to be a gentleman, so I try to let him when I remember it.

He kisses me and tells me I look beautiful before helping me into his truck. We've had a few more driving lessons, and I'm starting to get the hang of it. I might even try to get an actual driver's license at some point. I'm not in a rush, though. I kinda like having Landon drive me around.

He pulls up to a charming white house a few miles outside of town. A big tree is in the front yard, and a tire swing hangs off one of the big branches. The house is small but looks so comfortable and cute. Serena would love this. It's very Hallmark and so different from the house I grew up in with its two stories, spiral staircase, and big white columns out front.

He parks his truck behind his sister's small Toyota and his dad's big, black truck.

Before we get out of the truck, I wipe my sweaty hands on my skirt and exhale.

"Sweetheart, they're going to love you. I promise," he says in an attempt to calm my nerves.

I nod, but I'm not sure if I believe him. "I just want them to think I'm good enough for you."

His eyebrows raise in surprise. "Good enough for me? Olivia, one of us is clearly shooting outside of their league here, and it's very obviously me. You have the world at your fingertips. I, on the other hand, have nothing to offer except myself."

"Landon, no. That's not true. You've treated me like a princess since I got here. You've been so nice and understanding. No one has ever been like that to me. People either want something from me, or they want to fuck me."

He holds up a hand. "Let's not talk about you fucking anyone except me, please."

"Right. Sorry. What I'm trying to say is you're too good for me. I don't deserve you."

He gives me a comforting smile. "We'll have to agree to disagree on this. Now, let's go before my mom actually breaks the window with her forehead."

I turn to the house, and sure enough, a curtain moves like someone just put it back.

He helps me out of the truck, takes my hand, and we walk up the path to the front door. Landon doesn't bother knocking and just turns the knob and walks in.

Everyone is already standing around the front door, which makes Landon laugh. He squeezes my hand before he starts introductions.

“Jesus, guys. Way to be chill. Olivia, this is my mom, my dad, and my little sister, Lucy. Guys, this is Olivia.”

I lift my hand to wave.

His mother speaks first. “Olivia, it's wonderful to meet you.” She steps forward and wraps her arms around me in a motherly hug, and for a moment, I'm not sure how to react. I can't remember the last time my own mother hugged me. I finally relax and hug her back. His sister jumps in right after and wraps her arms around me. She's beautiful and takes after Landon's mother, but they both have their dad's brown eyes.

“Welcome to our family, Olivia,” Mr. Bowen says as we shake hands. I'm part of the family now? I hesitate for a second, wondering if Landon has told them I'm not staying forever, but I push it out of my mind. Landon wants me here and knows the truth, so I have to trust that he's told his family what he wants them to know.

“I love your outfit,” Lucy says as we head to the kitchen.

“Oh, thank you.” If I were talking to anyone else, I'd tell them I got this outfit for the grand opening of one of my father's stores in London. I keep that detail to myself this time, but I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe because I want these

people to see me just as Olivia and not Jameson Sterling's daughter.

"Olivia," his mother says as she takes a large chicken out of the oven. "I actually went to school with your mother. She was a year above me, but we were both on the cheerleading squad." Huh. I didn't even know my mother was a cheerleader. "You'll have to tell her Natalie said hello."

"For sure. I will." When my mother ever decides I'm worth talking to again.

Landon leads me into the dining room off the kitchen to show me the pictures of young Landon and Lucy hanging on the walls. I immediately start looking, my eyes lighting up with amusement.

Landon has several school pictures with crooked teeth and crazy hair. His mother yells that he would never let her style his hair before school. He would roll out of bed and go to school however he woke up. He's definitely grown into his looks, though. He's gone from a cute little kid to a hot-as-fuck man, and I'm certainly not mad at it.

There are a few family pictures of them on Christmas, a few on a beach somewhere, and one of Landon in a football uniform with a young Camden and Bennett.

It's adorable.

When I think about it, I don't know if there are any pictures of Rhett and me as kids in our house in New York. The art is all designer or custom pieces. It's beautiful, but definitely not personal like this room.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when Natalie and Lucy bring dinner out and set it in the middle of the dining table. We

take our seats, Landon and I on one side, Lucy and Natalie on the other, and his dad at the head of the table.

“So, Olivia. How do you like working at Underwood Farms?” his dad asks as he takes a scoop of potatoes.

“Uh, it was definitely an adjustment for me. The smell was a lot to handle at first.” They all laugh because I’m sure they know what I’m talking about. “But I think I’ve gotten a lot better at everything. I’m getting used to it, I guess.”

“She’s doing great,” Landon adds. “I’m impressed by how quickly she caught on.”

“I had a great teacher.” He smiles at me as his sister goes, “Awww.”

I look over and see her and Natalie smiling at us.

“Landon came home for dinner one of the first days after you got here and told me how gorgeous and funny you were,” his mom tells me.

“I’m pretty sure I also said she had an attitude.” Landon laughs.

“Yes, you did also say that. But I could tell my boy was smitten.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. I thought her son hated me at first, but it turns out all the times I caught him staring at me, he was checking me out, not trying to think of ways to sabotage me.

The family makes small talk around the table. Lucy tells us how excited she is for her next semester at school, Landon tells them what’s new on the farm, and his parents ask how Bennett’s daughter, who I’ve yet to meet, is doing. I talk when

they direct the conversation to me, but for the most part, I just listen and learn about the people who raised Landon.

After dinner, I offer to do the dishes even though I absolutely loathe doing dishes. I have to do them every night at Dottie's, and it's really not helping my poor fingernails. Thankfully, Landon rejects my offer, and he and his dad tackle them while I hang out in the living room with his mom and sister.

"What do you miss the most about New York?" Lucy asks once we're sitting on the couch.

Mrs. Bowen shoots Lucy a look. She's acting like Lucy asked a terribly invasive question. Little does she know, that's mild compared to what I've been asked before by reporters and paparazzi. I wonder if they've read any articles about me. God, if they know about Nipplegate, I don't think I'd be able to look them in the eye.

"What? I'm just curious. Thundersville is so different from New York," she explains.

"It is," I agree. "Honestly, I really miss my best friend, Serena. We've been friends since high school and have been together almost every day since. But besides her, I guess just my everyday life. I miss my nail tech and my hair stylist. The coffee shop by our penthouse. Small things like that, really," I answer. It's weird. It almost feels like New York was a whole lifetime ago. I still miss it, but not as much as I used to.

"How long are you here for?" his mom asks the dreaded question.

"I'm not actually sure." Which is the honest truth. I haven't heard anything from my parents or Rhett. I'm assuming Dottie is giving them updates.

“Well, we’re glad to have you while you’re here,” she says with a smile.

“I’ve always wanted to go to New York,” Lucy says. “Especially at Christmas.”

I nod. “It is beautiful at Christmas. The city has a different vibe with the decorations and events. It’s really special. It’s also really, *really* crowded.”

“I bet,” Lucy says.

“Christmas in Thundersville is a little quieter, but there are decorations on Main Street and a Christmas tree lighting in the park,” Mrs. Bowen tells us. “The whole town comes together.”

“It sounds beautiful.” I wonder if I’ll still be here to see that.

A few minutes later, Landon walks out of the kitchen and takes my hand. “Come on. I want to give you a tour of the house.”

In my head, I’m thinking that a tour won’t take long since I’ve already seen the downstairs, and the house isn’t that big. But I’ll take any chance to be alone with him.

He points out everyone’s rooms upstairs and pulls me into his old bedroom. It’s like a time capsule of him as a teenager. There’s a decent-sized bed, a desk, and a bookcase with trophies and medals.

“This was my room. It’s not much, but I liked it.” He points out the window to a big tree right outside. “I used to climb out the window and down that tree to sneak out and meet my friends.”

“Oh my god. And your parents never noticed?”

“Nope. If they did, they’ve never said anything.”

I laugh, and he pulls me closer, cradling my cheek with his hand. “See, you had nothing to worry about. They love you.”

“They’re great, Landon. You have an awesome family.”

He shrugs. “I tried to tell you.”

He leans down and kisses me like he’s been dying to do it. I let him, savoring his lips on mine.

“I’m about ready to get out of here so I can do dirty things with you,” he rasps in my ear.

“Please do.”

He chuckles in my ear, and we head downstairs, saying goodbye to his family and getting in the truck.

CHAPTER 20

Olivia

We're a few minutes down the road from Landon's parents' house when he finally speaks.

"Can you do something for me, sweetheart?" he asks, his voice deep and seductive.

"Sure," I say as calmly as I can, even though I'm pretty sure I would do just about anything he asked.

He smirks. "Lift your skirt for me."

I do it without question, bunching it around my waist. He glances from my lap back to the road and groans.

"Olivia, are you not wearing panties?"

"You said I got to be your little slut, didn't you?" I ask him coyly.

"Jesus fucking Christ." He takes a deep breath and keeps his eyes on the road. "Spread your legs wide and touch yourself, Olivia. Rub your clit until you're so wet I can hear you over here but do not make yourself come."

"Yes, sir."

It's not going to take long for me to get that wet. Just hearing him talk like that gets me all worked up.

My legs open, and I reach down to circle my clit. I'd rather it be him touching me, but just having him next to me is

enough for now.

“Stick your finger in your greedy little cunt, Olivia,” he says after I’ve gotten myself nice and wet. His voice has dropped an octave, and it’s unbearably sexy.

I do what he says, pumping my finger in and out a few times.

“Now, put it in my mouth. I want to taste you.” Oh my god. Ok. Ok. This is really freaking hot.

I lean over and put my glistening finger into his open mouth. He sucks, cleaning off all my wetness.

He groans and pulls the truck into a closed strip mall. The parking lot is empty. I’d assume most things are starting to close now that the sun is down.

“Turn toward me, Olivia. I want to see you.” He moves his seat back, making more room for him to move.

I undo my seatbelt, turn my body to face him, and keep my legs wide. He leans forward and licks me, making me moan loudly.

He takes my finger and puts it inside myself again, adding his finger as well. His mouth attaches to my clit, working it exactly how I need it.

Another one of his fingers slips inside, curling up to hit the spot I need. I feel so full and on edge that I know I’m going to come any minute.

With a few more circles of his tongue and pumps of our fingers, I’m coming, screaming his name as I do.

“God, I need you, Olivia. Watching you come might be the single best thing I’ve ever seen.”

I hear him undo his belt buckle and the sound of him unzipping his jeans. He pulls me on top of him to straddle his hard cock. I've never had sex in a car before, much less a front seat. But I'm pretty sure I'd have sex with Landon just about anywhere. A car. A boat. The dirty ground. A park bench. You name it, I'm there.

"You're gonna ride me, sweetheart," he tells me, and I nod, desperate to feel him inside me.

He holds my skirt up so we can watch as I sink down.

"So. Fucking. Tight." He groans as he bottoms out inside me, stretching me. He grips my hips to hold me still for a minute. "Just give me a second. You feel so good. I'm gonna blow way too soon." I giggle and wait for him to move my hips. I love that I can make him come so completely undone.

Once he gives me the go-ahead, I grind on his cock, moving my hips so my swollen clit rubs against him every time. His hands are everywhere. My tits. My hips. My ass. He keeps gripping wherever he can.

I love it. I love his hands on me, but I love his eyes on me even more. He's looking at me like I'm the greatest thing he's ever seen. Like he wants a part of my soul in exchange for making me feel this good. And dammit, I want to give it to him. I'll give him everything I have.

"Landon," I cry.

"Yes, Olivia. Take it. Take what you need from me."

I do. My pace increases as I ride his cock and grind against him. My clit is still sensitive from his tongue, but I feel another orgasm building all over again.

"Do it, Olivia. Come on my cock. I know you want to. I can feel your cunt squeezing me."

One more thrust and I'm there, coming undone on top of him.

When I come back down, he grabs my hips and angles me back. I accidentally lean on the horn. The sound makes me jump, but Landon doesn't seem to notice. He's laser-focused on where we're connected.

He thrusts into me at a punishing pace. I feel him everywhere, completely using my body how he needs.

And then he stops. His head falls back as he groans and whispers my name. I feel him pulsing as he comes deep inside me. When I'm completely filled, he pulls me into his chest and gently kisses my lips. Both of us are sweaty, and the windows of his truck are all foggy.

So foggy that neither of us notices the red and blue lights are flashing behind us.

There's a knock on the driver's side window.

"Shit," Landon whispers, pulling my skirt down to cover my ass. He makes no move to get me off him, so I stay put, plastered to his chest.

He lowers his window, and the same cop who pulled us over last time stands there. Is there only one cop in this damn town?

"Hey, Dean." Landon greets him casually, like I'm not sitting on his lap, his cock still inside me and his cum starting to leak out.

Dean shakes his head. "Landon. What the hell, man?"

"Sorry." He offers the officer a small shrug. "I couldn't keep my hands off her."

“That’s all well and good, but you can’t be doing this in a public place. Someone could’ve easily walked up on y’all.”

“I know. I wasn’t thinking,” Landon admits.

“Please move along from this parking lot, and for the love of god, find a bed next time.”

“We will,” Landon promises.

Dean rolls his eyes and walks back to his patrol car. As soon as our window is back up, Landon and I burst out laughing.

“You’re going to get me thrown in jail,” he teases.

“Me? You’re the one who pulled me onto your lap.”

“And you’re not wearing any panties,” he counters.

“Only because you cut them off last time. I don’t have many cute pairs with me, so this is all on you, buddy.”

He laughs again. “I guess we better get out of here before Dean comes back with handcuffs.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Handcuffs? That could be fun.”

Landon shakes his head with that gorgeous smile on his face.

I lift off him, leaving behind a sticky mess. He grabs a napkin from his glove compartment, wipes off, and tucks himself back into his jeans.

When I reach for a napkin, he stops me. “I want my cum dripping down your leg, sweetheart. Leave it.”

Fuck, that’s hotter than it has any right to be, but it makes me think of something I should’ve asked last time.

“Should we be using condoms?” I ask.

He looks at me, all humor gone from his face. “I don’t know. Should we?”

I shrug. “I’m on birth control. But I’m clean. I’ve just never done it without a condom.”

That makes him smile. “I’m clean too. So no, we won’t be using condoms because I want to pump you full of my cum so you remember you’re mine.”

“Such a caveman.”

“Only for you, sweetheart.”

Oh. My. God.

Are all Southern boys this possessive, or did I get lucky and find the one with a magic dick and a dirty mouth?

CHAPTER 21

Landon

August turns into September, and the days run together. I don't do much else between work and spending as much time with Olivia as possible. I wouldn't want it any other way, either.

Some nights, I stay at Underwood Farms and have dinner with Dottie and Olivia. And Olivia comes to my parents' for dinner almost every week. They love her like I knew they would. I even manage to get Olivia back to my house so I can fuck her properly in a bed. No more police run-ins for us.

On one of my days off, my friends ask me to meet them at Cowboy's, the one and only bar off Main Street. I agree and decide to bring Olivia with me. She's part of my life now; thankfully, my friends are accepting that. Even Cam.

When I pick Olivia up for our night out, she's in a gold sequin dress and shiny black heels with a red sole. I don't think I've ever seen her wear the same thing twice. The dress is way too much for Cowboy's, but there's no way I'm telling her that. Not when she looks this damn good. Olivia isn't meant for a small town like this, and I'd never ask her to be anything different from who she is.

"Are you sure your friends want me there tonight?" she asks once we're on our way.

“Yes,” I tell her, which is true. Cat and Laura were asking about her the other day. “And even if they didn’t, I want you there. Isn’t that enough?”

She puts her hand on my jean-clad leg. “Of course, it’s enough.”

We drive down Main Street and pass everything available on the square: the diner, the ice cream shop, the small boutiques, the coffee shop, the courthouse, and the library. Olivia has mentioned a few times how strange it is to her that everything is so close. It’s nothing like New York City and the places she’s used to. She’s shown me pictures of her house and the penthouse in the city.

It’s... a lot. A lot more than I would ever be able to give her.

But I try to not let that bother me. I have to hope that I’m making an impression on her life. One she won’t easily forget. One that maybe, just maybe, she can’t walk away from.

I find a parking spot on the street near Cowboy’s, and we walk into the bar. All eyes are on us. Really, they’re on Olivia, which is fine with me. I like to show her off. She’s been the talk of the town since she got here. Even several months later, people still stare when they see her. She doesn’t seem to notice it, but I do.

My friends are already in a booth in the back of the bar, and Olivia and I scoot in. Everyone is here tonight, even Benny, which is rare. Usually on our days off, he’s with his daughter. But I think his parents wanted her to spend the night with them tonight, giving him an opportunity to come out with us.

“Are those real Louboutins?” Cat asks Olivia with wide eyes.

“Of course.” I highly doubt my girl would go out in knock-off designer shoes.

“Oh god. What I wouldn’t give to raid your closet,” Laura gushes.

“I wish I could take you guys. I have so much stuff you could have. Maybe I can send some stuff when I finally get back home.” All the girls gasp.

“For real?” Laura asks, her eyes wide.

“Of course. I’ve got loads of things just sitting there that I don’t need.”

They start talking about clothes. Even Ellie looks excited about the prospect of getting Olivia’s clothes. It’s kinda weird, but I’m keeping my mouth shut. It baffles me that Olivia could possibly have that many clothes. I’ve worn this black T-shirt every week since I bought it like three years ago.

A depressing thought takes root in the back of my mind. Soon enough, Olivia will be gone. And damn if that doesn’t make my fucking chest hurt. I know she wants to go home. I understand. But that doesn’t mean it’s not gonna break my heart.

Deep down, I want her to stay. I want her to look around and decide that Thundersville is enough for her. I’m enough for her. But that’s not fair to her.

Shaking the thought out of my head, I grab her hand. “Let’s go dance.”

She looks out onto the dance floor, where everyone is doing a line dance. It’s one I’ve done since I was a kid. Her

brows furrow. “I don’t know how to do that.”

I smile. “I’ll show you.”

She hesitates for a second longer before scooting out of the booth with me.

We find a spot toward the back of the dance floor. Keeping our hands linked, I start moving my feet, and she attempts to follow. She trips over her feet a few times. I can’t imagine those shoes are easy to dance in, but eventually, she gets the hang of it. By the time the next song starts, she’s laughing and having a good time, not even caring that she’s messing up or turning the wrong way.

The crowd pulls her into the middle, taking it upon themselves to teach her the moves. I stay as close as I can, but I love seeing her have fun and love to see the town embracing her.

When she finally makes her way back to me a few songs later, she’s sticky with sweat, barefoot, and smiling.

We head back towards the table, where everyone tells her how good she did. Even Cam seems impressed.

“Olivia, you might be starting to fit in here after all,” he tells her.

She smiles apprehensively. When she puts her hand on his shoulder, he doesn’t shrug her off. “Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t had the sheriff throw me out of town yet.”

It’s the first time they’ve joked with each other since she showed up here months ago. Everyone is quiet for a minute as we wait to see if Cam will get pissed or laugh.

Thankfully, he tips his head back in laughter. “I should’ve thought about that. The sheriff is friends with my dad.”

“Too late now,” she tells him. “You’re stuck with me.”

He studies her for a second. “Yeah, well, maybe you aren’t so bad. And you make my best friend happy, so...”

“Camden. That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. You better stop now before I think we’re actually friends.”

He laughs. “You’re right. That’s enough for tonight.” He pauses and looks at her. “Your makeup is running. You look like a raccoon.”

She laughs at his attempt to be mean to her. “That’s better.”

They bump shoulders before he turns his attention back to the rest of the table. “Let’s get some food.”

I pull her back toward me and kiss her. It’s a silent thank you. Thank you for putting up with Cam. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being with me.

We order a round of appetizers for the table and get refills of our drinks, except for Olivia, who is still nursing her sparkling water.

My friends interact with Olivia like they’re finally starting to accept her into our little group. It’s what I’ve wanted from the start.

When the wings are delivered to the table, Olivia grabs a fork to get one off the plate, and Cam grabs her arm. The look of pure horror on his face makes me laugh.

“Olivia,” he says sternly. “You do not eat a chicken wing with a goddamn fork.”

She looks from him to the chicken wing. The entire table is trying to stifle their laughs.

“Bless your heart, honey,” Cat calls out from across the table.

“You eat it with your hands,” Cam explains as he grabs one and brings it to his mouth, showing her how it’s done.

Olivia looks back at the plate. “You just... grab it? Isn’t that messy?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, sweetheart. It is messy. But they’re so good, you won’t care.”

She cringes. Before I think better of it, I grab one for her and hold it up to her mouth to take a bite.

“Jesus Christ,” Cam groans. “She has you pussy whipped already.”

The whole table laughs, but I don’t care. I’d do literally anything to make Olivia more comfortable. She takes a bite, and I set it on her plate.

“Aw, Camden. Sounds like you’re jealous. Are you having trouble finding pussy?” Olivia asks, unbothered by his comment. Benny lets out an exaggerated “Ooooh.”

“I get plenty of pussy,” Cam defends himself.

“I’m sure you do,” Olivia teases, nodding at him as he rolls his eyes.

Cam isn’t wrong. Olivia has me wrapped around her little finger. Let them make fun of me all they want. I’m the one who’s winning at life.

CHAPTER 22

I assumed it would start cooling down in September, but I was wrong. Very wrong. The high temperatures haven't gone anywhere. I didn't even know my body could produce this much sweat, but I feel like I've been dripping non-stop since I got here. It's honestly disgusting, and cold showers in the afternoon have become a staple for me.

We've been busy today, running all over the farm. I saw Landon and the boys at lunch, but that was it. Aunt Dottie has me checking in on several of the crops now. She says I'll be able to tell if something is wrong, but I'm not sure that's true. I've been Googling what could go wrong with certain crops just to make sure I don't fuck anything up.

I don't want to let her down.

The walk back to the main house for dinner feels like the longest part of my day. I'm exhausted. My feet ache, and all I want to do is peel these sweaty clothes off. I don't get the pleasure of using one of the UTVs to ride around the property like the guys do, so I have to walk everywhere. My legs feel like Jell-O at the end of every day.

The house comes into view, and I stop in my tracks when I see someone with bleach-blond hair standing on the back porch with Aunt Dottie.

I squint, trying to see who it is.

Is that...?

My pace picks up even though my feet scream in protest, and the woman runs off the back porch. It is! It's her! We crash into each other's arms, both of us squealing so loud that Cam and Landon come running from wherever they are.

"Jesus Christ," Cam says when he sees us. "There's two of them." He rolls his eyes and walks away. I'm assuming he knows she's my friend, not only because of the screeching but because she's dressed to the nines in a hot pink jumpsuit with matching platform heels. It's not something you see every day in Thundersville, and I'm starting to realize how they must have seen me when I showed up.

Landon comes a little closer. "You alright, sweetheart?" he asks, glancing between us.

"Oh my god," Serena says, doing a double-take when she sees Landon. "Are you him?" She looks back at me. "That's him, isn't it?"

I smile and nod.

"Ugh, I understand everything now," she says.

"Landon, this is my best friend, Serena. Serena, this is Landon." I gesture to each of them.

"Her boyfriend," he adds as he sticks his hand out to shake hers. I laugh at his possessiveness. I never thought I would like a man like that, but Landon? I don't know. He makes it kind of hot.

Serena shakes his hand, the smile never leaving her face.

"Serena, what are you doing here?" I ask, still surprised that my best friend is in Thundersville.

“I came to visit you, duh. It’s been months since I’ve seen my best friend, and that’s just unacceptable. So, I packed my bags and flew down for the weekend.”

A whole weekend with my best friend? It’s such a relief to see her that I could cry.

“And don’t worry. I talked to your parents, and they said it was fine if I came down for a visit, but I only have two nights.”

“Oh my gosh, this is so great.” I hug her again. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Me too!” She looks at my outfit. “You were right. These clothes are hideous.”

I groan. “Ugh, I know.”

Her eyebrows raise. “Well, I mean, maybe’s it’s kind of farm-chic?”

“You don’t have to try to make me feel better. I know they’re terrible.”

“I’ll let you two be,” Landon says and then faces me. “Sweetheart, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He leans in and kisses me gently.

Serena waves her fingers at him. “Bye, Landon.”

“Bye, Serena.” He gives her his most charming smile.

After he walks off, Serena says, “Olivia, that man is gorgeous! The pictures don’t do him justice.”

“I know,” I say, watching him walk away. “He’s pretty much perfect.”

“Oh my god. Look at your face! You’re in so deep,” she squeals. “I’m happy for you, Liv. You deserve a good man.”

Do I deserve a good man? I'm not sure if that's true. But I couldn't give Landon up even if I wanted to. He's too good, but I want him. Every morning, I look forward to seeing him. I'm pretty sure he feels the same because he always finds a way to see me, even on his days off. The butterflies still haven't gone away. Whenever I see him or his name pops up on my phone, my stomach does somersaults. I've never experienced anything like this before.

"Come on, your aunt said dinner was almost ready. Also,"—she grabs my hand—"what is going on with your nails?"

My last manicure from New York is long gone by now. I was able to watch a video on how to remove a gel manicure, and thankfully, Walmart had all the supplies I needed. My nails are bare and cut down pretty short, and there always seems to be dirt stuck underneath them. When I first got here, I hated looking down at my hands with my chipping manicure, but now I don't care all that much. There are other more important things for me to worry about now.

Although, I gave in and bought some box color at Walmart. I had Landon help me do my roots one night, but that's been the extent of my beauty regimen since I've been here.

"Yeah, there's no nail salon in Thundersville. The closest one is in the next town over, and I haven't really had time." And I'm not sure my dad would qualify my nails as a necessity for me to use my credit card.

She gasps. "Oh my god. That's terrible."

"I know," I nod in agreement.

“How are your driving lessons going with Mr. Hottie McHotterson?”

I laugh. “Good. I have to get forty hours of driving time before I can try to take the test. But we’re getting close.”

She claps her hands. “I can’t wait to have you drive me all around this cute little town.”

We link arms and walk to the house, where we have dinner. Thankfully, it’s not a mush casserole, even though I’ve gotten used to them. We eat the chicken, rice, and roasted carrots while chatting. Apparently, Dottie was in on the surprise of Serena coming. My parents called and asked if Serena could stay for a weekend, and she agreed. Honestly, I can’t believe my parents agreed to do something nice for me.

I tell Serena what I’ve been up to, and she tells me about all the parties she’s gone to and people she’s been hanging out with since I abandoned her—her words, not mine. She shows me pictures of the new dresses she just got. They’re beautiful, but I’m surprisingly not jealous.

Hearing her talk about all of this, I almost can’t believe I used to do this too. It feels like a lifetime ago.

I’ve seen the pictures on her social media of everything she’s been doing, and she always looks amazing. The last picture I posted was a picture Landon took of me. I was laughing, sitting in the pen with a few of our new baby goats. I had no makeup on, there were armpit sweat marks on my shirt, and I had Landon’s hat on because the sun was starting to burn my face.

Landon sent me the picture and told me how much he loved it. He even set it as the background on his phone. So, I posted it for all the world to see. It got over a hundred

thousand likes, and people commented on how happy I looked and how nice it was to see *someone like me* doing something so normal. There were a few nasty comments, but there always are. I tried not to let those get to me.

The point is, my life has changed so drastically, and I don't hate it as much as I thought I would.

After dinner, I wash the dishes as usual and ask Serena if she wants to watch *Wheel of Fortune* with us while we work on our puzzle. Landon has stayed a few nights to help, and we're getting close to finishing it.

She looks at me like I've grown a second head before agreeing. We all sit down on the old as fuck blue couch in the living room and work on the puzzle.



The next morning, I let Serena sleep in while I get up to do my morning chores. She slept in my bed last night instead of one of the other guest rooms because we wanted to stay up talking like we used to. It was so much fun. I knew I missed her, but having her here has made me realize just how much.

I meet Landon and Camden in the milking parlor, just like normal. Landon kisses me and asks me about my night while we clean udders. I really should've woken Serena up for this. She would've gotten a kick out of it, I bet. I'm not sure if she's ever even seen a cow in real life. I know I hadn't before I got here.

"I'm taking Serena to Cowboy's tonight," I tell Landon as I strip my gloves off.

“Would you be mad if I met you there?” he asks.

“Of course not. I mean, you are my *boyfriend*, right?” I tease. We’ve never had the boyfriend-girlfriend discussion, so hearing him introduce himself like that took me off guard for a minute. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

He smirks. “Yes, I am. And you’re my girlfriend.”

“Does being your girlfriend have any special perks? I don’t agree to things unless they benefit me.”

“Don’t I know it,” he mutters jokingly. “But yes, you get unlimited access to amazing sex, romantic dates, and constant princess treatment. I’ll even throw in bodyguard duty tonight while you’re at the bar. Wouldn’t want anyone getting handsy with you while I’m not around.”

I tap my chin like I’m thinking. “Hmm. I guess those terms are acceptable.”

“Good. Glad we’ve come to an agreement. I’ll see you tonight, then. Don’t get too crazy until I get there.”

I agree and kiss him goodbye. If he only knew how I used to act, he’d probably have a heart attack. Cowboy’s is the most tame bar I’ve ever been in, but I’ll allow Landon to feel like he’s protecting me if it makes him feel better.

After finishing my jobs, I head back to the house, where Serena is sitting at the table talking with Aunt Dottie. I hand over my basket of eggs.

“Are those like actual chicken eggs?” Serena asks.

“Yep,” I answer proudly. I’ve started to really like those chickens. Sometimes, I even talk to them while I’m in there. That probably sounds crazy, but being in the middle of nowhere will do that to you.

“Thanks, hun,” Aunt Dottie says. “So, I thought I could drop you girls off in town for the day. You can have lunch at the diner and maybe look at some of the shops, then call me when you’re ready for me to come pick you up.”

“That sounds great, Aunt Dottie. Thanks. Let me go shower and get dressed, and then we can go.”

I really make an effort to look like my old self today. I do full makeup even though I know it’ll probably melt off. I curl my hair in effortless beach waves, which actually take a lot of effort. I pick a white dress with black straps and black floral embroidery on the bottom.

When we’re ready, Aunt Dottie takes us into town and drops us off at the diner I’ve been to a few times with Landon. It’s one of my favorite places in town, not that there’s much competition.

“This place is so cute,” Serena says while looking out the window of the diner after we order our food. She ordered a salad, but I ordered a cheeseburger, which surprised her. Working as much as I do makes me ravenous, and Landon got me hooked on these damn cheeseburgers and fries.

Following her gaze, I look at the little brick buildings lining Main Street. “It really is cute,” I hear myself saying. Huh. Who knew?

“How are you doing here?” she asks. “Like for real.”

I think about it for a minute. “It was really hard at first. I was angry for a while. But I think I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Did a certain sun-kissed farm boy help with that?” She smiles at me.

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Oh my god,” she says suddenly, hitting her palms on the table. “You’re going to stay here forever, aren’t you?”

“No,” I say quickly. Too quickly. “No. Absolutely not.” I can’t stay here. I can’t. This isn’t my home.

“I’ve seen this movie, Liv. You’re going to fall in love and move to this small town and I’m going to have to come visit you every Christmas to help you with your failing Christmas tree farm.”

“We don’t have Christmas trees, and if we did, I don’t think it would be failing,” I counter.

She points at me. “See! You just said *we*.”

“I’m not moving here. I’m waiting on my parents to tell me I can come home, and then I’m out of here.”

“If you say so,” she smirks.

“I do.” I think.

Our food is delivered just then, thankfully ending this conversation.

CHAPTER 23

Olivia

After lunch, where Serena watches in awe as I eat my entire cheeseburger, fries, and down a Dr. Pepper, we walk down the sidewalk arm in arm until we get to a little boutique Landon told me about. I haven't gone in because I didn't want to be tempted to buy anything and give my parents another reason to leave me here longer.

The store is cute but not exactly our style. It doesn't stop Serena from gasping as she floats through the displays. Country music is playing from the speakers, but it's just one more thing I've become accustomed to. From hearing it at Cowboy's to listening on Landon's truck radio, it's just become normal. I even know some of the songs, and it freaks me out when I catch myself singing the words.

The clothes are very country chic. That's the best way I can describe it. None of this would ever be in a Sterling's department store. The first thing I notice is the giant display of cowboy boots against the wall. Serena, however, starts digging through a rack of dresses.

The pretty woman behind the counter comes straight for us with a huge smile.

"Welcome in, y'all. Is there anything I can help you find?" she asks.

I'm about to tell her no, but Serena beats me to it. "We're just browsing, but do you have anything new in stock?"

Serena wants "new" because she'd never be caught dead in something someone else could be wearing. I know this because I'm the same way. Or at least, I used to think showing up with someone else wearing the same thing would be hella embarrassing.

"Well, we just got in our new items for football season. Those are our hottest items at the moment."

"Football?" Serena and I say in unison. Her face looks just as disgusted as mine. I look around and see jerseys, team dresses, and even jeans with a team name embroidered down the leg. No. Nope. Definitely not.

"It's football season, y'all!" the woman laughs. "But how about one of these new shirts?"

She holds up a white crop top with long, poofy sleeves. It's beautiful, and I can tell Serena falls in love with it.

"Absolutely," Serena says. "This is what I'm looking for." She finds her size on the rack and carries it around while we browse, adding more to her try on pile.

"Are you new around here?" the woman asks.

"Nope. I'm just visiting my best friend." Serena points to me. "But I'm Serena."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Marren." She looks at me. "Are you Landon's girl?"

I almost choke. A complete stranger knows me as Landon's girl? I've never been known as anyone's anything except for my parents' daughter.

"How did you know that?" I ask.

She laughs. “Well, I’ve heard a lot about you, and since I haven’t seen you in here before, I assumed it had to be you. I’m also friends with his sister, Lucy.”

“Well then, yes, I’m Landon’s girl.” It feels weird to admit it out loud, but it’s the truth. He called himself my boyfriend yesterday, but I hadn’t even thought about it before that.

Serena and I follow Marren around the store as she points out different items that just came in. I’ll admit, there are some really cute things in here. I’d probably buy most of it if I wasn’t on lockdown with my credit card.

Serena turns to me with several hangers in her hands. “We’re getting new outfits for tonight. My treat.”

“Serena...” I start.

“No. Nope. I’m not taking no for an answer. We’re getting new outfits because we need to blend in with the town. I can guarantee you that nothing in my suitcase will do that.”

“You really don’t have to,” I try again.

She puts her hand on my shoulder. “I know I don’t have to. I want to. And let’s be honest, whatever we buy here would be so much cheaper than one dress at Saks. Daddy will be proud that I’m bargain shopping.”

I can’t argue with that logic, so I let her pull me into a changing room.



Later that evening, we spend hours getting ready, just like we used to, only this time there’s no alcohol involved because of Aunt Dottie’s no alcohol rule. Although I don’t really feel like

I *want* a drink. I'm having fun laughing and getting ready with my best friend. There's nothing I need to feel numb from, and that's a humbling experience.

It's really nice. I would share my revelations with my parents if they ever called me directly instead of getting updates from Aunt Dottie.

After dinner, Aunt Dottie drives us to Cowboy's. She agreed to drop us off as long as Landon brought us home. Of course, he agreed.

The look on Serena's face when we walk into Cowboy's is priceless, and I wish I would've taken a picture.

The bar is nothing special, especially considering what we're used to in New York. Still, it has a quaintness I've come to appreciate. The floors are sticky, the chairs and tables are all mismatched, and there are dead animal heads on the walls. A jukebox sits in the corner and gets a lot of use on nights when a band isn't playing on the stage. The actual bar is surrounded by barstools that are almost always occupied by the locals. Most of them even have assigned seats that are common knowledge. And if someone accidentally sits in one of them, they'll be asked to get up as soon as the owner of the chair walks in. It's insane, but awesome.

Serena turns to me. "Ok, first impression is a little jarring."

"Is it the animal heads?" I ask.

"It's the animal heads," she confirms. "But, after a second look, it's cute in a small-town charm kinda way."

"Ok, we can work with that," I say, nodding. Serena is a romantic at heart. She looks for the fairy tale ending in every situation.

“We can definitely work with that. And maybe I’ll even find my very own cowboy tonight.”

I laugh as we push our way to the bar, where she orders a cocktail, and I order sparkling water, which the bartender puts in a wine glass for me.

We’re heading to a booth when I see Landon walk in with Bennett. Landon stops in his tracks when he sees me, and his eyes slowly move up my body. Serena bought me very short, cut-off denim shorts and a brown belt with a big-ass belt buckle similar to one I’ve seen Landon wear. I also got a big T-shirt with the football team logo from one of Landon’s hats that I tucked loosely into my shorts. I cut off the sleeves of the shirt, making extra large armholes like Landon’s. I’m wearing a bralette under mine though, so I’m covered. I’ve seen a few girls wear outfits like this since I got here, but I never really understood it until now. I feel cute. The best part of the outfit is the cowboy boots that come halfway up my calf and are covered in silver rhinestones. Serena got similar ones with rainbow rhinestones. They’re obnoxious and perfect at the same time.

Thanks to whatever Serena used, my hair is curled and more voluminous than usual. She also put strings of glitter into the curls for some flare. We went really heavy for our makeup, like what we used to do in New York. I almost didn’t recognize myself when I looked in the mirror before we left.

Landon walks directly to me, grips my waist, pulls me close, and groans, “You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you? How am I supposed to do anything with you walking around looking this fucking good?”

I giggle and reach between us to feel the bulge in his pants. “Don’t fucking tempt me, woman,” he growls. “I’ll march you

right out of here and fuck you senseless in my truck. Don't think I won't."

"We might actually get arrested if we do that again," I tell him with a laugh.

"I know my girl is hot," Serena interrupts us. "But please keep it in your pants tonight."

We pull away from each other, but I don't miss that Landon has to readjust his pants. I love that I get this reaction from him. The best part is he thinks I'm attractive when I'm all dressed up like this and when I'm covered in dirt in baggy clothes at the farm. It's a win-win.

Landon clears his throat. "Serena, this is my best friend, Benny."

As Serena introduces herself, I see the look in her eyes. Bennett walked in here wearing a cowboy hat, fitting the only criteria for Serena's cowboy fantasy.

Bennett wears a cowboy hat every day at work, and when I think about it, the few times he's come out with us, he usually has one on. Maybe Bennett is a real-life cowboy, but I don't think he's Serena's type. Landon has told me that his daughter is his number one priority, and Serena needs a man who makes her his number one priority.

But she's only here for tonight, so I'll let her have her fun.

The four of us go to a table in the back of the room. Landon and I sit on one side, and he pulls me as close as possible without us actually sitting on the same chair. That leaves Bennett and Serena sitting next to each other. Serena doesn't seem to mind one bit. I bite back a smile when she finally looks at me and winks before turning to her prey.

“So, Benny, tell me all about what you do at the farm,” she says.

“Well, I work in the stables. Keep the horses trained and healthy. I also teach riding lessons a few times a week,” he responds. His voice is so quiet I can barely hear him. It’s also the most I’ve heard him speak, like ever.

“Wow,” Serena says in her full-on flirty voice. I almost roll my eyes because poor Bennett doesn’t stand a chance. She puts her arm on his bicep. “That’s really awesome. I’ve never ridden a horse, but I am pretty good at riding other things.”

“We should get some chicken wings,” I blurt out to stop her from going into detail about exactly what she’s good at riding. Although, by the look on Bennett’s face, he already knows.

“Chicken wings?” Serena asks. “Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?”

“They’re not bad, actually,” I tell her, looking over the menu.

“Don’t let her fool you, Serena. I have to feed them to her so she doesn’t get her hands messy,” Landon chimes in. I elbow him in the ribs.

“Whose side are you on?” I ask.

“No one’s side. Just making sure she has the truth.”

Serena laughs. “Alright, girl. Get us some damn chicken wings, then.”

Landon orders the food and then nods to the dance floor. “Should we show Serena your new dance moves?”

“Absolutely.” I turn to Serena, who is trailing her hand up and down Bennett’s arm. “Serena, let’s dance.”

She looks to the dance floor and cringes. “I don’t know—”

I don’t let her finish. “Come on. When have you ever backed down from a challenge?”

She smirks at me and takes my hand, pulling Bennett along behind her.

I attempt to show Serena some moves on the dance floor, but Bennett eventually takes over when I’m whisked off with Landon.

We stay out there, dance after dance. I try my best to follow Landon’s steps while watching everyone else. I never thought I’d be a line dancer, but it’s actually kind of fun. Everyone moves in one big group and still manages to put their own style into it. I’m tripping over my feet a lot, but I’ll be as good as everyone else soon enough.

After a few songs, I look over my shoulder just in time to see Serena pull Bennett’s face toward her to kiss him.

CHAPTER 24

Landon

As much fun as it was to see Olivia with her best friend, I'm glad I've got her all to myself again.

After the bar last night, we're all dragging this morning. Reason number one for why we don't go out on work nights. To Olivia's credit, she still showed up when she was supposed to. Dottie gave her the day off from the farmers market, but she still has to work. I imagine Olivia is better off than us because she didn't drink.

A little after the sun comes up, Olivia runs back to the house to tell Serena goodbye. I wait on the back porch for her to come out.

"You alright?" I ask, pulling her into my arms.

She exhales deeply. "Yeah. It was great to see her. I miss the hell out of her, but I kinda like the routine I've got going here."

"You? Princess of New York likes the farm routine?" I ask.

She steps back and playfully punches my shoulder. "Trust me. The moment my feet hit the ground in the city, I'm putting my tiara back on."

I laugh even though the thought of her back in New York makes my heart sink. "I don't doubt that one bit."

“Thanks for coming with us last night.”

“Where you go, I go, sweetheart. But I was a little nervous for poor Benny. He’s not used to that kind of attention.”

Olivia laughs. “It’s his own fault for walking in there looking like he stepped straight out of Serena’s dream with that cowboy hat on.”

I nuzzle into her neck. “Should I get a cowboy hat? Would that turn you on?”

She tugs at the back of my hat. “You turn me on just fine with this. You could maybe do something about these clothes, though. And those boots...”

“Oh. You don’t like my clothes, huh?”

She shrugs. “I mean, they’re kind of dirty.”

Her voice is full of humor. I grab her by the waist and hoist her over my shoulder.

She squeals loudly with her ass in the air. “I’m going to show you just how dirty I can be.”

“Landon!” she shrieks.

I toss her into my UTV and take off toward the other end of the farm.

She holds on to the handle and asks, “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” is all I give her.

I bring the UTV to a halt in front of the sunflower field. The stalks have been cut back, but it’s still one of my favorite places. I’ll never not associate sunflowers with Olivia now. Not since that first kiss where I knew she would be my destruction.

I grab her hand and lead her into the middle of the field. I curl my fingers around her neck, pulling her towards me and kissing her hard. She doesn't object, her hands immediately grabbing my shirt and tugging me even closer. I love that about her. She's always just as eager and ready as I am.

Her hand moves from my shirt to my pants. She groans when she feels that I'm already hard. I'm always fucking hard around her. I can't get enough. And seeing her like that last night and not getting to touch her the way I wanted was absolute torture.

"On your knees, sweetheart," I whisper. "I'm gonna make you get real dirty."

She drops to her knees, not caring that her jeans will get dirty.

"Undo my belt buckle." She does it quickly and unzips my pants.

"Take my cock out." She tugs my jeans and boxers down my thighs, and my cock springs free. She looks at it like it's a fucking treat.

Her eyes move to mine as she waits for direction, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

"Suck it, sweetheart. Take it all the way into your mouth until you're choking on it."

She leans forward, circling her tongue around the tip and gathering my precum. Then she licks me from top to bottom, getting my dick nice and wet. Her lips finally wrap around me, and she slowly slides down my length and takes as much as she can before pulling back.

Each time she goes down, she takes me a little deeper until I can feel myself hitting the back of her throat. She gags

initially but quickly gets used to my size and moves back and forth on my cock.

Her hands move to my ass so she can hold me in place. She teases me with the scrape of her teeth against the tip every so often. It feels so fucking good.

I grab her head to hold her in place as I start moving my hips faster. Her nails dig into my ass, but she lets me fuck her face exactly how I want. I thrust hard and deep, something I've never done with anyone before, but Olivia and her smart mouth are a challenge I never knew I needed.

I pull out of her mouth when I feel myself on the verge of coming. As much as I'd love to pump myself down her throat, it's her pussy I'm after.

She stares up at me with tears in her green eyes. For a second, I worry that I went too hard, that I hurt her. But then she smirks and asks, "What's next?"

Fuck me. "Take your pants off and get on your hands and knees."

She does as she's told, getting on all fours with her ass in the air.

"Spread 'em wide, baby."

She opens a little wider, enough for me to lie on the ground underneath her. She looks down at me, confused. She thought I was going to fuck her. I will. But first I need her to come.

I pull her hips down to my face and suck her clit. She moans my name. I should tell her to be quiet so no one will accidentally walk up on us. But I don't. I want people to hear her screaming my name. I want the whole damn world to know she's mine.

Her hips rock against my mouth, and I lick her exactly how I know she likes. I've studied her body over the last few weeks. It drives her wild when I move my tongue in slow circles on her clit, and she loves when I finger fuck her hard. She rides me when we fuck so she can rub her clit against me, and we come together. She didn't even have to tell me. I want to make her feel good. I need to. So, I make a note of when she has a bigger reaction to something so I can keep coming back to it.

Her legs shake around my head.

"Oh god, Landon. I'm gonna come. I'm gonna come," she pants. And then she does. With one loud moan, she comes on my tongue. I watch her from my position. Her head falls backward, and her eyes close as she grinds against me, taking what she needs. I could stay like this all damn day. Eat her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

She catches her breath before she lifts off me.

"Goddamn. You're so fucking sexy when you do that," I tell her, my mouth covered with her release.

She smiles and moves one of her legs so I can get out from under her, but she stays on her hands and knees. I position myself behind her, and this time, I do fuck her. She's so wet, my cock slides right in.

Her hair is in one long braid today, and it's calling my name. I tug on it, wrapping it around my fist as I pump in and out of her.

"Harder," she cries. "Fuck me like you mean it, Landon."

I let out a strangled laugh. She loves to keep me on my toes.

My free hand grips her hip as I thrust into her, hard and deep. She cries out a loud “Yes!”

I do it again and again, pounding into her as hard as I fucking can. Her pussy squeezes me just right, and I know I’m close again. I let go of her hair and grip both hips as I thrust in and out.

Finally, she comes again, and I empty inside of her. I curl over her back and kiss her neck.

We stay like that for a minute, enjoying our connection.

I pull out and help her stand. Her knees and the palms of her hands are covered in dirt. She looks at them and smiles. “Guess you weren’t kidding about the dirty part.”



Over the next few days, Olivia and I fall back into our routine. We work, I stay for dinner most nights, and then we work on a puzzle with Dottie. Dottie even lets me spend the night sometimes, but I’m definitely not trying to overstay my welcome. Waking up next to Olivia might be one of my new favorite things, even if we wake up at an ungodly hour. It just makes it a little easier when we get to do it together.

We spend every second we can together on our days off. Between dinners with my parents, I show her around the town I grew up in. We even take a day trip to visit my sister at her college. Olivia has a blast while we’re there. Understandably, the college town is more fun than Thundersville.

Olivia is getting better at driving, too. She’s only hit a few curbs and has learned to look out for both stop signs and stop

lights. We've reviewed the requirements for someone over eighteen to get a driver's license in Georgia, and I think she's about ready to take her test even though she feels like she's not. She's stalling big time, but I'm not giving up.

Everything is going well. Too well. So I'm not surprised when we walk up to the house one afternoon after a long day of work and see a woman standing on the back porch with Dottie.

Olivia stops in her tracks and pulls back on my hand.

"What's the matter?" I ask, looking between Olivia and the woman. "Who is that?"

She takes a deep breath and says the words that make my heart sink. "It's my mother."

CHAPTER 25

My mother is the last person I expect to see standing on the back porch. Certainly not in regular jeans and boots I've never seen her wear in my entire life.

Her hair isn't styled like usual, and she's wearing minimal makeup.

She definitely doesn't look like the woman who dropped me off at the airport months ago without a second thought.

"Mom?" I ask when we reach the house. I'm squeezing the life out of Landon's hand, but he doesn't pull away. It's not that I'm scared to see my mom; I'm just a little nervous about what this could mean. On the one hand, she could be here to take me back to New York. She could also be here to tell me I'll be staying longer. I'm not sure which one makes me more nervous. "What are you doing here?"

She smiles. "I'm here to check on you."

She could've called. Or texted. Or freaking emailed. I don't know, something a little less extreme than hopping on a plane to come here.

"Are you going to introduce me?" she asks, looking between Landon and me.

"Oh, yeah. This is Landon. My boyfriend." It still feels strange to say boyfriend. "Landon. This is my mother, Helena

Sterling.”

Landon wipes his hand on his jeans, which doesn't do much considering his jeans are just as dirty as his hands, and extends his hand to my mom. “It's nice to finally meet you, ma'am.”

“You as well. Dottie has told me a lot about you.”

That doesn't sit well with me. I should be the one to tell my family about my own boyfriend, but we've got bigger fish to fry. Like what she's really doing here.

Wait. Did I just say bigger fish to fry? What is happening to me?

“Hope it's all good,” Landon says with his charming Southern drawl and welcoming smile.

Mom laughs. “Oh, yes. Mostly just how happy you're making Olivia.”

He squeezes my hand. “Good to hear.”

“Well, come on in,” Dottie says, waving us in. “We can all catch up over dinner. I made spaghetti. Landon, you're welcome to stay.”

Dottie and my mom walk inside. Landon turns to me. “Sweetheart, do you want me to stay, or do you want to spend time with your mom?”

I shake my head, appreciating his thoughtfulness. “No. Please stay. I want you here.”

He leans forward and kisses me. It's gentle and lets me know he's here for me, which calms my racing heart a little. He's good at that.

Landon and I wash up before taking our seats at the table where Aunt Dottie has put a big pot of spaghetti and meatballs. I've learned that she makes the sauce from the tomatoes we grow on the farm, which I'm still amazed at.

I'm not sure when I started thinking farm facts were amazing or cool, but here we are.

"You look good, Olivia," Mom says.

I look down at myself and then back to her. "I'm covered in dirt," I say plainly.

"Well, it's better than being passed out drunk."

I stiffen in my seat.

Her comment doesn't deserve a response, so I don't give one.

"Tell me what you've been doing," she says, serving herself a small amount of pasta while Landon and I load our plates up.

"Farming," I deadpan.

"Olivia."

I sigh. "I guess you need to report back to Dad, huh? Well, I've milked and cleaned cows, collected eggs, worked with the crops. I help at the farmers market every weekend and do chores around the house. I go to bed at a decent hour, haven't had a drop of alcohol since I got off the plane, and haven't spent any money."

"She's really good on the farm," Landon adds, bringing it back to the work I've been doing. "She caught on quickly and has never missed a day. She's reliable and on time every morning."

Bless him. I wonder if he realizes that by giving my mother a good report, she might let me come home, which means I would be leaving him.

“That’s good to hear,” Mom says with a smile. “How long have you worked here, Landon?”

“Ten years. Ms. Dottie hired me on right out of high school with my two best friends, Cam and Benny.”

“And you like it here?” she asks.

He nods. “I do. Underwood Farms is a second home to me.”

“Good. I’m glad Dottie has good people working with her.” I fight the urge to roll my eyes. My mother couldn’t care less about this farm or who Dottie has working for her, but she puts on a good act.

There’s an awkward silence after that. No one seems to know what to say, so we all focus on our plates.

After dinner, Mom and Aunt Dottie go to the living room while Landon and I stay in the kitchen. He tries to help me with the dishes, but I won’t let him. I don’t want to give my mom any reason to say I’m not doing what I’m supposed to.

When I’m finished, Landon says goodbye to Dottie and my mom. I walk him out to his truck, throwing my arms around him and letting him hold me for a few minutes. I hear his heart pounding in his chest and wish I could soothe it, but I’m not sure I can. I’m not sure what could make this better.

He seems to understand everything that’s going on in my head without me even having to say it. I want to go back to New York, but I don’t want to leave him. This place has grown on me so much more than I expected, and I’m not sure how to feel about that.

He kisses me, holding me close. Did I ever think I would be kissing a man while we stink and are covered in dirt? No, absolutely not. But here I am, and I actually like it. In fact, I can't get enough of it. When Landon kisses me, everything else disappears. It's just me and him.

"Have a good night, sweetheart. Call me if you need me." I nod, and he kisses my forehead before climbing in his truck. I wait for the loud rumble of the engine and watch him pull out of the drive before I go back inside.

"He seems nice," Mom says as I sit next to Dottie so we can work on our puzzle.

"He is. He's the best."

She smiles at me like she might actually care. But then I remember she called me an embarrassment and wonder if her only daughter being with a farm hand just adds to my list of fuck ups.

"Do you feel like you're ready to come home?" she asks.

I wasn't quite expecting that question. Should I be allowed to come home? Yes. I've done what they asked me to. I worked hard. I was given responsibilities and proved myself by keeping them.

But am I *ready* to come home? That's an entirely different question. I miss the city. So much. I miss my bedroom, that doesn't look like the inside of an abandoned cabin. I miss going out to eat at places with more than burgers and fries on the menu. I miss Serena and all the time we spend together. I miss getting dressed up and going to events. I miss my life.

But I'm not sure if I want it back. It's ok to miss something and not want it, right?

Underneath all of that, I know I don't belong here. I've always been the outsider that the people in this town tolerate. Landon is the only one I truly care about, but he knew from the beginning that this wasn't forever.

We both knew that. But that doesn't stop the sinking feeling inside me right now.

Mom is looking at me, waiting for my answer. So, I give her the answer that makes sense. The answer that was always the plan. "Yes. I'm ready to come home."



The next morning, I'm up early to do my morning jobs. My mom didn't say when my time would officially be up at Underwood Farms, so I'm operating under business as usual. The only bad part is that Landon is off today, so I'm not sure when I'll see him. It's always easier to get up in the morning knowing I'll get to see him.

Mom is waiting when I walk in with a basket of eggs mid-morning. Dottie takes them, and Mom asks me if I want to go on a walk with her.

It doesn't seem like I really have a choice, so I nod, and we make our way down the back steps.

She looks out to the fields around us, smiling. "I used to love this farm when I was little."

"Really? I thought you hated it."

She shakes her head. "No. I loved it. I still do. I knew I didn't want to live here for the rest of my life, but I loved the

peacefulness of this place. I've seen some of the best sunsets of my life sitting on that porch swing."

"Hmm." I know exactly what she's talking about, having experienced them for myself.

"You seem happy here," she says.

It's not really a question, but I answer it anyway. "Yeah, I guess I am. I hated it in the beginning, but it hasn't been terrible. Well, ok, milking the cows is really gross, and the farm stench is everywhere, but everything else isn't that bad."

She laughs. "Are things serious with Landon?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I like him a lot. But we both knew there was an end date on this."

I can see her looking at me out of the corner of my eye, but I keep my eyes forward. My mother and I haven't had a heart-to-heart in years, but she might be one of the few people who truly understands what I'm feeling right now. She's had lives in Thundersville and New York and knew the draw of each.

"You're ready to leave him?" she questions.

Absolutely not. The thought alone makes me sick to my stomach. I don't know how I can go from seeing him every day to not seeing him at all. "I don't really have a choice."

"You do have a choice," she says. "You could always stay."

"Stay? And shovel shit for the rest of my life? No thanks." Ok, the guys only made me do that once, but still.

"No. Dottie isn't going to be around forever you know. She'll need someone to take over when she retires, and she really wants to keep the farm in the family."

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't. "And she wants *me* to take over? Why? Why not Rhett? Or you? Or some distant cousin I've never heard of?"

"Rhett is training to take over for Dad in a few years. I've done the farm life and much prefer my life in the city. And no, there are no distant cousins, at least not ones Dottie would trust."

"And she trusts me?" I ask in disbelief.

She nods. "She does."

I think back to when I overheard Camden talking about how there was no way I could take over the farm. He and I have come a long way since then, but I know I'm not his favorite person. I wonder if he thinks differently now.

Does anyone think I could actually run this place? Would they help me or wait for me to fail?

It doesn't really matter. I can't run a farm. I don't know anything about farming. I don't know half the stuff Dottie does. It'd be too much. I don't want that.

"No. No, I don't want to do that," I tell her, although that answer doesn't sit right with me.

"Alright. Well, you can always change your mind."

We walk a little longer before heading back to the house. She catches me up on everything that's been going on at home, but nothing she says is important. All I can think about is how my life will be uprooted for the second time in less than a year, except this time feels a lot more jarring than the last.

"Dottie says she thinks you've changed for the better since you've been here. Your dad and I agree you can come home.

You'll get your credit cards back and get access to your trust fund come January."

"Ok." The relief I expected to feel isn't there. The money is the last thing on my mind right now.

"Pack your bags, then. We leave in the morning."

CHAPTER 26

Landon

Olivia shows up at my door with a sad smile on her face. A sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach. We didn't have plans to see each other today.

“Hey,” I say, looking past her to the street. “How'd you get here?”

“Dottie dropped me off.”

I step aside to let her in. She's been here several times now and is constantly telling me how I should decorate the place. I have some generic pictures hanging on the wall, but she was talking plants and painting and even knocking down walls. If she was going to live here with me, I'd do everything she suggested in a heartbeat. Since it's just me, I'll live with the blandness. I'm not here enough to care all that much. It's just a place to sleep and eat.

She walks in slowly, her hands clasped in front of her, making my nerves worse. She's quiet. Subdued. Which is unlike her.

“Are you alright?” I ask, pulling her into me, but I think I already know the answer.

She swallows before looking up at me, her eyes glassy with tears. “I'm leaving in the morning.”

Fuck, I wasn't expecting that. At least not this soon. My heart drops, and my throat goes dry. "Leaving," I repeat.

She nods. "Leaving."

I exhale a deep breath. "So, I take it your mom was happy with your progress?"

"Yeah. She said I'm getting my credit cards back, and I'll get my trust fund in January."

I really want to be happy for her. This is what she was working toward. But it's really fucking hard when I feel like my heart is shattering in my chest.

"Congratulations, sweetheart. You earned it. I'm really proud of you." It's the truth, but I wish it didn't have to mean that she's leaving.

"Landon, I—" She chokes on her words as she tries to hold back tears.

"Hey, it's alright. Come on. Let's enjoy our last night together. We can get to the sad shit later."

She attempts to laugh but fails. I pull her over to the couch and bring her down to straddle my lap.

In an attempt to cheer her up, I ask, "What are you most excited about when you get back?"

She runs her fingers through my hair. I don't typically wear hats at home, and I've found that Olivia really likes to play with my hair. I also know that I really like when she plays with my hair.

"I think I'm most excited to get a coffee from my favorite coffee shop," she tells me.

I smile. Of course that's her answer. "What? Were the coffees I brought you not good enough?"

She laughs. "They were good, but not as good as the real thing. A for effort, though."

"Man, you're a tough critic." I grab one of her hands and bring it between us. "What about your nails? Are you excited to get your nails done again? You've been complaining about them since you got here."

She playfully swats at me. "I have not been complaining." She looks down thoughtfully at her fingers. "To be honest, I haven't thought about it recently. But yes, I'll probably get them redone. Serena will probably insist on it."

She's silent for a moment, just running her fingers through my hair. I close my eyes and listen to her breathing, trying to memorize everything about her. The way she touches me, the way she smells, the way she feels on my lap.

Finally, she says, "It's going to be weird going back. I feel like a different version of myself. A better version."

"That's impossible. Every version of you is perfect. You might be different, but that doesn't mean it's better. It means you're adapting. You're changing. And you'll continue to change and be different, but you'll always be perfect, Olivia. Not one version of you is better than the other."

She leans down and puts her forehead on mine. "You might be the only one who thinks that."

"You should think it, too. Because as long as you believe it, that's the only opinion that matters," I tell her.

"God, Landon. I love you."

And that's the moment my heart stops. It's a split-second pause, but it changes my life. Hearing the love of my life tell me that she loves me is fucking everything. I've been in love with her for months—maybe even from the moment I first saw her—but I didn't tell her because I didn't want to complicate things. She told me straight up that she would be leaving. Who am I to hold her back because of my feelings? Feelings always complicate everything. So, I kept it to myself. I showed her my love but never voiced it. And I thought I would be content with that.

But she said it. She said it first. She loves *me*.

I'd hoped she did. It felt like she did. And now I know it's true. It's bittersweet, really. She's giving me her heart as a parting gift.

"I love you too, Olivia. So fucking much."

She closes the distance between us and kisses me. It's long and slow. Our mouths meld together as we sink into our newfound love. I carry her back to my bedroom, where I strip her down and make love to her while she blinks away the tears in her eyes. I know they're not bad tears. They're happy 'in love' tears mixed with sad 'I can't believe this is it' tears. I get it because I'm feeling the same way right now.

I keep her with me all day. We shower together, bringing us right back to the bed, and order a pizza that we eat while sitting naked in bed. I ask her to stay the night with me tonight, which she's never done. To my surprise, she agrees and texts her mom and Dottie to let them know.

After we finish another round, she's lying on top of me, the side of her head pressed to my chest, and I can't stop what comes out of my mouth.

“Stay,” I say, barely above a whisper. But it’s so quiet in here that I know she hears me.

“What?”

“Stay. Stay in Thundersville. Stay with me.” It’s selfish to ask. And I’m not expecting her to agree, but I have to shoot my shot. I’d kick myself if I didn’t at least try.

She kisses my chest before she pushes up to look me in the eye. “You know I can’t. I’ll never fit in here.” I think she fits in more than she thinks. My friends have accepted her. The girls all love her, including Ellie, which was weird at first, but we all got used to the new dynamic. My family loves her. When I’m in town without Olivia, people always stop and ask me how she’s doing. She’s become a part of this town whether or not she believes it. “And New York is my home. I was never meant to stay here.”

I sigh, nuzzling into her. “I know, sweetheart. I just needed to try.”

“You could come to New York,” she suggests.

I smile at her. “What would a guy like me do in New York City?”

She shrugs. “Be with me.”

I wish it was that simple. There’s no way I could live my life without working outside. I was raised to do hard work. And I love Underwood Farms. I can’t see ever leaving unless Ms. Dottie actually forces me out. I love it here as much as Olivia loves the city. “If you think you don’t belong here, then I definitely don’t belong up there.”

Her fingertips trace down my cheek. “I know. I just had to try.”

She rolls off and snuggles against my side. I hold her as close as I can until we both fall asleep.



The next morning, we naturally wake up early because when you spend enough time getting up at four a.m. every day, your body gets used to it. It's a blessing and a curse.

I offer to make breakfast, and Olivia accepts. She pulls the T-shirt I was wearing yesterday over her head before we walk to the kitchen. Her in my shirt might be my new favorite thing. Too bad this is the last time I'll ever see her like this.

I make pancakes and bacon, and we drink our coffee while everything cooks. There's a quiet tension between us this morning. Obviously, I've been through breakups before, but never where neither one of us actually wants to break up.

After breakfast, she changes back into her clothes from yesterday but asks to keep my shirt.

"Sure, but I can get you a clean one, sweetheart," I offer, heading to my dresser.

She shakes her head. "No. I want this one. It smells like you."

I pull her into another hug. "I love you, Olivia."

"I love you too, Landon."

I drive us back to Underwood Farms. It's strange to think that she won't be here when I come to work tomorrow.

"This was fun, right?" she asks once I've parked in front of the house, staring straight ahead.

I squeeze her hand in mine. “So much fun.”

“Should we stay friends?” she asks hesitantly.

I smile at her. “We should definitely stay friends.” Although staying friends with the woman I’m in love with when I know I can’t be with her sounds like absolute torture. But if Olivia wants to be friends, then I’ll do it.

“Thank you for the ride,” she says.

“Have a safe flight, Olivia.”

And with that, I watch the love of my life walk into the house and out of my life.

CHAPTER 27

The chill in the air hits me when I step out of the car in front of our New York penthouse. It's early October, and the leaves have started to change to vibrant shades of yellows, reds, and oranges. It's beautiful, but not sunsets-on-the-farm beautiful.

The doorman gets my bags out of the car and into the building. My mother went straight to their house in the suburbs instead of coming to the penthouse with me. I told her I wanted to get settled back in. The plane ride here—on our private jet this time—was quiet. All I could think about was how I was leaving my heart with Landon James Bowen on a farm in southern Georgia. I didn't want to talk about it, and I think Mom knew that.

I need time.

Alone.

Which is not something I've ever thought I'd need.

As soon as I'm inside, I text Landon that I'm home, and he replies with a red heart emoji. I want so badly to call him. I want to hear about his day. I want him to tell me what's happening on the farm. I decide not to because if I hear his voice, I don't think I'll be able to hold back the tears.

I slowly unpack my things since I have nothing else to do today. My credit cards are activated again, so I can order food from one of my favorite Thai places, although I don't have much of an appetite. I end up lying in bed in Landon's T-shirt, watching a show about a chef who takes over his brother's restaurant. Everyone just screams at each other all day, every day. For some odd reason, it relaxes me, even though I don't think that's the purpose of the show. I have no idea why it popped up on the suggestions page of my streaming service, but I can't stop watching it. It makes me miss working.

Maybe I should get a job...

No. What am I thinking? I'm just emotional. I don't actually want a job. That's insane and so not me.



The next morning, I'm up way earlier than expected, but I guess I'm still on farm time. After I'm dressed, I walk down to my favorite coffee shop and order my usual coffee, the one I've been craving for months. But when I take that first sip, something is off. Maybe I built up the taste in my head. Or maybe I've grown to like the version Landon made for me more.

As I walk down the street, I take a selfie with my coffee and send it to Landon. He quickly likes the photo and texts back that he hopes it's exactly what I wanted.

It feels like a loaded sentence.

Exactly what I wanted.

I'm not sure I know what I want at this point. I'm sure I'm just confused after being gone for so long, but a huge part of me feels like I've left something important back in Georgia.

When I get back to the penthouse, I walk around in circles, unsure what to do with myself. I stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room before texting Serena.

She answers immediately and is knocking on my door less than an hour later with her arms spread wide for a hug.

"I'm so glad you're back, Liv. The city wasn't the same without you."

I smile, but I feel like her statement is only true for her. The city moved on just fine without me. In fact, being gone made me realize how truly insignificant I am. I can't believe I used to walk around here acting like I hung the moon, and everyone I met should bow down to me because I am the one-and-only Olivia Sterling, heiress to Sterling's department stores.

But while I was gone, not a single friend besides Serena reached out. My own brother didn't so much as text me.

"It feels good to be back," I tell her as I return her hug. It does feel good to be back in my own room and bed, so it's not technically a lie.

She looks down at my clothes. "But honestly, what are you wearing? We have a standard to uphold."

I look down at my outfit. I picked the leggings up on a random trip to Walmart one afternoon with Landon. I'd seen Cat wear them once, and they looked comfortable, so I decided I wanted some. They might be the best purchase I've ever made. And I'm wearing an Underwood Farms T-shirt that Aunt Dottie gave me one morning before we headed to the

farmers market. She has a matching one, and when we wore them behind the table, it was kind of cute. We even made it on a page in the local newspaper, which Landon cut out and put on the fridge in the house.

“Yeah, for sure,” I tell Serena. “I was going to change before we went out, obviously.”

“Good. Well, here’s what I’m thinking.” She walks over and parks herself on the couch. “First, we get your nails done because I know they’re horrendous. Then we’re going shopping because you haven’t even seen this season’s latest items. We can’t have you being a year behind.”

“Right,” I agree, completely forgetting about all the time we spent at the start of the season fashion shows to get the first pick before anyone else. Thankfully, since my dad owns the department stores, I was always on the viewing list. Designers always hoped I would tell my dad about what I saw that he should stock in his store. As if he cared about my opinion. He has people that do all of his shopping for him, and I am not one of them.

She looks over at me as I stare out the window. “You should probably call Jules and see if she can get you in for a cut and color.”

My hair. I twirl a piece around my finger and think back to Landon helping me touch up my roots. I laughed so hard as he carefully painted the box color onto my head. It was cute how nervous he was. And scary how much I trusted him. I don’t let just anyone touch my hair.

“Yeah, I’ll call her,” I agree.

There’s a silence between us that lasts too long. She knows I’m hurting. But instead of addressing it, she shoos me along.

“Well, go get dressed. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover today. This is what you need, Liv. To get back into your routine. I’m sure it’s difficult to be back, but this is your home. This is where you belong.”

I nod and take a deep breath. “I know.”

With that, I put on a suede skirt and chunky sweater with tan, knee-high boots. They’re from last season, which makes me cringe a little, but I don’t have a choice. Serena insists I do something with my hair, so I quickly do some curls and fix my makeup.

She’s right; I feel a little more like myself already.

Pretty soon, my nails are manicured, and I’m browsing through racks of winter dresses in one of my favorite stores.

Serena and I make an entire day out of it. We try on everything that we like. She buys a ton of new pieces even though I’m sure her closet is already bursting at the seams. I buy a few dresses and a pair of boots. Nothing too crazy, at least by my standards.

Serena asks me to go to dinner and drinks afterward, but I decline. I don’t doubt that she can see the sadness in my eyes even after I assure her repeatedly that I’m ok and just need some time to readjust.

She nods and lets my driver drop her back at her apartment. Before we get to mine, I ask to stop by a drugstore. I run in, find their small toy selection, and grab the only puzzle they have stocked. It just so happens to be of a sunflower field.

CHAPTER 28

Landon

“**Y**ou alright, man?” Cam asks for the fifth day in a row.

No, I’m not fucking alright. But I’m attempting to avoid the ‘I told you so’ lecture he’s dying to give me. Everyone said it, and I refused to listen.

She’s going to leave. She’s going to break your heart.

Well, it happened.

Not that I regret it.

Every moment I got to spend with Olivia was worth it. I wouldn’t change any of it, except maybe the leaving part. I’d definitely change that. I’d keep her right by my side forever. Make her Mrs. Bowen and have a houseful of kids who look and act like her because she’s my favorite person in the world.

It’s a pathetic dream I know will never come true, yet I can’t stop imagining it.

I sigh and finally tell Cam the truth. “Not really.”

He lets out an exasperated laugh. “Fucking finally. I thought you’d never admit that you’re falling apart.”

“It’s not really something I want to announce to the world.”

“We’re not the world,” Cam gestures between himself and Benny. “We’re your best friends.”

“I know, but I also know how you feel about Olivia. How you told me to be careful, and I...”

“You went and fell in love?” Benny finishes for me.

“Yeah,” I answer.

There’s a moment of silence before Cam asks, “Have you talked to her?”

I nod. “A few texts here and there.”

“I’m sorry, man. I really am. I’ve never been in love, but I can see how much it’s hurting you.”

I sit down on a bale of hay and shake my head. “Maybe you’ve had the right idea all along. If you never fall in love, you never get hurt.”

“Yeah, but you got to experience something not everyone does. The love you had with Olivia was special. We could all feel it between you two. It was kinda cool to watch it happen.”

Benny and I both look over at Cam, perplexed. “Cam, are you like a secret romantic or something?” I ask.

“Yeah, that sounded way too mushy to be coming from your mouth,” Benny adds.

“Shut the fuck up. I’m trying to be a good friend.” Cam rolls his eyes at us.

I laugh. “I appreciate it, Cam. Really. And I’m not ok right now, but I’ll get there. I just need some time. Thanks for bearing with me.”

“Of course, that’s what we’re here for. And we’re also here if you ever want to talk,” Benny says.

“Or, if you want us to get you really fucking drunk and take you to the strip club two towns over, we can do that too,” Cam offers.

That’s the last thing I want to do, but it doesn’t stop me from laughing. “Appreciate it, guys.”



Later that evening, I end up on my parents’ couch, watching a football game with Dad after finishing a bowl of chili. My phone lights up on the table, and I lift it to see who it is. When I don’t see Olivia’s name, I don’t bother reading the text.

My mom catches me.

“Lan, have you heard from her?”

I sigh. Everyone keeps asking me about her. Even one of the waitresses at the diner asked me about her the other day. I can’t escape her. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t want to escape her. But when I’m attempting to mend my broken heart, it makes it a little inconvenient, to say the least.

“A little,” I tell her.

I see her and Dad share a look out of the corner of my eye.

“Did you consider a long-distance relationship?” she asks. “I’m sure it’s easier with technology these days.”

“No. No, I can’t do that. If I’m gonna be with her, I need to actually be with her. And what would be the point? She never wants to live there, and I can’t do shit in New York.”

“I’m sure there would be plenty for you to do there,” Mom says.

“This is my home, Mom. I don’t want to leave here just like she doesn’t want to leave New York.”

“Ah, so you’re both being stubborn,” she says.

“Probably. Can we just not talk about it, please?” I snap. I don’t typically snap at my parents. In fact, I don’t really snap at anyone. I’ve always been a pretty laid-back guy. So, I instantly feel bad. “Sorry,” I say, rubbing my hands down my face. “Sorry, I just miss her.”

“It’s alright, honey. We all miss her.”

I nod, and she thankfully drops the conversation.



And with that, life goes on.

Cam, Benny, and I show up at Underwood Farms at the crack of dawn every day. We tend to the horses, chickens, and goats. I miss the sound of Olivia mumbling ‘ew’ whenever she bent down to a cow or her shrieks if a chicken tried to peck her.

I still meet my friends at the diner for meals every so often. I order the chocolate milkshake because I always thought it was adorable that she would say she didn’t want any but then end up drinking most of mine.

We still go to Cowboy’s on nights off, and I watch the crowd line dance, wishing Olivia was intertwined between them, stepping over her own feet. Sometimes, I laugh to myself, picturing the first time I pulled her out there. She had no idea what she was doing, but that didn’t stop her. She kept a smile on her face the entire time.

Dinners at my parents are noticeably quieter. They know I'm not in the mood to talk about Olivia, but I know that they miss her, too.

Ms. Dottie doesn't give me any updates on Olivia and doesn't ask if I've talked to her. She occasionally asks if I want to stay for dinner, but I always decline. Sitting at that table without Olivia doesn't feel right. I've even started eating my lunches outside on the porch swing.

I know it'll take time.

As the days go on, it does get easier, just like everyone said. I still feel her in my bones. I see her everywhere I go in Thundersville, even my own house. But she made the best choice for her, and that I know she's happy makes it a little easier on my heart.

I'll get used to her not being here, but I don't think I'll ever stop loving her.

CHAPTER 29

Asking my brother if he wants to meet for lunch is harder than I thought. I type out and delete several texts before I finally settle on just a simple *Are you free for lunch?* He replies quickly, telling me where and when to meet him.

I'm at the little cafe near his office fifteen minutes early just to be safe but also because I didn't have anything else to do. I grab us a table and order myself a water while I wait.

Rhett walks in exactly when he said he would, and I wave at him to grab his attention.

"I wasn't expecting you to be here already," he says as he sits across from me. He's in his standard suit and tie. He's been working closely with my father, learning the ropes to take over the company one day. The two of them act more and more alike every day.

"Surprise, here I am. I ordered you a water." I tell him, nodding towards the glass in front of him.

"Thanks. I've got to keep this quick. I've got a meeting in forty-five minutes," he explains as he waves down a server.

After we order, he clasps his hands on the table and asks, "So, what's this about?"

"Do I need a reason to have lunch with my brother?"

“I can’t remember a time where you’ve asked to meet with me, so yes, I’d say there has to be a reason.”

I sigh. He makes a fair point. I should’ve tried harder. But to be fair, I was caught up in the lifestyle and nothing else mattered. “Fine. I just wanted to... to apologize and, I guess, thank you.”

His eyebrows raise in surprise. “For?”

Of course he’s going to make me elaborate. “I’m sorry for all the headaches I’ve caused you and all the middle-of-the-night pickups. I wanted to thank you for talking to Mom and Dad about it. I hated you at first and couldn’t believe you would rat me out like that. But as much as it pains me to admit this, I think it was for the best.”

“Wow.” He leans back in his chair. “Mom said she thought you’d changed, but I didn’t believe it.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I did. I learned a lot about myself while I was gone, I think. Being away from all the parties and bars was good for me. I haven’t had a drink in months, and I haven’t even gone to a party since I’ve been back.”

“That’s good, Liv. We only did what we did because we were worried about you.”

“Yeah. I get that now.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m proud of you,” he tells me. “It sounds like you did really great down there, but I’m glad you’re back. It felt strange knowing you weren’t in the city. Dinners with mom and dad were a lot quieter.”

I laugh. “I bet they were.”

Rhett and I eat our sandwiches while he tells me what he’s been up to. It sounds like he’s even met someone that he might

be introducing to the family soon. He's always very hush-hush about his relationships, so it must be serious.

He pays the bill and pulls me into a hug when I follow him out. I can't remember the last time I hugged my brother. It feels good.

“Love you, Liv.”

“Love you too.”

He lets me go and walks toward his office. “Don't be a stranger.”

I wave and watch him go.



Being friends with Landon is not what I thought it would be like, but I keep trying my best no matter how hard it hurts. He's the first person I want to talk to every morning. I want to hear all about his day and tell him about mine, even though I mostly just hang out with Serena or sit on my couch thinking about him.

But this is what's best. This is what we both wanted. This was the plan.

Right?

10/7/23 3:32 PM

Olivia: How is my baby goat doing?

10/7/23 3:47 PM

Landon: Is that my new nickname?

10/7/23 3:49 PM

Olivia: Changing your name in my phone as we speak

10/7/23 3:52 PM

Landon: Ha. Goat is good. Misses you though.

10/9/23 5:13 AM

Landon: *sends picture of a cow* Could use your help.

10/9/23 9:21 AM

Olivia: Literally the last thing on my list of things I miss.

10/9/23 9:27 AM

Landon: I'm on the top of the list right?

10/9/23 9:28 AM

Olivia: Obviously

10/13/23 6:45 PM

Olivia: *sends picture of salad* Could really use one of those burgers right about now.

10/13/23 6:47 PM

Landon: *sends picture of chocolate milkshake* With one of these?

10/13/23 6:49 PM

Olivia: Drooling. Sending my Door Dash driver down there now

10/13/23 6:50 PM

Landon: Ha. Everyone says hi

10/13/23 6:52 PM

Olivia: Hi back everyone!

10/17/23 10:32 AM

Olivia: How are you?

10/17/23 2:13 PM

Landon: Doing ok. You?

10/17/23 2:15 PM

Olivia: yeah. Same.

10/20/23 12:13 PM

Olivia: Hey! I was thinking I could come down and visit for a weekend.

10/20/23 3:13 PM

Landon: I didn't think you'd ever want to come back here.

10/20/23 3:15 PM

Olivia: I miss you

10/20/23 4:32 PM

Landon: I miss you too

10/30/23 1:37 AM

Olivia: I miss you so fucking much. This sucks.

11/1/23 10:13 AM

Olivia: How was your Halloween?

11/2/23 2:10 PM

Olivia: Is everything ok?

11/3/23 12:17 PM

Olivia: Ok. :(



I sit on my bed and stare at my phone, wondering why Landon has stopped responding to my texts as Serena recounts a party she went to without me last night. Besides one Halloween party, I haven't gone to many parties at all since I've been back. It wasn't even that fun. Probably because all I could think about was Landon and what he was doing and how I should be there with him instead of at this stupid party with these people I don't even like.

I missed the pumpkins at Underwood Farms. I missed the hay rides. I wonder if Landon was one of the tractor drivers taking the kids from town down to the pumpkin patch. He'd be great at that.

I should've been there.

I've been back in New York for a month now, and nothing feels right. There's nothing for me here. I thought everything would fall back into place when I got home, but nothing is the same.

I'm not the same.

“Are you even listening to me?” Serena asks with her hands on her hips.

“No, not really. Sorry,” I admit.

She sighs and sits next to me. “What is going on with you lately? It’s like you’re not even here.”

My eyes stay focused on my blank phone screen. “I... I don’t think I want to be here, Ser.”

“You wanna go stay with your mom and dad? I can text your driver.” She reaches for my phone.

“No. No... I don’t think I want to be here. In New York.”

She rubs my back, understanding setting in. “You want to go back to Georgia? Back to the farm?”

“I think so.” It feels weird admitting it out loud, but I think that’s what I want.

“Maybe we could go for a long weekend? Get it out of your system? I’m sure your dad wouldn’t mind if we took the plane,” she suggests.

I shake my head. “No, not for a weekend. I think I want to live there. I want to live on the farm. I want to work with the guys and go to the farmers market and eat at the terrible food trucks. I want to line dance on the sticky floor of Cowboy’s. I want to sit and do puzzles and watch TV with Dottie.”

She looks at me for a long minute before saying, “You’re sure? You should think really hard about this. There’d be no department stores. No nail salons. No poke bowls.”

“I can always visit New York, but I’ve just felt so empty since I left the farm. I feel like I have no purpose here. I know I have you, and I love you. But I can’t keep going out like we used to. I don’t like it anymore. I don’t want to be a buzzkill.”

“Does this have anything to do with a certain cowboy?” she asks, smirking.

“Yeah. Yeah, it does. I love him, Serena. I love him so much. I think I would regret it my whole life if I didn’t give us a shot.”

She lets out a deep breath. “Alright, well, what do we need to do to get you back there?”

I smile for the first time in days, my heart beating fast at the prospect of going back. “I need to make some calls.”

CHAPTER 30

Landon

“Landon, you wanna go out tonight? We can drink at my place if you don’t want to do Cowboy’s,” Cam says as he runs up behind me. We’re just finishing up for the day, and even though we’re creeping into November, it’s still hot. I wipe the sweat off my forehead with my arm before answering.

“Nah, not tonight, man.” I brace myself for the guilt trip he’s about to give me.

“Come on, man. You haven’t gone out in weeks. And we don’t have work tomorrow,” he tells me like I don’t already know this. Like I don’t know I’ve been secluding myself from everything and everyone. I just haven’t been up to it. They’ve all understood and left me alone. Until now. I guess they’re getting sick of my shit. It’s been over a month, and I know I need to snap out of it, but that’s easier said than done.

“I know,” I tell him. Sighing, I concede. “Alright. I’ll come.”

“Hell yes, man. You need to get out. Stop thinking about it. This’ll be good for you.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but I don’t know if I believe that.

We walk back to the house to let Ms. Dottie know we’re heading out for the day. I hope she doesn’t ask me to stay for

dinner again tonight. I hate declining, but I still can't bring myself to do it. I know we'll end up talking about Olivia, and I'm still not ready for that yet. I don't know if I'll ever be ready for that.

"Hey," Cam starts, but his voice sounds strange. He grabs my arm. I look to see if he's alright, but he's staring at the house. "Is that...?"

My head whips toward the house, and someone is standing on the back porch. It's far enough away that I have to squint, but the hot pink sweater is pretty hard to miss.

"Olivia," I breathe so quietly that I'm not sure a sound comes out.

My legs move progressively faster until I'm jogging, which then turns into a full-on run. She's running toward me, too, her hair flying behind her in the wind. Her arms are outstretched, and, in a few heartbeats, we collide into each other. I hoist her up so her arms and legs wrap around me and hold her as close as possible.

In that moment, all is right with the world again.

"You're here," I say into her hair.

"I'm here," she confirms.

I don't know how long we stand like that, but it's long enough for Cam to catch up and stop beside us. He lets out a small laugh. "Guess that means you're not coming out tonight." He's not actually expecting a response, so I don't give one. "It's good to see you again, Olivia."

She mumbles, "You too," and he walks past us into the house.

“What are you doing here?” I finally ask, setting her down in front of me.

“You stopped answering my texts,” she states plainly, making me wince slightly. I feel bad about it, but I just... couldn’t.

“It was too hard,” I admit. Every time her name popped up on my phone, it felt like my heart was breaking all over again. I figured if I stopped responding, she’d get mad and stop trying. It was shitty of me, but it was the best I could come up with.

“Well, you ghosted me, Landon Bowen, and I don’t take that lightly.” She puts her hands on her hips and purses her lips. It’s so cute I have to bite back a smile.

“I’m sorry, Olivia.”

“Well, too bad for you because now you’re stuck with me forever,” she says.

I’m about to launch into an even more heartfelt apology when I register her words. Forever? Did I hear that right?

“What?” I choke out.

“Yep. I’m moving to Thundersville permanently, so you’re stuck with me,” she explains like she’s proud of herself.

“You’re moving here?” I repeat. “To Thundersville?” I have to make sure I heard her correctly.

She steps forward and puts her hands on my cheeks to look into my eyes. She doesn’t even cringe from touching the dirt.

“Landon, I’m here. I’m staying. Forever. I want you. I choose you.”

I don't wait a second longer before pulling her toward me and pressing my lips to hers. It feels like my heart is beating again. My lungs are working again. I'm *living* again.

We kiss for minutes. Hours. Days. I don't fucking know. But it's long enough that I feel breathless, happy, and convinced that she's mine.

"What made you change your mind?" I ask when we finally stop to catch our breath.

"Well, I got back to New York and thought my life would go back to the way it was. But nothing was the same. I take that back. New York was the same, but I wasn't. I had changed. I didn't want anything in the city anymore. I wanted you. I wanted to be here on this farm with you, covered in dirt every day. And I want to do the hard stuff with you. I want you to laugh at me when I drop eggs and kiss me senseless when I tell you how bad you smell every day. I want the early mornings. The busy days. I want it all... with you."

Only she could make me laugh when declaring her love for me.

"I love you, Landon. And I don't want to go another day without you next to me. Honestly, I can't believe I ever thought I could do it to begin with. That was pretty stupid of me."

"We were both stupid," I tell her, tucking one of her chestnut locks behind her ear. "But all that matters now is that you're here."

She smiles. "I'm here."

"I love you," I tell her. "Nothing was right without you here. I felt empty, lifeless. But I kept telling myself I could handle it as long as you were happy. That's all that mattered."

That you were back in the place that made you happy. But it killed me. You leaving was the worst moment of my life. And now that you're here, I'm never letting you go again."

I kiss her again because I fucking can. Because she's here. Because she's staying.

"I just can't believe it," I whisper against her lips.

"Well, believe it." She pulls away from me and looks around the farm. "I have so much to tell you. For starters, I'm going to start shadowing Aunt Dottie so I can take over when she decides to retire."

"What? That's amazing, sweetheart." She told me months ago that she didn't want to do it, but I always knew she could if she just put her mind to it.

"Yeah. It'll be... interesting. But she said she'd hang around for at least another year."

"I'm so excited for you, Olivia."

"How do you think Cam is going to react? I mean, I'm basically going to be his boss." There's a smirk on her face. I don't think she really cares how he reacts. She's ready to play with fire.

I laugh. "I'll let you be the one to tell him."

She rubs her palms together. "Goodie."

I grab her hand, and we walk to the house, swinging our hands back and forth like we're teenagers.

"So, the first order of business, which Dottie agreed to as part of my stipulations, is that I'm going to use some of my trust to renovate the house. New decor, paint, furniture, and updated kitchen. Everything. I have so many ideas. I made a whole Pinterest board."

I have no idea what a Pinterest board is, but I have to clarify something before we get to that. Pulling her close, I correct her. “First order of business is getting you in my bed and keeping you there long enough that you never try to leave me again.”

She visibly shivers at my words and turns to me with a bright smile. “Well, obviously. That was a given.”

“Just making sure we’re on the same page, sweetheart.”

“Definitely. Same page. Same sentence. Same letter.”

We get to the house and find Dottie leaning against the kitchen counter, smiling at us.

“Landon, would you like to stay for dinner *now*?” She gives me a shit-eating grin, probably because I declined her offer while Olivia was gone.

“Yes, Ms. Dottie. I’d love to stay for dinner.”

“It’s nice to have our girl home, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Very nice.”

She pushes off the counter and finishes dinner while I wash up. Olivia is going on about butcher block countertops while Dottie just nods along when I finish.

“You ok with Olivia changing the house, Ms. Dottie?” I ask, finding my seat at the kitchen table.

She looks around for a moment, taking in the kitchen. By the looks of it, I don’t think the house has ever been renovated. It could definitely use some TLC. And I know Olivia hated the room she was staying in. “Too much wood,” she told me the first night I stayed over with her.

“I think it’ll be good. I’ve lived here a long time, and it’s always been like this. My parents and grandparents never saw fit to change anything. Underwood Farms could use a set of fresh eyes and ideas. Olivia is just the one to do it. She can carry on the legacy.”

“Damn right,” Olivia interjects.

Dottie laughs. “You might have to rein her in a little, Landon, but for the most part, I think she’s got some good plans.”

I know Olivia probably has something over the top in mind because that’s just who she is. It’s what I love about her. She’s over the top. But I wouldn’t want her any other way.

We sit around the table talking and eating, and it feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

After dinner, I don’t give Olivia a choice as I carry her to my truck. She’s staying with me tonight. I need her in my bed. I need her arms and legs wrapped around me all night, and I want her right there when I wake up in the morning.

She doesn’t protest because she wants it as badly as I do. She smiles as I drive through the town. She’s happy to be here, and that makes my heart so full. My favorite person in my favorite town.

When we pull up to my small bungalow, I turn the truck off, and we sit silently for a moment.

She’s staring at my house when she says, “You know, Dottie said that once I’m comfortable on my own, she’s going to move to the house her parents lived in when they retired. So, I’d be all alone in that big old house.” She flicks her eyes to me with a smirk, and my heart pounds in my chest.

“Sweetheart, are you asking me to move in with you?” I ask.

“Hell, yes.”

As much as I’d miss the first house that I bought on my own, it’s a no-brainer. Of course, I’ll move in with her. There’s no place I’d rather be—on my favorite farm with my favorite girl.

“Well, then hell yes, I want to move in with you.”

She smiles. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

We get out of the truck, and she runs up my front steps. I take her to my bedroom and show her just how much I fucking missed her.

Eight months later

The kitchen was the first thing on my list of renovations because I realized it was where everyone spent most of their time. Even though it's been done for three months now, I still have trouble finding everything.

I'm currently looking through one of the cabinets for Aunt Dottie's large red casserole dish. When she moved out a few months ago, she was nice enough to leave some of her favorite things with me, telling me they belonged with the house, not her.

Dottie is still very much part of the business. She's at the house every day to go over budgets and planning and everything else I didn't know existed until she took me into her office and gave it to me straight. It was... a lot. I've spent more than a few nights crying on Landon's shoulder, telling him I don't know if I can do this. He, of course, talked some sense into me like he always does. He's really been a rock for me through this entire process.

"Hey, sweetheart. What're you doing?" Landon asks as he walks down the hall. He's already cleaned up from work. He had plenty of time because, unlike Dottie, I don't have dinner

ready immediately after everyone finishes working. Landon doesn't seem to mind, though. Sometimes, he even cooks dinner. Since neither of us really knows what we're doing in the kitchen, it's definitely been an experience. We've eaten more burned chicken than I care to admit, and I'm pressing hard for this town to get a damn DoorDash driver and more restaurants.

“Trying to find the casserole dish so I can cook dinner,” I tell him. I look over my shoulder and do a double-take. He's in his nice jeans and a light pink button-down shirt I've never seen before. My brows crinkle together. “What are *you* doing?”

“I have a surprise for you tonight. Go upstairs and change into the outfit on the bed.”

I clap my hands together and squeal, forgetting all about the casserole dish. I love surprises. I quickly give him a kiss before running down the hall, past our newly furnished living room, and up the stairs. I pass the room I used to stay in and head to the primary suite, which I painted a calming cream color. The furniture is all new and black matte and makes this place feel a little more modern.

In the center of our fluffy white bed is a hot pink mini dress I've never seen before. I pick it up and hold it against me. It's sparkly, with spaghetti straps and a V-neck, and when I check the tag, I see it's from one of my favorite designers.

I wonder how Landon got this, or more importantly, why he got this.

I'm sure he'll explain it to me soon enough. I quickly change and take my hair out of the ponytail it's been in all day. Luckily, I curled it yesterday so it still has some style. All I have to do is fluff it up and add some spray. My makeup is still

decent from this morning, too. Since I'm not out in the dirt as much these days, I take the time to put makeup on in the mornings. It makes me feel a little more like me.

Once I check myself in the mirror, I head downstairs, where Landon is waiting by the back door.

“Ready?” he asks with a smile.

“Yes!”

He walks us down the back steps to the UTV parked behind the house.

I pause. “Alright, I know this was an expensive dress. You're not taking me out to ruin it, are you?”

He laughs. “No. Come on, sweetheart. You trust me?”

I look down at the beautiful dress and then back at him. “Yes,” I drawl.

We get into the UTV, and he takes off. We're both silent as he drives. He seems excited, but he always seems excited when he has a surprise for me. For the last one, he whisked me away to Savannah for a weekend, and we stayed in a beautiful hotel. We got dressed up every night and had dinner at some amazing restaurants. It was perfect. He's been so good about trying to make sure I'm happy in Thundersville, even though I keep telling him all I need is him. He can be so stubborn sometimes.

In the distance, I see twinkle lights and immediately break out into a smile. This man and his twinkle lights. As we get closer, the lights are set up on some posts in front of the sunflowers, which are just starting to bloom for the season.

“Landon,” I whisper.

He doesn't say anything as he stops the UTV and takes my hand to help me out. A blanket and picnic basket are set up, just like our first date almost a year ago.

"Can I see your phone?" he asks, which is definitely not what I expect him to say.

"Sure?" I hand him my phone, and he takes a picture of us with the sunflowers and the setting sun in the background.

"What was that for?" I ask, taking the phone back.

"I wanted a picture of the day I asked you to be my wife."

"Wh-What?" I stammer. His wife? My heart races as he takes a small box from his pocket and gets down on one knee.

"Olivia, from the moment I first saw you, I knew I had to have you. I wasn't expecting you to walk into my life that day and turn it completely upside down. But you have, and I'm so grateful for you and for us and for our future. I love you, Olivia. Will you do me the honor of letting me stand by your side for the rest of my life? Marry me."

I don't know when the tears started, but they can't be stopped now.

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" I get down on my knees as he takes out a ring.

His hands shake as he continues. "I know the diamond isn't as big as you deserve, but this ring belonged to my grandmother, and I've always pictured it on my wife's hand."

I honestly couldn't care less how big the diamond is as long as this is the ring tying me to him. "It's perfect Landon. It would be an honor to wear her ring."

He slides it onto my ring finger, and it fits perfectly. Thank god I just did my nails! I invested in an at-home gel manicure

set since the nearest salon is a town over, and I don't have much free time these days. Serena called last night and chatted with me while I did them.

"I love you, Landon." I lean forward to kiss him. This moment could not be any more perfect. Just the two of us professing our love to each other in front of our sunflower field.

He opens up a bottle of champagne—real champagne because I've learned how to pace myself—and we toast.

"To us," Landon says, holding up his glass. "To the future Mr. and Mrs. Bowen and any future little Bowens we may have."

My eyes widen at that last part. "Little Bowens?"

He smirks. "Oh, I'm definitely knocking you up at some point. The only thing better than seeing my ring on your finger will be seeing you pregnant with my baby."

I swallow hard. I've never really thought about having kids. Well, I've thought a lot about *preventing* kids, but actually having them hasn't crossed my mind often. I've never really thought of myself as a mom. But hey, kids could be fun. Especially with Landon. "Who can argue with that?"

He chuckles. "Drink up wifey. We've got some celebrating to do."

So we do exactly that. We eat, drink, and make love in front of our favorite sunflowers. It's the perfect night. The perfect proposal.

On our way back to the house, a new wave of excitement hits me. "Oh my god! I get to plan a wedding." I clap my hands excitedly. "It's going to be perfect. I'm thinking winter because it doesn't really get cold here. And we can do it on the

farm. I need to start a Pinterest board for this.” I pull out my phone.

He laughs. “Calm down, Bride Barbie. I’m sure whatever you put together will be amazing.”

“Oh, it will. It has to be!”

“Of course,” he agrees.

He parks the UTV by the back porch, and we walk into our house. I felt so out of place when I first came here, but now I can’t imagine being anywhere else. This is my home. Landon is my home. I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

The End

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D.C. Kile lives in Georgia with her husband and two kids #TwinMom. If she's not writing steamy romance, she's probably reading it. She also enjoys cooking, drinking coffee out of really large coffee cups, and daydreaming about future vacations.

D.C. Kile would love to hear from readers, so be sure to follow along on social media. She can be found on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook @AuthorDCKile.

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